Vijay Kannan at Foundation Day Celebrations

Vijay R. Kannan is a Vernon and MaRee Buehler Endowed Professor, Head of the Management Department, and Executive Director of International Programs, at USU’s Huntsman School of Business. He is a Fulbright U.S. Scholar and shares his insights from a Fulbright experience in India.

One of the highlights of my life was the five months I spent as a Fulbright Scholar in India in 2006-2007. It was a deeply personal experience as I got to live in the country of my parents, having previously only visited, albeit on numerous occasions. It also gave me the opportunity to share my cultural heritage with my wife and pre-teen children.

I was based at the Indian Institute of Management – Lucknow (IIM-L), one of India’s top business schools. My primary assignment was to teach 1st year MBA students about purchasing and supply management. The academic culture in India is quite different from that in the U.S. It is typically professor-centric, and there is a clear hierarchy between professor and student and a greater level of respect and deference to the professor than in the U.S. While I was familiar with this, it was rewarding to observe how students embraced an interactive classroom environment and efforts to connect with them. Where students in the U.S. expect to be engaged if not ‘entertained’, my Indian students saw this as a breath of fresh air.

In addition to teaching, there were several other elements of the Lucknow engagement. I was asked to put together a business simulation competition as part of a student-run professional development event that attracted corporate leaders and students from across the country. Thirty student teams participated in the competition. IIM-L is actively engaged in corporate training programs and I was invited to contribute to a couple of these programs. Part of my time was spent exploring research initiatives with IIM-L colleagues as well as presenting my research to the faculty. A tradition I was also able to enjoy was the morning and afternoon ‘tea times’ when faculty would meet in the faculty lounge to socialize and otherwise connect.

The Fulbright experience is about being broadly engaged in the host country. I had the opportunity to travel across the country to teach, give research presentations, and conduct workshops. I visited both well established, prestigious institutions, and those with much lower academic standards and more limited resources. These visits also allowed me to connect with faculty and learn about their realities. One participant at a workshop on pedagogy lamented that as much as they learned from the session, the reality was that it would be an uphill battle getting institutional support to innovate in the classroom. Alas, this was not a unique concern. Other highlights included being invited by the Fulbright organization in India to be a guest speaker at their anniversary celebration event, and to connect with other Fulbright Scholars at the bi-annual Fulbright India conference.

The engagements were not without ‘adventure’! At one, a session was interrupted by student activists angrily demanding the reinstatement of students dismissed for inappropriately treating a faculty member. At another in a remote, rural part of the country that has experienced separatist violence, my family and I stayed at a government guest house that was spartan, to say the least. Why? Our safety could be better assured there than at a hotel in the city! This visit was particularly rewarding. The host was deeply appreciative that a U.S. faculty member would travel to his part of the country when faculty at leading business schools in India generally would not. It also enabled my family and me to visit a tribal community and learn a little about village life.

There was also time to sightsee and to introduce my family to uncles, aunts, and cousins. There were cultural festivals, visits to local markets, and in the case of our children, the experience of going to school (they came home with an entirely new appreciation for their Logan school!). It was in equal measure exhilarating and challenging but always rewarding.
We learn more from what is different than from what is familiar. Living and working in someone else’s world allows us to gain an appreciation for alternative realities, develop empathy, and help us overcome misunderstanding. As easy as it is to stay in our comfort zone, it cannot compare with the reward of having such a unique experience.

Vijay enjoys Holi Festival in India

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