人生は夢だらけ [Life is full of dreams] . . .

by Dr. Gaurab Das Mahapatra

Dear readers, I shall share the story of the realization of my dream with all of you. My name is Dr. Gaurab Das Mahapatra and I am from Kolkata, India. I completed my Ph.D. (April 2020 - September 2023) in Architectural and Structural Design from the Laboratory of Architectural Planning of the Division of Architecture and Structural Design of the Graduate School of Engineering at Hokkaido University, Japan under the supervision of Professor Dr. Suguru Mori and co-supervision of Associate Professor Dr. Rie Nomura. My education was sponsored under the Embassy Recommended MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) Scholarship by the Government of Japan. Presently, I am working as an Assistant Professor at the Department of Architecture and Regional Planning at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Kharagpur, India. I have divided my story into smaller fragments to give a clearer picture of my journey.

Figure 1: After receiving my degree in September 2020

The journey begins:

I stumbled upon the MEXT scholarship in 2019 while browsing through the websites of the Department of Education, Ministry of Education, Government of India and University Grants Commission. I decided to give it a shot. The website of the Embassy of Japan in India mentioning the MEXT scholarship is extremely well laid out, crisp, and clear for the applicants. First, I filled up the application form mentioning the necessary details (including the research plan) and submitted it to the Embassy of Japan in India, New Delhi. After receiving the news that I was shortlisted, I went to New Delhi where I was asked to appear in two language proficiency tests: English and Japanese. However, the score of the highest among the two tests was to be considered for the next phase. The score of this test along with the score of the previous research plan submission was considered while shortlisting the candidates for the last part, i.e. interview; and I was shortlisted! In my category of Architecture, only 3 candidates were selected for the interview and arguably it was one of the most intense moments of my life. However, I was satisfied with the interview and that was the first time I ever interacted with a Japanese person!

After a few weeks, I got the information that I was awarded the prestigious MEXT scholarship for pursuing a Ph.D. from any Japanese University that accepts MEXT scholars. I was happy (that I got the scholarship), tensed (because I needed to leave my then permanent job as Assistant Professor), excited (since I would be able to see Mount Fuji whose picture stand my father had gifted me years back), and humbled (as I was the only 1 student selected in the category of Architecture under MEXT).

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The last run:

From then things were pretty tight and tense. MEXT Scholarship is a financial assistance, however, the actual realization of the assistance shall take place if one can get a 'Letter of Acceptance' or LOA from a Japanese university. Thus, I started my hunt, and after sleepless nights and hundreds of emails to the Japanese professors, I was able to secure LOA from the following universities: (a) Hokkaido University, (b) Hiroshima University, (c) Toyohashi University of Technology, (d) Mie University, and (e) Ibaraki University. However, my first preference was Hokkaido University due to the following reasons: (a) My supervisor Dr. Mori was the only one who took a Zoom interview and we had an amazing discussion, (b) My supervisor was one of the researchers who are working very close to my research domain and have multiple publications as well as projects to his credits, (c) The university is a National University and has very high ranking in Japan and well as the world, and (d) The location of the university, i.e. in Hokkaido prefecture, is one of the most beautiful places in the world. I submitted the names of the universities that granted me LOA to the Embassy of Japan once again. Finally, The Embassy permitted me to start my education in Japan by April 2020.

Figure 2: Hokkaido University in Winter

COVID-19 resisted:

After receiving my visa from the Consulate General of Japan in Kolkata, my flight from Kolkata was on 1st April 2020. I resigned from my then-current job on 25th March 2020. However, India went into lockdown on 24th March 2020 and my travel to Japan was immensely delayed. Being frustrated at the fact that I could not travel to Japan by flight, and anxious because I was jobless at the moment, it was one of the toughest parts of my life. At one point I had almost given up the idea of going to Japan and started looking for other jobs. However, my family gave me moral and financial support and the Consulate of Japan in Kolkata gave me repeated assurance, and I finally could enter Japan on 5th November 2020. After spending 15 days in quarantine in Tokyo, I travelled to Sapporo where Hokkaido University was located. Thus, the dream was realized!

Shock, but a sweet one:

There were several surprises that I faced in Hokkaido, Japan, like (a) Temperature going down to almost -18°C, (b) People not communicating in English at all, (c) Eating raw fish in the form of Sashimi or Sushi, (d) Taking part in cultural activities like ice fishing, matcha (green tea) making, or even traditional kanji (Japanese alphabet) writing class. Japanese people are extremely honest, hardworking, punctual, and polite. I was fascinated to see the Japanese toilet as well.

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Figure 3: From left – Ice Diving in drifting ice near Abashiri, Ice Fishing in Barato River, Skiing in Fu-Resort

My gain - Friends and beyond:

Being lucky enough to study at Hokkaido University which is a global university with 150 years of legacy, I could make friends from all over the world including people from Japan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, Cambodia, Singapore, Australia, Fiji, China, Taiwan, Mongolia, Russia, Finland, Sweden, Egypt, Angola, Kenya, Ethiopia, Nigeria, USA, Canada, Guatemala, Mexico, Columbia, Peru, and many more. It gave me a fresh perspective towards culture, religion, economics, society, food, and human emotions. When I came back, the Japanese friends gave me a treat of 'Chengiz Khan' (lamb barbeque) and Sushi; the Egyptian friends gave me Hummus and Dried Lime; the Chinese friends gifted me with homemade Chinese dessert! Thanks to my friends all over the world, I can now distinguish between Spanish and Portuguese, or between Chinese and Japanese, or Finnish and Russian. These memories are for life. The university also gave multiple opportunities to take part in such activities.

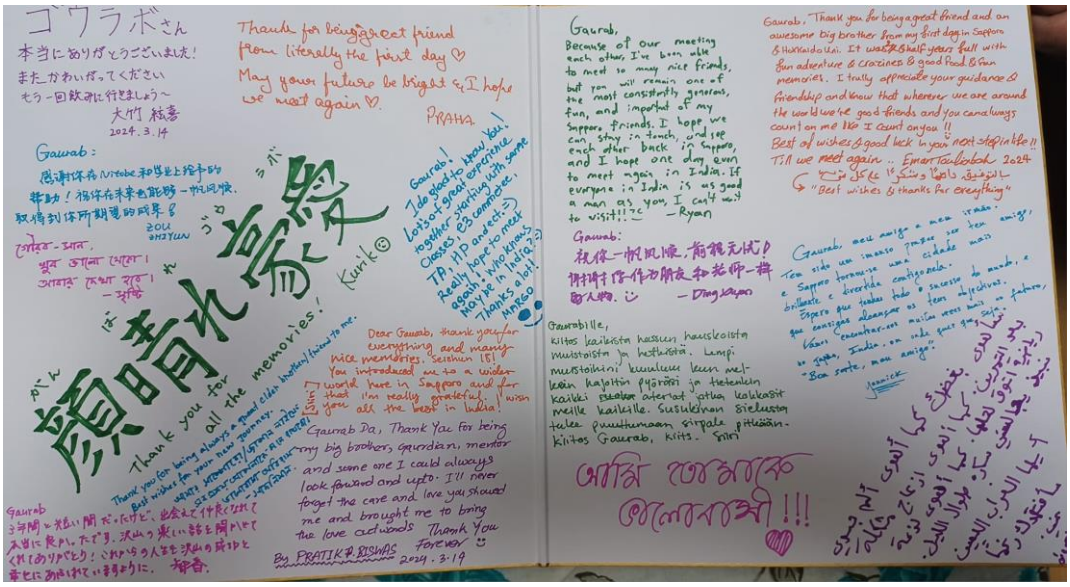

Figure 4: Message from my friends before I left Japan

My contribution - Academia in rolling motion:

I was lucky enough to have an amazing supervisor Dr. Mori and a supportive co-supervisor Associate Professor Dr. Rie Nomura who supported me academically and always ensured my stress-free condition in Sapporo. I published 5 papers during my PhD! I also met Dr. Ram Avtar who has been a mentor throughout this journey. All of them have ensured my academic and financial well-being in every possible way. Professor Yoshichika Iida, Professor Dr. Kaori Kuribayashi-Shigetomi, Professor Dr. Kazuaki Oda, and Mr. Motoki Harigaya were my mentors and well-wishers as well. They were always accommodating and extending their support. Also, the Hokkaido University staff were more than helpful. I was also the valedictorian during the graduation ceremony.

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Figure 5: With my supervisor, Dr. Mori

My improvement - Interpersonal skills:

In Japan, I was also involved in teaching and research assistant positions besides working as a part-time English teacher. I have been involved in leadership and management activities as (a) Event manager for an international symposium, (b) General Secretary and Vice-President for international student associations, (c) Campus Director for the student entrepreneurship program 'Hult Prize OnCampus program', (d) President of Indian Association in Sapporo, and (e) the co-founder of a student-based startup 'Beeber Global'. Being the Campus Director of Hult Prize OnCampus (2021-22/23) made me interact with students from more than 35 countries, who were from different genders, had dissimilar sexual orientations, practised distinctive religions, spoke various languages, and held unique ethnic beliefs. Most importantly, since I was leading the organization, my perspective towards handling a diverse background and getting the work done (on time) was a challenge that I enjoyed. Similarly, while working as the General Secretary of HUISA (Hokkaido University International Students Association), I was dealing with a relatively large number of international people (over 2000). Also, this was the first time that I got actively acquainted with the LGBTQ+ community. The related events and meetings made me more sensitive in the way I delegate duties, improved the way I frame my speeches, and more inclusive in my approach or management (micro and macro). Since 2020, I was also fortunate to travel through different countries in Asia (Sri Lanka, Japan, South Korea, Qatar, Türkiye), Africa (Ethiopia and Kenya), and Europe (Finland, Estonia, Germany, and Portugal). Travelling and meeting people in all these places made it clear that the beauty of the world is in its diversity, which is also in coherence with the ideology of India- 'unity in diversity'.

Figure 6: The members of our start-up Beeber Global

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My Message to all:

I am just a hardworking and lucky person who is ever indebted to the Embassy of Japan in India and MEXT. After completing my Ph.D., I was working as a Technical Assistant at Hokkaido University. In March, I was offered the position of Ambitious Special Assistant Professor at Hokkaido University. However, I decided to come back and join IIT-Kharagpur so that I can serve my nation through academia. It was not always a smooth journey during my PhD. I must say, my wife Architect Sudeshna Chakraborty who is also a graduate of Hokkaido University supported me and kept the ball rolling (and my dreams alive).

Figure 7: Me and my wife at the Byodoin Temple at Uji, near Kyoto, Japan

Finally, with my experience, my suggestion to aspiring candidates for MEXT scholarship is the following:

1. **Before applying:**
   - Prepare an elaborate Research Plan.
   - Talk to previous recipients.
   - Do not talk to too many unrelated people.
2. **While applying:**
   - Be patient.
   - Keep trying for other scholarships too.
3. **After getting confirmation**
   - Keep in touch with the Embassy and Consulate
   - Try to start learning Japanese.
   - Try to email as many professors as possible.
   - Be professional and polite in your emails.
4. **While travelling to Japan**
   - Carry cash converted into Japanese Yen.
   - Take small souvenirs for Japanese friends.
   - Take permissible spices from India.
   - Don't take too many clothes or shoes.
5. **After reaching Japan**
   - Make Japanese friends.
   - Travel Japan
   - Eat Japanese food.
6. **After completion of the course**
   - Check job opportunities at least 1 year before course completion.
   - Keep in touch with the Japanese Embassy in India to share your experiences.

I hope that you all believe 'Life is full of dreams'

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Figure 8: From top left clockwise – With my part-time employer and her pet attorney; My doctoral Degree where I was the valedictorian; During fall when the leaves turn golden; My farewell party; and The president of Hokkaido University holding my book P.S. Melancholy

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