

A recap of my fellowship experience at Aspen Institute India

Puseletso Nkopane

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I have wanted to come to India for the longest time thanks to how fondly family, friends and acquaintances spoke fondly of various trips to India. Prior to my fellowship at Aspen Institute India, I was fortunate enough to live in Japan and travel to some Asian countries such as China, Hong Kong, South Korea, Singapore and Malaysia, and my one of my regrets not to travel to India. However, thanks to the Avantha-Aspen Institute India Fellowship, that would soon change.

As a graduate student of International Administration at the school of Public Administration at Leiden University, my focus is essentially on the complex national and international contexts within which international organisations function. My specialisation places emphasis on public administration and state-society relations in transitional societies whilst studying international relations, international organisations, and national administrative systems current theory and research on issues that are high on both international and national agendas. My thesis topic was on providing a comparative analyses on two Asian powers, China and Japan as development assistance partners in Africa. Consequently, my courses and my thesis allowed me to be deeply engaged with issues in emerging countries, global governance issues, regional organisations, 'south-south' dynamics, 'north-south' dynamics and living in an age defined as the Asian Century.

During my studies I became familiar at looking at India as a dominant actor in South Asia, and also as an emerging global power. Although I received and engaged in numerous studies on India's domestic and foreign policy issues, I felt that I did not have sufficient knowledge on India hence I began to seek opportunities that would allow me to have an experience in India. Fortunately I came across the Avantha-Aspen Institute India Fellowship, I immediately applied hoping that I would be considered as a candidate. After completing the application form and writing an essay based on the following question, *Does BRICS provide a flexible platform to responding to India's regional and global challenges?* I must admit, I was nervous on whether my essay met the high standards that I expected from Aspen, luckily I was informed I was short listed as a candidate and I would have to partake

in an interview. I remember being very anxious the night before the interview, thinking of what questions I may be asked, and I frantically read and reread just about anything I could find on contemporary domestic and foreign policy issues in India. Much to my surprise two friendly faces appeared on skype to conduct what in retrospect felt more like a friendly conversation than an interview. After the interview I was sure of my decision to apply for the fellowship at Aspen Institute India was the right one and I was elated to receive the news that I was selected as a fellow.

Many of my friends and family members were initially worried about my decision to accept the fellowship position in India, especially since the recent bad publicity Delhi has experienced on safety issues for women. However, I've always stood by the stance one has to be safety conscious anywhere in the world and we have nothing to fear but fear itself. Oddly enough, I remember thinking to myself on the drive from Indira Gandhi International Airport to a place I would soon call home, on how parts of the city bore resemblance to parts of South African cities. I would later find out that one of the most dominant figures in South African architecture, Sir Herbert Baker was also the same man who were responsible for planning and construction of New Delhi. Hence I would later make a joke that New Delhi feels just like home to me.

My first few days at Aspen were spent acquainting myself with my colleagues, learning names and the duties of the people I would spend two months with. After being eased into the functions of Aspen Institute India and familiarising myself with previous work of the institution I was later immersed into ongoing projects such as the production of the Aspen Institute India annual report and also being informed and assisting on upcoming events. Throughout this process, I continuously engaged with my colleagues on ongoing projects and upcoming events, constantly learning how programmes are best executed from inception until fruition. This indeed, was a learning experience for me, since for someone who attends to public lectures, I wasn't aware of the organization that is necessary for successful events to take place.

During my fellowship at Aspen Institute India I had the honour of attending a range of public sessions. I first had the honour of attending "India-Latin America: A Growing Partnership", with the Ambassador of Brazil H.E. Carlos Sergio Sobral Duarte, Ambassador

of Mexico H.E. Jaime Nualart and Ambassador of Chile H.E. Cristian Barros Melet. To be in a room listening, to authoritative voice on issues pertaining to developing countries and linkages between Latin American countries and India was a thrilling experience for me. I was even more enthused when I had the opportunity to conduct an informal conversation in Portuguese with the Ambassador of Brazil.

Other public sessions held by Aspen Institute India during my tenure as a fellow include “Global Swing States: India and the International Order” hosted by a panel of seasoned academics and the Former Foreign Secretary of India, Ambassador Kanwal Sibal. The discussions and issues raised by all panellist, were enlightening, particularly Ambassador Kanwal Sibal’s thought provoking question “Is a hegemon is necessary for a stable international order?” It was a bold question to pose and I believe such a question inspired many conversations thereafter. One of the most special events hosted by Aspen Institute India is a session on the "India & the US" .This year’s chief guest was Mr Shivshankar Menon, National Security Adviser, who graced attendees with his astute insights on India’s contemporary security threats and how India should proceed in securing itself in a seemingly more insecure global order. I am glad to have been in an audience of experts who raised important issues on security and stability not only in Asia but also globally. Another public session I attended was "The CEO Series: Leading in the 21st Century: a conversation between Mr Rahul Bajaj, Chairman, Bajaj Group”. Mr Bajaj proved to be a knowledgeable voice on issues pertaining to the success and challenges of the private sector in India and he also raised vital issues on the convergences and divergences of the public sector and private sector in an increasingly globalised world. Indeed, Mr Bajaj wisdom not only left me but other attendees reflecting on some of the gems of wisdom he imparted during his talk. The last public session I was able to attend before the conclusion of my tenure at Aspen Institute India was “China as a world power with James Mann and Shyam Saram”. Seeing as China has risen as a global power, many observers ponder what the possible consequences could be for the international order, to accommodate a power like China whose rise has been unparalleled to any other power. Mr Mann provided insightful commentary on the politburo of China, and the impending reforms that are to be introduced in China, whilst Ambassador Saram raised important issues on China and India and the rise of two Asian powers in the international order. The stimulating conversations

between these two experts' encouraged inspired questions from the audience, which later turned into even more thought provoking conversations.

I am grateful for the opportunity to attend all these public sessions as I feel they enhanced my knowledge on critical issues in domestic and foreign policy affairs and forthcoming issues that need to be addressed in global governance. It may seem audacious to state that the public session that I attended at Aspen Institute India have added value to, not only my knowledge of theoretical concepts I learnt at graduate school but also provided me with insight that I could not gain from solely academic studies. I believe I am privileged to have been privy to the dynamic conversations I observed at all Aspen Institute India public sessions and each session imparted new knowledge on domestic and foreign affairs issues to me.

One of the requirements during a fellow's tenure at Aspen Institute India is to produce a thematic paper on an issue pertaining to India's domestic or foreign policies. During my tenure I produced two discussion paper, 'India's Non-Traditional Security Concerns' and 'Africa and India: Strengthening connections and advancing opportunities'. Thankfully, my colleagues at Aspen Institute India encouraged my pursuit to produce these papers, and without their guidance, reflection and assistance I would not have produced research that I hope can be of value for people interested in domestic and foreign policy issues in India. Being around my colleagues at Aspen proved to be an opportune opportunity as I was surrounded with a knowledgeable team of people, who can hold length discussions on critical issues in India and their far reaching impact throughout the region. I will always remember the conversations I had with my colleagues on a realm of important issues and many of their words provided me with plenty of reflections on issues that I am also interested in.

Essentially, I would encourage any student who is interested in international development, policy issues, domestic and foreign affairs to apply for the Avantha-Aspen Institute India Fellowship. It has been an inspiring and invaluable opportunity for me to engage in value added learning through a first-hand experience of interacting with stakeholders and decision makers in India. Few opportunities such as the Avantha-Aspen Institute India Fellowship exists for young people to be truly engaged on crucial issues and make a

valuable impact through participating in discussions, attending public sessions, and producing original research.

To conclude, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the CEO and Executive Director of Aspen Institute Ms Kiran Pasricha, whose immaculate leadership will continue to inspire me in my own professional trajectory. I would also like to extend my gratitude to all my colleagues at Aspen Institute India; Minema, Nidhi, Swati, Niyathi, Nikita, Gaurav, Wikky, Mukesh, Arunabha and Samarth. Each and every one of them made my tenure at Aspen Institute such a pleasure experience, and I appreciate the warm and welcoming office environment they all provided on a daily basis.