

# The India Experience:

The Role of Research Institutes and Think Tanks in  
Democratic Governance Reform

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# Knowledge, Policy, and Political System -I

## Issue 1: The Permanent Civil Service v/s the Spoils System.

- The nature of the bureaucratic system influences the relationship between research institutes and policy makers with respect to:
  - ✓ The question of turf – advice perhaps but no encroachment
  - ✓ Movement in and out of bureaucracy between academics and civil servants.
  - ✓ The generalist who develops an ‘attitude’.

# Knowledge, Policy, and Political System - II

## Issue 2: Democratic v/s Authoritarian systems.

- In authoritarian systems the technocratic knowledge is often sufficient for policy making which is predominantly instrumentalist in nature .
- In democratic systems, in contrast, technocratic knowledge has to accommodate political claims and contestation, other knowledge positions, before it results in policy outcomes.
- The character of the knowledge inputs that goes into policy is hence different in the two systems.

# Knowledge, Policy, and Political System - III

## Issue 3: Developing v/s Settled Political Systems.

- In developing political systems the priorities of policy are, in the first instance, driven by political ideology and not by research evidence since these polities are facing the multiple challenges of nation-state formation, poverty reduction, and social justice.
- In settled polities, these are no longer priorities.

Example: climate change as an issue area

# From Socialist nation-building to Liberalization

- One must not forget that, in the 50s in India, the overall policy aspiration was to build a socialist society by adopting the path of a constitutional parliamentary democracy.
- The public discourse was dominated by the need to explore the role and capacity of the state, to design programmes, establish departments, and set up a governmental architecture to promote state led development.
- The Planning Commission was the key institution where research was done and policy designed.

# Three phases of knowledge production

- In 60 years the knowledge to policy relationship travelled through three phases. (source: Kuldeep Mathur)
  1. In the **first phase (early 50s)** the Planning Commission was the central institution that did research in-house, invited consultants, and prepared the plans to meet the goals of addressing poverty, education, health, rural development, etc.
  2. As research capacities grew , in the **second phase (late 50s to 80s)** research institutions were set up, outside the Planning Commission where research followed policy. i.e., policy gave an impetus to research especially on aspects such as programme evaluation. Institutions such as IEG, NCAER, NLI, IIPA, ICSSR, NCERT, etc.
  3. Such research then went into fine tuning policy.
  4. The Ford Foundation played a significant role in supporting these institutions.
  5. The **third phase (90s)** when there are multiple sources of funding, including multilaterals, bi-laterals, and foundations especially foreign foundations.

# Self –Reliance and Capacity Development

- Within the state sector key producers of knowledge were :
  - Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) for science and technology with 40 odd institutions spanning everything from oceans to drugs to building materials. Knowledge production in the public sector was for the goal of self-reliance.
  - Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) with 27 odd institutions which are located in many Indian states to help the process of policy making in the states. E.g., ISEC in Bangalore, CDS in Thiruvananthapuram.
  - University Grants Commission and all universities recognized by it.
  - Other institutes: IIMs, IRMA, IGIDR, IIPA, ASCI, IDSA, MAKAIOS, etc.

# Social Science producers of knowledge

- Universities - both central and state
- Research Institutes - both public and private.
- Think Tanks – ORF, TERI, CPR, PRIA, ISS, ...
- Advocacy groups - CSE, NCAS, MKSS, CPP, ...
- Consultancies – KPMG, Kirloskar Consulting, ... (especially after liberalization)
- Significant individuals - It is important to recognize the role of 'champions' who lead research and campaign for policy change e.g., R.K.Pachauri, M.S.Swaminathan, Jean Dreze, Medha Patkar, Nandan Nilekani.

# Anxieties concerning knowledge produced

- Validity of the knowledge produced especially with respect to its truth claims. How does one distinguish between activist research (goal driven) and academic research (open ended)?
- Agenda setting by donor agencies. They determine not only the thematics of what should be researched but also campaign for the research findings to influence policy. (Ref: Health policy)
- Demand and supply. The GDN programme has rightly identified gaps at both the demand and supply sides. The permanent civil service in India has not encouraged the use of outside researchers in studying issues and advising on policy. Many senior policy makers have lamented the fact that even when they want quality research it is not available and hence evidence based policy is not really possible.
- Quality of research (ICSSR). Even the 4<sup>th</sup> review committee has observed that 'descriptive accounts and polemical discussion are far more common than incisive and original analytical studies'.

# Knowledge and governance reform

- While no singular pattern of use can be discerned across government in India three types of users may be suggested.
  - **Don't know but need to know** e.g., National Commission on Urbanization, National Commission for Women. Champions important.
  - **Too busy and too urgent** e.g., issues relating to national security.
  - **Issue too controversial** e.g., Venkatchalaih Commission on reform of the Constitution.

# Knowledge to governance policy – Public discourse

- The debate must recognize the intangible impact of a robust public debate in setting the framework of significance for policy choices.
- Policy makers are both guided and constrained by this framework in selecting the direction of policy.
- Institutions such as JNU, from where many of those in the higher civil service come, have played a prominent role in the evolution of this framework.

# Knowledge to governance policy – Routes

- There are at least five mechanisms through which such knowledge becomes available to policy makers:
  - (i) professional journals especially **EPW**.
  - (ii) public affairs journals such as **Seminar**.
  - (iii) popular media especially the op-ed discussions in the newspapers.
  - (iv) google.
  - (v) commissioned studies.

# Knowledge to governance policy - sites

- The policy makers draw on research knowledge through multiple sources in India. Academics are members of several commissions and committees constituted to advise the government such as The National Knowledge Commission.
- The other strategy is to organize colloquia and seminars where academics are invited.

# Democracy studies – The Case of Lokniti

- State of Democracy in South Asia – four pathways: attitudinal survey, case study, qualitative study, dialogues.
- State of the Nation Survey– partnership with media
- Report Card – partnership with media.
- National Election Survey – with universities across India.
- Index of democratic governance in Indian states.
- Political Parties in South Asia.

# Four significant cases of governance reform

- **PRI (local government)** – Long history of debates on reforming local self-government in India. A shift from centralised to decentralised.
- **NREG (rural employment guarantee)** – Campaigned for by advocacy groups especially at the now disbanded National Advisory Council which was the site for CSOs to influence Government.
- **RTI (Right to Information)** Prolonged campaign by CSOs to make governance more transparent.
- **ARC (Administrative Reform Commission)** In spite of the grand mandate it used mostly colloquia and did not commission specific studies.

**Thank you**