

A Recap of My Fellowship Experience

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Having grown up in Nepal and as a student in Boston, I had the opportunity to observe India from near and far, yet never from within. Aspen Institute India's Avantha International Fellowship provided me with the opportunity to do just that. As a student specializing in climate change negotiations and policy, India has been a country worth studying- it remains firmly committed to negotiating international agreements on common grounds with the rest of the Group of 77 and China and at the same time has a vibrant private sector that is willing to innovate and scale green energy to another level.

The early half of 2012 was a time when India's sheen was starting to wear away in the eyes of those who saw only a rising and 'shining' India till a few years ago. The much touted Indo-U.S. strategic partnership was being (and still is) questioned. Some analysts thought the partnership had been oversold while others lamented India's inability to deliver. Furthermore, the worsening economic climate and shaky confidence in the future of the Euro zone was dampening India's potential for high growth figures. Faced with such an external environment, the policy paralysis of the Indian government and the parliament did not offer much hope. The disruptions in the monsoon session of the parliament further exemplified the lack of domestic consensus on India's priorities.

It is in this context that the past two months have been a period of immense personal and professional growth for me and has enriched my understanding of India's domestic political calculus and the nature of its relations with countries around the world. I am very grateful to Aspen Institute India and its Board of Trustees for making such an opportunity available. This paper is a reflection of my two months at Aspen India. The first section of this paper will focus on some substantive themes that I found particularly interesting and the remaining portion is a more personal reflection. I must admit that my reflections are very much evolving and bear the imprint of a summer in India more than being an outcome of rigorous research.

Observations on the Discourse

I begin with a few quick observations on the discourse on India as I feel this is how the story of India has been framed, for the better or for the worse. I believe a significant challenge will be to align the discourses with the nature of change taking place in India today.

a. Masked Diversity

When scholars study China, they spend a great deal of effort to make sure that they capture the diversity of thought that exists within the political system. India, by the virtue of being a vibrant democracy, sadly does not seem to get the same level of attention as there is an assumption that the narrative in the mainstream media is reflective and representative of the state of thinking in the country. While there is certainly some effort to redress this, the problem very much exists. I believe this lop-sided discourse is more prevalent in foreign policy where the acceptance and the buy-in of the Nehruvian vision of non-alignment has not been put to test in historical terms.

b. India as a land of paradoxes

Scholars who have ventured out to capture the essence of India in a volume or two have normally defined it as the land of paradoxes; the land where globalization has created Slumdog Millionaires and a place that was able to gift the world yoga and yet has millions under poverty. To me, it reeks of intellectual laziness to define a country as a land of paradoxes as it escapes the deeper question of what contains these paradoxes and why these paradoxes are possible.

c. Leadership of Businesses/Industry

While the constraints of coalition politics have severely impaired the government's ability to act decisively and has left the government occupied with managing its political crises, it was very heartening to get to meet some visionary leaders who have been pushing the frontiers of social entrepreneurship and other business models. Yet, there is a lot more space for such creative and bold approaches to push India's economy forward. A major challenge seems to changing tracks from what some have pointed out as the degeneration of economic liberalization into crony capitalism.

Impressions from select book discussions, workshops and conferences

***PaxIndica* by Shashi Tharoor**

PaxIndica could not have come at a better time. When the debate on what ‘non-alignment’ really means and if such a course of action is even advised is high pitched, a “futuristic” take on Indian foreign policy was a valuable addition. However, Tharoor seemed to evade some of the difficult questions posed to him at the panel, particularly on multi-alignment. When asked if a world of multiple allegiances is really possible if one has to take ‘either-or’ decisions, how does India calibrate its foreign policy? Perhaps ‘alignments’ will no longer be as defined as it was during the Cold War. Yet, if foreign policy is to be an instrument of domestic transformation, it begs the question of whether there is enough of an agreement on what foreign policies to pursue to for domestic change. This also brings to the fore the question regarding whether ‘Non-Alignment’ in its original form in the days of Nehru enjoyed national consensus to begin with and whether, as one observer put it, perhaps non-alignment turned into an end in itself from its original casting as a policy.

Sadly, Nehru, both the man and his policies get lumped into one. This seems to make it impossible for someone to admire the person but not like his policies. In India I witnessed precisely this. Even those who profess to be contemptuous of Nehru’s idealistic policies are quick to recognize the tremendous benefits that India got by having a world-class spokesman for it, a figure who was recognized throughout world.

Malgudi to Mocondo

The book discussion on Ambassador Vishwanathan’s *From Malgudi to Mocondo* was very entertaining and yet insightful. The portrayal of Latin America to an Indian audience by a veteran diplomat proved to be a great example of how far away lands, made closer by the increasing interconnectedness of the world, are being presented and discussed in India. I couldn’t help but wonder how the existing Western narrative on emerging markets and countries of the Global South, in general, inform and influence how Indians see these countries. Is an Indian counter-narrative of the global south possible in a world where the distinction between globalization and Westernization has blurred? As India increases its

interactions and scope of engagement with countries around the world, it will be interesting to see how the dominant narrative surrounding these countries in India will change.

Martin Jacques- When China Rules the World

Rightly, there exists a lot of uncertainty and unease about the nature of China's rise and what this entails for the international order. Jacques' book provides a strong case for the argument that China's rise has been singularly unique. Whether you buy all of his arguments or not, it certainly sets the stage for a deep reflection on the nature of India's reemergence into the world order and how this will shape the international system.

Jacques argued that the emerging world order would not just be of multiple polarities but also of multiple modernities. This brings to attention the role of Indian soft power and how there is increasing space for an Indian narrative. Perhaps an interesting extension of this argument is the link between civilization and polity. While Jacques illustrated the coincidence of civilization and polity in the Chinese case, one cannot make such a sweeping statement about India. There have certainly been episodes of such coincidence but the relationship between the nature of the Indian civilization and the polity, or rather, polities, is complex and subject to much debate.

Often, the questions and comments that people raised during the Q&A sessions provided an interesting window into the concerns and queries that occupy people's minds. I found it interesting that there is a strong desire to see China grow in a robust way and yet there is significant unease about China's potential aggressiveness regarding territorial disputes. This feeling of uncertainty is also fueled by concern over the nature of the Tibetan movement in the eventual passing of the Dalai Lama. Furthermore, the sustainability of Chinese growth has also been questioned by China's reliance on a manufacturing driven growth and questions about the ability of the Chinese Communist Party to keep up with the aspirations of an increasingly prosperous citizenry.

India Bangladesh Roundtable

As this was a roundtable on a South Asian neighbour, I was immensely interested to get a sense of how India's relations with a neighbour is debated and discussed. This India-Bangladesh roundtable also came at an interesting time as there were many calls for the

Indian parliament to ratify the Land Border Agreement during the monsoon session of the parliament. In addition, the lack of domestic consensus coupled with the strong role played by regional parties seems to be undermining the progress that the Central government is trying to make regarding its relations with the South Asian neighbours. Of course, it would be unfair to cast blame on regional parties for India's dicey relationship with its neighbors, but we must recognise that they have emerged as a major force to reckon with.

The question remains: what is the method of bringing in states into the national foreign policy discourse and how can consensus be obtained so that foreign policy initiatives can be undertaken. There seems to be a general reluctance to recognize and institutionalize the foreign policy roles that states can play. This may come at the cost of a further fractured polity where electoral calculations and foreign policy objectives become increasingly entwined, subsequently undermining India's role in the neighbourhood and beyond.

Social Dimension of Climate Change

While at Aspen India, I was happy to be assigned work regarding climate change and energy and energy security as these fall directly in my field of study. I really value the exposure to how the debates are currently going on 'in the real world'. I was happy to see that these issues are increasingly becoming a part of the mainstream discussion and that there are efforts to connect the world of international negotiations on climate change to discussions on the ground.

While most of the debate has focused on matters of financial viability and India not being able to compromise its growth potential for the sake of climate change, I stumbled upon another factor that seems to be as important as the two other factors: the social dimension.

Take for example, mass transit. There is a general aversion to public transport amongst the middle class and upper middle class. If sustainability is to be taken seriously, mass transit, amongst numerous other issues, needs to be a focus area. As ecological economics pushes the concept of 'de-growth' forward, we are at a stage where we really must ponder the links between materials and well-being, something that India is by no means unfamiliar with.

Personal Reflection

There are three main reasons why I felt that the fellowship experience was a unique one with tremendous value to me.

First, as a student of international negotiations and climate change and energy policy, I was very happy to find the overlap area of the two fields being one of Aspen India's programmatic areas. My two months at Aspen India were a nice testing ground for the material I have been learning at the Fletcher School.

Second, I was assigned tasks that spanned across many topical areas. This not only allowed me to gain great familiarity with the work going on in Aspen India but it also allowed me to practice different functional skills. I am also very glad that I was quickly absorbed into the work of Aspen India in no time and I felt like a regular member of the team.

Third, I was able to gain exposure to visionary leaders who are at the forefront of India's domestic transformation. This includes the Board of Trustees and participants in various programmes organised by Aspen India. How can non-state actors be major influences for positive change; Who can drive forward such changes? The answer of course is no longer just the government but through a greater mobilization of people across sectors. Aspen India is a part of this process by promoting values based leadership and dialogues on Indian development. It was certainly a great summer to be a part of this process.

I conclude by thanking Ms Kiran Pasricha and the Aspen India staff for an excellent experience. The trust that the team placed in me certainly affected my fellowship experience very positively. I hope many more students will continue to make use of this great opportunity.