

No Indian think tank in Global 50

Not one Indian think tank figures in the Global 50 annual list for 2012 released by the University of Pennsylvania end-January. China beats India in this area as well and so do, in some specific cases, think tanks from such countries as Ethiopia, Costa Rica, Brazil, Egypt and Argentina.

The best India has managed is the Centre for Civil Society (CCS) at Number 51.

The US occupies five of the top 10 slots, with Brookings, Carnegie Endowment, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Council on Foreign Relations and Rand Corporation.

But for those who want India to shine and value the contributions made by think tanks in shaping a country's future, the carps aren't limited to the fact that only those in the US or even the UK, with Chatham House, Amnesty and International Institute for Strategic Studies, make it to the top 10.

China, despite its innate disadvantages in the English language, sits with two such institutions in the global 50 - the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences is at Number 17 and the Chinese Institute for Social Sciences is at Number 38 and many more in the pyramid below.

Beyond China, at Number 24 is Brazil's Fundacao Getulio Vargas and at Number 39 is Argentina's Consejo Argentino par alas Relaciones Internacionales, while Egypt's Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies at Number 50, who all show India the mirror. Even Kenya, Indonesia and Chile have institutions that figure higher than our second-highest ranked institution.

Our bunching in the global 150 begins in the bottom 33 percentile. After Centre for Civil Society, the Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis (IDSA) sits at Number 105, the Indian Council for Research on International Economics Relations at Number 109, The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI) at Number 110, the Observer Research Institute (ORF) at Number 115 and Development Alternatives at Number 141.

That said, India is Number 4 by way of total numbers. Out of 6,603 contacted by U-Penn across 182 countries, India can boast of 269 think tanks. Only the US (1,823), China (429) and the UK (288) have more feedstock. Also, the general trend appeared bullish given that the relative rankings of Indian institutions has improved compared to 2011.

U-Penn offers the same listings sans US think tanks. They also divide the institutions by the region, and in domains such as science, economics, health and the environment. They even slice Asia into an amusing construct. In one such list only India, China, Japan and the Republic of Korea are ranked. Naturally, Indian think tanks rank higher when any of this is done. But so do a whole lot of them from China.

In the curtailed Asia (India, China, Japan, RoK) list, for example, ORF shows up at Number 10, IDSA (11), Centre for Policy Research (12), CCS (15), Delhi Policy Group (22), the Institute of Peace and Conflict

Studies (24), TERI (25), the Centre for the Study of Science Technology and Policy (28), National Council for Applied Economic Research (29), Centre for Study of Developing Societies (33), Institute of Economic Growth (40), United Service Institution (42) and Liberty Institute (43).

Beyond research output, it is funding and resultant influence among policymakers that drives these rankings. Here, the role of the Indian government (and the country's university system) remains the weak link. Not one Indian entry makes it to an interesting list showing the world's 40 best university-affiliated think tanks.

There's a similar blank India has drawn in the list of the world's 30 best party-affiliated think tanks. Among government-affiliated think tanks, there's only IDSA at Number 16. A silver lining, perhaps, is the role two corporate notables -- Reliance and in an earlier hue the Tatas - who seed-funded ORF and TERI, respectively. Both think tanks have found government funding for their programmes. Is that the future?

India's poor show continues in lists of 40 think tanks which best use the internet and social media. Here the irony is, an Ethiopian and a Costa Rican think tank, respectively, make it, but none from India.

The Economist magazine gives away a hint on how India can do better. So, here it goes: A good think tank is one that is able to combine intellectual depth, political influence, and flair for publicity, comfortable surroundings, and a streak of eccentricity!

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