

FELLOWSHIP REPORT

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“Incredible India”

I cannot express how profoundly privileged and humbled I am to be awarded the Avantha International Fellowship 2015 at the Ananta Aspen Centre, one of India’s leading organizations in the field of international relations, public policy and leadership. India has been a country I have long been fascinated with and dreamt about visiting. Over my stay I have fallen in love with its diversity, charm, and incredibility. India surpassed my expectations; I had certain preconceived ideas but my firsthand experience is nothing like what I had anticipated. My academic endeavors have been enriching. My perspective on India has expanded greatly. Overall, my experience as a fellow here truly reflected the “Incredible India”. In the following, I will divide my reflection on my experiences into accommodation and commune life, office life, personal life, and most importantly, academic life.

Accommodation and Commute

I have always wanted to come to India due to its tradition of diversity and to see what one of the largest democratic countries in the world looks like. I think Thailand and India have a lot in common, especially regarding religion and cultural aspects and therefore I thought I must at least come and explore it once in my life. I was extremely delighted to find that I had been selected for the Avantha International Fellowship 2015. I was so grateful and looking forward to this journey. My first impression of New Delhi started from the airport. Indira Gandhi International Airport has a high security protocol, only travelling passengers are allowed inside the building. The immigration is decorated with Buddha’s hands; showing the great religious heritage of this country. As soon as I stepped out of the airport, I saw a driver holding my name waiting outside. To a girl traveling alone like me, this was truly a great comfort. The next impression is how hospitable the driver was. He told me many stories about India and recommended many things for me to visit and sightsee. Once I reached the hotel, the staff was also very friendly and helpful.

The room was spacious, with WIFI and in good condition. It was also located at one of the safest and most convenient to commute places in Delhi. With just 5 minutes-walk, you can reach the metro station, and right in front of the hotel is a pharmacy and sim-card store. The area is also located near a taxi stand, a grocery, market and bank. This gave me a very good impression of India and made my life in India very convenient, safe, and enjoyable.

Office Life

My first day at the office was equally impressive. I was very grateful to have befriended the three other amazing fellows: Akmal Atkhamov from Uzbekistan, Bantayehu Demissew from Ethiopia and Hamdi Echkaou from Morocco. I remembered Akmal to be the first fellow I met and he was very welcoming; Bantayehu was my second friend here who, as a warm gesture, was nice enough to buy for me my first metro train ticket; then I arrived at the office to meet the third fellow, Hamdi, who also studied Chinese. We shared lots of interests and things in common. All the colleagues at Ananta Aspen Centre were also very intellectual, friendly, and supportive. I could discuss various topics with them ranging from politics, economics, social issues to food and fashion. Together with the fellows and colleagues I engaged in lots of deep academic discussions as well as fun conversations. In working here I was treated as an integral member of the organization. I attended staff meetings, birthday celebrations, farewell parties and festive celebrations like Diwali and Christmas. I felt very lucky to be here during the great ancient Hindu festival of lights- Diwali. The whole city was lit up and people were enjoying their time with friends and families. And likewise, we also got the chance to celebrate the warm festival here as a family at the Ananta Aspen Centre. I have made some life-long friendships and unforgettable memories. It has truly been a blessed experience.

Personal Life

In addition to everyday life, I also got to experience other parts of India during my fellowship here. Being a girl and getting around in India which is considered somewhat unsafe, my colleagues at work kept my safety as their priority. No matter where I went they made sure it was safe and constantly reassured me of that. I am very grateful to them for I was able to take off on several comfortable and safe journeys. To start with, I was blessed enough to visit Bodhgaya in Bihar state to pay my respects to the place where Buddha became enlightened. As a Buddhist, this meant everything to me. The Taj

Mahal in Agra in the state of Uttar Pradesh, which is one of the seven man-made wonders of the world, is also a must when in India and I certainly did not miss out on that either. Following that, the pink city of Jaipur –the capital city of Rajasthan- was my next destination. This historical place gave me further insight into India’s diverse cultural heritage. Finally, shortly before leaving India, together with my newly made friends, we managed to travel to Shimla, the capital city of Himachal Pradesh and the former summer capital of the British Raj. This place was truly breathtaking and entirely different from New Delhi. Moreover, I also had the opportunity to be a part time volunteer at the Child Rights and You organisation (CRY) in Delhi. CRY is a NGO that works with underprivileged children and aims to protect their rights. As a part of my responsibilities I taught basic Chinese to these children, however, during my time as a volunteer I realised that I had learnt far more from them than they could from me. Their innocence, innovation, creativity, talents and enthusiasm for learning was beyond words and I am grateful to have taken part in this. Having travelled to different places outside of the capital of India as well as participating in short term voluntary work at CRY, I truthfully realise the meaning of “Incredible India”.

Academic Life

As a Master’s Degree student of Public Administration from Zhejiang University in China my interest has been on the development and governance of China. I was very delighted to learn that Ananta Aspen Centre is also very much interested in this area; during my fellowship I was therefore given the opportunity to further research on domestic development policy and governance in India. With all the constructive comments and assistance being received from the Centre I was able to develop a comparative research study of the two countries on these issues. In addition, the Centre is enthusiastically passionate about foreign relations. During my stay here I witnessed multiple public talks regarding India and its relationship with certain countries and regions like Myanmar, China, Japan, Latin America and the Caribbean. I was also fortunate enough to have had the opportunity to network within the social sphere of India’s intellectuals via the four public sessions held by the Ananta Aspen Centre which I attended. For all the public sessions the panelists were distinguished experts in their field. The audiences were from many different backgrounds yet still actively engaged in the discussions. It impressed me as to how civil society in India is indeed strong like I’ve heard, and that the majority of its middle class is indeed politically opinionated and academically inclined.

Upon my first day at the office, the Centre held the public talk on **“Myanmar Elections: Why Do They Matter?”** as the then impending Myanmar general elections were soon to be held on 8th November with a resulting landslide victory for the democratic icon Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD). This talk was moderated by Ambassador S K Lambah, the new Chairman of Ananta Aspen Centre with further remarks given by some of the experts on Myanmar. Ambassador Rajiv Bhatia, a former Ambassador to Myanmar, pointed out that Myanmar would need to strategically manage its relationship with India and China as its major bordering neighbours. According to Ambassador Bhatia, Myanmar will face a huge challenge in the coming years on issues such as democracy and economy formation, ethnic reconciliation and the crossroad of politics and religion regardless of the winning party. Ms. Suhasini Haidar, the diplomatic editor of the Hindu, questioned whether the elections were indeed free and fair and whether the results would be accepted; she agreed that the general election in Myanmar was a big change that India could not ignore as it concerned its democratic, economic, and strategic interests. In contrast, Dr. Sanjoy Hazarika, the director of the Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research at Jamia Millia Islamia, questioned whether India matters to Myanmar. He expressed the worry that while China has been insistent on involving itself in the cease-fire process, India could have done more to strengthen its relationship with Myanmar.

The next two public sessions put emphasis on East Asia and India. **“China’s Domestic Economic Policy - A Critical Understanding” with a focus on China’s ‘new normal’ and ‘the fourth generation reforms’**, was the next public session. It was of great interest and relevance to me, and I was assigned to be a note taker for the session. The session was moderated by Ambassador Jaimini Bhagwati, the former Indian High Commissioner to the United Kingdom. On this ‘new normal’, the slowdown in the economy and its implications, both of the Chinese scholars, Dr. Huaizhu Xie and Dr. He Fan, agreed that this was simply a natural progression in an economic cycle, whilst the Indian scholar Dr. Sanjayu Baru saw it as the biggest challenge faced by China, alongside its growth long term sustainability issue. In this talk, the two parties respectively agreed to disagree. I think this is the beauty of discussion and the type of democracy India has to offer. The next public session was on **“India and Japan: New Imperatives in the emerging Asian Geopolitics”**. This session was moderated by Ambassador Biren Nanda, the former high commissioner of India to Australia and the panel consisted of Ambassador Aftab Seth, the former ambassador of India to Japan, Professor Tomohiko Taniguchi, the special advisor to the cabinet of Prime Minister

Shinzo Abe, and Dr. Srabani Roy Choudhury, professor at School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University. Although the international security issue of the South China Sea is definitely a focus that may require more action from India, India and Japan foresee a great relationship even moving beyond this shared interest. With the rise of China, Japan acts as a counterweight in East Asia, and thus, India and Japan should increase investments as well as exchange in technology. I am very impressed at how hard the Centre worked, creatively making the panel discussion the best possible. In this session, Professor Taniguchi actually appeared via a video link from Tokyo and the discussion progressed beautifully without any interference or disruption.

Last but not least was the session on **“India’s future with Latin America and Caribbean”**. This was my most favourite out of the four sessions I attended. It was moderated by the Ananta Aspen Centre Chairman Ambassador S K Lambah, with a keynote address by General V K Singh, the Honorable Minister of State for External Affairs, Government of India. The panel guests included Ambassador Deepak Bhojwani, the former ambassador of India to Colombia, Venezuela, and Cuba, Ambassador Melba Pria, the ambassador of Mexico to India, and Ambassador Tovar da Silva Nunes, the ambassador of Brazil to India. This public session was really impressive as we got to hear the current ambassadors’ viewpoints on India. All the panelists were exceptionally inspiring. The key point that I took away from the session is that if the relationship between the two regions is to deepen there must be a mutual understanding and a greater cross cultural exchange between the two. Moreover the economic, commercial, and diplomatic ties are there but they have not yet reached a desirable point. A more comprehensive action plan and Indian presence is needed in this region, as well as cooperation, investment and understanding from Latin America and the Caribbean towards India. In this session I got the opportunity to personally interact with the Mexican ambassador whilst also engaging in discussion with the Venezuelan ambassador who attended the session as a member of the audience. This was truly an inspiring session that will forever last in my memory.

Conclusion

In short, every second of my two months of experience during my Avantha International Fellowship here at the Ananta Aspen Centre India has been worthwhile academically and personally. I give my wholehearted gratitude to the Avantha group for financing the fellowship, and Ms. Kiran Pasricha for her always inspiring guidance. This has been the greatest opportunity filled with the most phenomenal experiences one could ever wish

for from a fellowship here in India. My thanks also go out to all the colleagues and friends at Ananta Aspen Centre that I have met along the trip. They have made this experience an unforgettable one. If you also have keen interest in India I wholeheartedly urge you to seek out this opportunity. I promise you that India will not disappoint you and that you will truly be able to realise its "Incredible" charm.