



**A RECAP OF MY FELLOWSHIP PROGRAMME EXPERIENCE**

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AVANTHA INTERNATIONAL FELLOW 2011

“The only source of knowledge is Experience”

Albert Einstein.

## **INTRODUCTION:**

Prior to coming to India, I was just another Masters graduate from the University of Birmingham - one of many thousands from the university and one out of millions around the world. After two months with Aspen India, I feel a transformation unparalleled even by my whole MSc. studies experience. I have not only lived and learned from a unique Indian experience, I have been furnished with certain invaluable skills that will carry me a long way in building an international career. I am leaving India with a sprint in my step because I am no more a mere atom in the mass but now I can stand out in the crowd and boast of having an international experience that is second to none.

As the Avantha International Fellow for 2011, from the 1<sup>st</sup> of July to the 31<sup>st</sup> of August, 2011, I was based with Aspen Institute India. Within this time, I was an integral part of the Institute and participated in all its activities. Most ground-breaking were the conferences, seminars and book launch events in which I participated. The overarching objective of the fellowship was to give me international exposure and an opportunity to understand the complexities of the Indian Democracy and learn from experts on how these can be handled. These were clearly fulfilled by virtue of my coming to India, participating in the conferences and meeting high-profiled personalities.

This report therefore centres on the value-added resources I gained during the programme. It has five sections. The first looks at the intellectual upgrade I got from the whole experience; the second focuses on the leadership aspects; the third pays attention to organisation and communication. The fourth section dwells on team-working and the final section draws some conclusions.

## **INTELLECTUAL UPGRADE:**

The Hegelian-Marxist credo that “Practice without thought is blind and Thought without practice is empty” made more meaning to me during the period of my fellowship. While I had read-up things about India and had some intellectual grasp of Indian realities, practically living these realities was a

game-changer as far as my intellectual growth is concerned. Listening directly to policy makers and experts discuss issues carried with it a different ring to the detached classroom lecture.

First, listening to Ahmed Kathrada, on his Mandela International Day lecture, narrate his experiences and emphasise the qualities that made Mandela a great leader, came with a force never experienced in hitherto discussions on leadership. The simplicity with which the experience was communicated coupled with the fact that it came from a person who had lived it, made all the difference.

This is also true of the other session on Economic Diplomacy where Ms. Karen Tan, High Commissioner of Singapore to India, Mr. Stewart Beck, High Commissioner of Canada to India, and Kishan Rana, Former Indian Ambassador to Germany, used their experiences to capture the complex issues surrounding inter-state relations. These diplomats made me realise that theory is and should be the handmaiden of practice and not the other way round. This was made clear by the establishment of the fact that in reality there was little or no difference in Economic Diplomacy and Political Diplomacy. Similar to this was the discussions on Afghanistan, where an expert was able to clarify some of the doubts about India – Afghan relations and say those things which mainstream media will not say.

The books launch discussions of *His Majesty's Opponent: Subhas Chandra Bose and India's Struggle against Empire* by Sugata Bose and *Growth with Financial Stability: Central Banking in an Emerging Market* By Rakesh Mohan, were other landmark events in their own light. I not only had the opportunity of experiencing a book launch discussion first hand, but was able to listen and participate in discussions of high intellectual capacity. Sugata Bose's book has had a tremendous influence on my political views about India. First, I had not heard or read of Subhas Chandra Bose before then. Secondly, I began to see where a weakness of India's democracy could be attributed. This book influenced a post on my blog titled "India's Journey to the top – The missing

Link”, in which I argue that India was a victim of a “single Story” – her story being told only from the Gandhian-Nehru perspective, while the Bose angle has been relegated to the realm of debates. The discussions on Rakesh Mohan’s book on the other hand, gave me an opportunity to hear the ‘truth’ about the recent financial crisis. Following the discussions, I have been able to confidently establish what the crisis is – a North Atlantic and not a Global financial crisis. Also, the discussions laid bare to me the dangers India or any developing nation faces when relying on regulations dictated by global financial bodies such as the IMF and World Bank.

‘What matters is what it takes’, was the caption of the discussion that brought to me the most amazing discussion on leadership. Listening to a cross-section of India Leadership Initiative Fellows consider leadership from their different experiences, perspectives and backgrounds, not only made me learn novel aspects of leadership, but also gave me an opportunity to appreciate the importance of transformational and situational leadership.

## **LEADERSHIP:**

Ms. Kiran Pasricha’s ability to influence, motivate and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of Aspen India is all too evident in the giant strides the Institute is making. I have been able to learn the secret to this from the first moment I spoke to her in her office. Her decision to allow me the free reigns that enabled me to develop my own leadership and potential made my experience a really enjoyable one. Her blend of charismatic, transformational and situational leadership style is something I had not thought possible in an India setting, especially given the previously held knowledge of the existence of a high power distance in India.

Stimulating also, was the connection Kathrada made between the leadership style of Mandela and the notion of value-based leadership held by Aspen Institute. I had always tried to understand what made leaders like Gandhi, Luther King Jr. and Mandela to stand-out, and this lecture made me realise

that it was not the traits or physical attributes that made a leader but the values upheld by the leader. In leadership then, values matter – many values matter.

The session by Akshat Verma, screenwriter and Associate Director of the movie 'Delhi Belly' presented another strong motivation on self-made leadership. He clearly emphasised the importance of risk-taking, learning from mistakes and failures and resilience as the recipe to reaching the top. He came across as one who sees the unfortunate situations he faced in life especially from India as the key to his success and who believes that the key to his success lies still with the same India.

### **ORGANISATION AND COMMUNICATION:**

Another thing that has left a lasting impression on me is the manner in which the whole fellowship programme was organised. I have a lot to be grateful to Ms. Gulshan Borah and Mr. Basudev Mukherjee who from the moment I received the offer of the Fellowship were in constant communication with me. They made me realise the importance of effective communication and the need to pay attention to detail, in the systematic manner in which they were able to handle everything relating to my travelling and lodging.

Being part of the office, it did not fail to impress on me that communication is a key ingredient to the overall success of all the programmes I participated in. The attention paid by all to the dissemination of information relating to the programmes and the manner in which constant communication was maintained all through each successive programme was all too obvious for me to see and learn from.

### **TEAM-WORKING:**

Working in teams to ensure the success of any venture is already considered an essential aspect of organisations' strategy. However what struck me most was not just the fact that there was a lot of coordination among all those in the

office and that they were ever-willing to be of assistance where I lagged, but also the fact that there was this communal spirit of eating together and sharing food. It made me integrate faster than I ordinarily would under normal office settings.

The assistance I was constantly given whenever I could not get something right, the patience with which my shortcomings were borne, and the diligence with which I was reminded of things I had to do, made me understand the power of making people feel a part of an organisation. The concept of 'carrying others along' could never have been clearer to me.

## **CONCLUSION:**

I began this report by calling all what I have narrated here 'value-added' experiences. The reason for this is that to me, they come as an addition to what the fellowship promised. Over and above having a unique experience in a country that is fast gaining prominence in the international terrain, I have had opportunity to improve on a variety of transferable skills which have greatly enriched my experience. Having the opportunity to visit historic sites like Qutab Minar, Agra Fort and the Taj Mahal, added flavour to the whole experience. It goes without saying that the Avantha International Fellowship is an invaluable experience for any student who aims to build an international career. It is my great conviction that with the skills and experience I have gained I will make a wonderful ambassador of Aspen Institute India and the Avantha Fellowship Programme.