

Seeking Our Common Cultural Heritage in Asia: How I Developed My Vision for the Future

FAZAL KHALIQ

Since my childhood I have seen the Buddhists and Hindu ruins of the ancient Gandhara civilization in and around my hometown in the Swat valley that was known as the ancient Uddiyana Kingdom in the past. The valley is not only famous for its scenic beauty but also for its rich culture heritage belonging to Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam, and can be regarded as the common point of cultural heritage for Asia.

However, people in Swat, unaware of the importance of the rich cultural heritage, consider the ancient archeological buildings as mere structures of the past belonging to non-Muslims and that is why they do not care about it. The extremist religious communities also played a role in furthering the idea that the ancient ruins were un-Islamic and they destroyed important archaeological sites and sowed their ideas in the minds of local people.

When Taliban blew up the face of the iconic 7th century Buddha at Jahanabad in Swat during the Militancy period in 2007, the incident sparked world-wide anger and discomfort not only among the Buddhists but also cultural activists, historians, archaeologists, and civil society.

The reaction from the international community created a sense of curiosity in me, so I started studying them and found them very important not only as they were the sacred remnants of Buddhism and Hinduism but there was also a full-fledged civilization connected with the sites. These ruins held stories of the past and were important for many researchers, historians, and archaeologists in the world.

I also looked around the globe and found that there were always conflicts based on religions and cultures, which sensitized me that nations give great importance to their religions and cultural heritage and they can go to the extent of war between to protect their beliefs.

In addition, I remembered that during my student era the Babri Mosque was destroyed by some Hindu extremists in December 1992 in Uttar Pradesh, India, and how that created bloody conflicts between Muslims and Hindus not only in India but also around Asia. In Pakistan the Muslim majority reacted to the incident by destroying Hindu temples and harming Hindu communities. In Swat I witnessed the destruction of some Hindu temples and saw enraged mobs stoning ancient statues.

Consequently, I reached the conclusion that religion is the most influential entity for human beings. Similarly, if someone respects and takes care of others' religious beliefs and their sacred buildings, it helps create a soft and tender image. My premise was proved later when I started writing in print and electronic media about the miserable and crumbling

condition of the Buddhist archaeological sites and putting pressure on the government to preserve them: I received positive feedback from Buddhist and Hindu communities in other countries.

I also realized that ignorance in local people makes them harm and damage the religious and cultural heritage, which creates mistrust and intolerance in the people of other countries and can ultimately lead to violence and wars.

In this regard, I personally took the initiative to educate local people with a special focus on youth and civil society members about the importance of cultural heritage and archaeology standing around us. I started presentations in schools, colleges, and civil society organizations and motivated print and electronic media to report on those events and broadcast them. The two-fold campaign worked amazingly, because people have started respecting archeological sites, and students and tourists have begun visiting them. The government also took special measures to protect, preserve, and open the sites for national and international tourists.

I also visited different Buddhist countries and gave presentations about our rich archaeological heritage. My selection in the Asia Leadership Fellow Program this year, 2017, was part of the campaign during which I not only discussed it with the other six fellows but also gave detailed presentations at several universities in Japan.

Here, I must mention that becoming an ALFP 2017 fellow and spending two months in Japan changed my vision about this amazing country, Japan. It not only provided an opportunity to intermingle and interact with fellow scholars but also opened new doors of learning and understanding, and extended my knowledge of social, cultural, economic, health, educational, and environmental sectors of the diverse Asian nations.

It was an opportunity for me, as a Pakistani to meet my fellow participants in the program and to discuss our mutual common interests and our differences. With an Indian fellow I shared and developed understanding about gender inequality to politics and minorities' problems. An Indonesian fellow and I peeped into the landscape of each other's countries and saw cultural and religious similarities and we discussed our social norms, including the health sector. I also interacted with a Vietnamese fellow to discuss similar sectors in our two developing countries from education to infrastructure. A Thai fellow provided me a better understanding of Thailand's historical background, from state diplomatic vision to ASEAN's climate change and disaster management efforts, while a Chinese fellow shared her country's economic vision, the travel from rural society to an urban one. And from a Japanese fellow I learned about hate speech and gender indifferences, rapid development to family structure.

I gained a lot from other fellows and also found similarities in the issues that concern us. Issues across Asia are so common that if we concentrate upon them as we did during this

two-month ALFP program, then we can reach a conclusion on how to create a better future for Asia.

Giving lectures and presentations at various universities of Japan on the Gandhara Civilization and rich cultural heritage of Pakistan enabled me to create a strong network for future collaborative undertakings. The seminars organized for the fellows on various emerging topics not only enhanced our knowledge but also widened our understanding on many complicated topics.

It was incredible to learn from Professor Kohtake Naohiko the use of satellite applications for services, ranging from monitoring illegal activities to engaging farmers in proper sowing and harvesting to tracking ground activities and making sports trainings scientifically accurate. There is a high need to raise awareness regarding the satellite technology applications and its innovative services among the public of all the Asian countries as well as globally.

Understanding populism in global context was also an interesting topic as Professor Aida Hirotsugu rightly summed how populism was the reaction of globalism. He also pointed out that it had the elements of nationalistic sentiments behind it. He explained the main causes behind Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 US election by focusing on the model of recent US elections and backed it up with concrete examples and data. I understood that to mean that it was mainly the gap between rich and poor and the unfair distribution of resources and facilities that created populism and resulted in a clash between globalism and nationalism, a revolt against capitalism, a grudge between the lower middle class and elite class, a prejudice against foreigners, and a divide between rural class and urban class.

As Professor Ambeth R. Ocampo pointed out in his seminar titled "Forgetting as Remembering: Cultural Heritage and World War II," it is true that history is dealt in a subjective way. I know from personal experience that all over the world, as well as in our country, history is being treated in a partial and personal way which leads towards nationalism. He explained that history should not be taken the way it was done but must be understood and critically analyzed as memory had always two different points of view and we should not be imprisoned by our past memory or history, but we have to remember and move forward.

Learning about three major issues Japanese working women face and what is holding them back from Professor Osawa Machiko was another interesting point about the developed nation of Japan where men still consider themselves as the sole bread winner and bear full responsibility of taking care of their families. It was interesting to know that even in Japan, as in the third world, social norms have not changed and women face the same hurdles between pursuing careers and being mothers. The seminar was useful for my learning as I had never thought about the waste of women's talents and now I plan to concentrate on the issue in my country where we are already deprived of talents of women who make up nearly half of our population.

The thought-provoking seminar on Northeast Asia relations with a special focus on China-Japan relationship and a perspective on North Korea's role in the region by Professor Takahara Akio opened a fresh window in my knowledge about the fostering role of China with North Korea and South Korea as well. It was also interesting to know how the Northeast Asian region's economic development and race towards international competition affects the world.

Professor Tanabe Akio expressed his view that public sphere in Asia is expanding into different realms such as in cultural, economics, and digital where vernacular publics are becoming active agents and it is becoming a glocal interaction. He also noted that for the first time Asia is being seen as an area where politics are becoming transnational and cosmopolitan, and that Asia is moving from Atlantic-centered world to Asia Pacific-centered world order was interesting.

On my visit to Mie Prefecture, I met the visionary governor Mr. Suzuki Eikei and learned about his various initiatives to make his prefecture a model for disaster management activities. My visit to Ise Jingu, an ancient Shinto shrine in Ise City, Mie Prefecture, instilled in me a new spiritual knowledge about Shintoism and its influence on Japanese society. Its highly applaudable management system for visitors and tourists taught me a lot. In addition, during other visits and the field trip I went on with the ALFP group, I closely observed how Japanese protect and manage their cultural heritage, and how tourism plays a great role in its sustainability and harmony.

Learning about the traditional culture of *Ama* (women free divers) and meeting with Ms. Ozaki Yoshi a local *Ama* in Shima, was also incredible and new for me. It was heart touching to see Ms. Ozaki's love for her profession and her warm feelings for diving and catching shellfish. I wish this beautiful and age-old tradition is preserved for a long time.

In Hayami Forest I learned about forest management for environmental sustainability and biodiversity, forest conservation, and cultural landscape. A short trek to explore Mangose-toge Pass, the ancient pilgrimage trail, provided me a chance to view how the administration preserved and maintained it for tourists.

It was yet another interesting aspect of learning about Japan's poverty and demographic issues in the Kamagasaki area. Visits to different sectors of the Kamagasaki community in Osaka showed a gloomy view, but the government initiatives to keep people in the community engaged in work and also the arrangements for their day-to-day life were worth learning. The social work and activism by Mr. Arimura Sen for the homeless and poor workers were impressive.

Knowing about the *Zainichi* Koreans and their ties to Japan and Korea gave me a new understanding of the Japanese social fabric. Impacts of hate speech are so poisonous that it can ruin peace of societies and even lead to extremism. I wish civil society in Japan can understand it and resolve the issue wisely.

Visiting a nursing care facility for aging people in the Atsugi area gave me a new outlook of the Japanese urban society. The practice of working long hours by both genders affects family structure which will, one day, lead to social disruption. Family system is indispensable for balanced societies because it not only ensures healthy lifestyle free of anxiety and depression but also saves money. In the aging care centers I saw a strange gloom on the innocent faces of aged people who were left by their children. Reshaping the family structure is one of the most important and immediately needed sectors for Japan. On one hand the birth ratio is very low as young Japanese do not want to have children; on the other hand the constantly increasing number of aged people is putting a huge burden on economy.

The changing demographic will soon become a population disaster for Japan as it happened in many countries of Europe, and this rapid shrinking of population will definitely create financial crisis in the country. During the ALFP program, I met many young people in Japan, both male and female, who wanted independence, and I was shocked to find out that they were not in favor of marriage or having babies. This trend of single-member family house can prove a catastrophe. There is an urgent need for the think tanks and intellectuals of Japan along with the government machinery to undertake serious initiatives and try to resolve it.

Visiting Hiroshima was my longstanding dream since my school days when I read about the use of atomic bomb on the city along with Nagasaki. The visit at last came true. Seeing the memorial park, the A-bomb dome and then a detailed visit of the peace museum took me back to World War II and I felt that I was physically present on the day the bomb was dropped. Seeing the miseries suffered by the innocent citizens made me feel sad; meeting some of the survivors and hearing their stories broke my heart. They are witnesses of that gloomy day and they repeatedly demand those countries that have nuclear weapons to demolish them for a safe and peaceful world.

Through the ALFP program, I learned a lot about the management of cultural heritage and sites and showcasing them to the national and international tourists. The ancient Itsukushima Shrine on Miyajima was perfectly maintained and the influx of huge number of tourists on the island taking photos at the great Torii gate was inspiring. I have only ever seen deer either in zoos or in jungles and was delightful to see a large number of deer on the Miyajima Island living peacefully with human beings. To me this was an example of high standard humanity and civilization as today in many countries even human beings do not live peacefully together, but here on this beautiful island of Japan animals and human beings live in love and harmony. I thought if on Miyajima human beings and animals can live peacefully, then surely Japanese and Koreans too can live together with love and peace.

I was equally surprised to see the well-maintained tourist attraction of Rabbit Island Okunoshima where thousands of friendly rabbits entertained visitors with their presence everywhere. The communication between rabbits and human beings was worth seeing. I

found rabbits running after people to get food and it was more beautiful than anything to see many people carrying food for the cute bunnies. I thought how different we are in South Asia where many of our people go to far-flung mountains to hunt wild rabbits. These people chase rabbits to their hideouts and shoot them. But in Japan, people come to enjoy and play with cute bunnies. Presence of large number of international tourists and the well-managed ferry service and several other facilities inspired me more.

Experiencing a Japanese *onsen* in Hakone and its attraction for international tourists is also one of the landmarks and something unique for newcomers. The scenic Hakone district with multiple attractions and its traditional wood art also left a deep impression on me. Furthermore, the systematic tourism management around Mt. Fuji and how skillfully Japanese entertain the tourists there with hundreds of attractions around the mountain startled me. It is pertinent to mention that Saiko Iyashino-Sato Nenba, a small traditional village with thatch roofs, has been revived and is now a place where one can see not only Japanese traditional houses but also traditional craft making activities, museums, and many more.

My special attention was attracted to Buddhist and Shinto shrines in Kyoto and Nara, which I found busy with worshipers and tourists alike stimulating one's spirituality. The ancient architecture, natural beauty, and serenity were inspiring and attracted tourists from everywhere.

In short, the two month-travel blended with scholastic meetings, multi-dimensional visits, engaging dialogues, seminars, and workshops was inspiring and showed me how the sincere and hardworking people of Japan transformed their war-torn and devastated country into one of the most developed and civilized nations. The Japanese learned from war and showed the world that they can achieve every height if there is a will and determination. This is a much-needed learning model for Pakistan as we are passing through our hard and ugly time of terrorism and militancy. It is sad that we are engaged in self-victimization and busy in blaming each other for our policies and the on-going situation in the country.

There is always a lesson in war and militancy but a nation with visions and learnings will come out of it as Japan did. Unfortunately, Pakistanis are still imprisoned by past glory and have no roadmap for the future. We are imprisoned in a self-victimization complex. In this regard, Pakistanis can learn a lot from Japan, from its rapid development to super clean society, from disaster management and earthquake and typhoon mitigation measures to waste management, and from public transport and industry development to successful pollution free environment.

I reached the conclusion that I could take my lessons from Japan and its development model to replicate it in our country. We have to train our younger generation to join the civilized and developed nations. We have to train them to live on their own and not on the IMF and international aids.

Standing on the ALFP platform, it is high time to initiate an active civil society collaboration program with scholastic, educational, technological, medical, economic, and cultural exchanges to harmonize our interests, minimize our gaps, and create a peaceful and civilized Asian society.

Today, I am more informed about Japan and the on-going situation in East Asia. I now have ample knowledge about Southeast Asia and I am more sensitized towards seeking a common vision for the future. And, of course, my experiences and learning will go in broader sense, not only, to my audience and readers in Pakistan but also go abroad for wider coverage.