Funding Think Tanks is a strategic imperative
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India's increasingly assertive role in international affairs necessitates a robust and independent intellectual foundation. In a world where geopolitical and geoeconomic complexities are reshaping alliances and policies, India's voice must be clear, confident, and rooted in its own insights. As Joseph Nye said, true power transcends mere resources; it lies in the capacity to shape ideas, influence perceptions, and set the terms of debate. This is the precise domain where independent think tanks prove invaluable. While India is home to over 600 think tanks, placing it among the top three nations globally in terms of numbers, a significant challenge remains. Few Indian institutions are influential in shaping global policy or offering truly transformative thought leadership. The issue is not one of quantity, but of quality, strategic vision, sustained credibility, and consistent long-term support.

The prevalent model of project-based funding, often reliant on short-term assignments and foreign philanthropic or corporate donors, severely limits the capacity of Indian think tanks to undertake deep, long-term research. This dependency poses legitimate questions regarding their perceived independence and influences the trajectory of their work.

A critical question arises: Why has India Inc. largely remained disengaged from consistently supporting domestic think tanks, especially when foreign counterparts benefit from strong governmental and corporate backing? Several factors contribute to this gap.

One, some Indian think tanks are viewed as too closely aligned with the government, undermining perceptions of their independence. Others are seen as lacking the scale or capacity to generate significant impact. Two, corporate social responsibility (CSR) funds are frequently directed towards highly visible, immediate-impact initiatives like health care or education, which offer clear, tangible, and communicable results. Policy research, conversely, is perceived as having a less immediate impact and being harder to quantify or communicate. Three, many businesses believe they can influence policymakers without the intermediation of a think tank. Four, many think tanks operate in silos, lack interdisciplinary collaboration, and struggle with effective communication strategies. A shortage of dedicated fundraising, communications, and marketing teams often means their valuable research insights are overlooked or underutilised. Furthermore, limited and uncertain funding hinders their ability to attract and retain top talent.

Despite these challenges, there are compelling strategic reasons for Indian businesses to significantly increase their investment in domestic think tanks. Foreign research, however rigorous, often fails to fully capture the unique complexities of India's social, economic, and political realities. Domestic think tanks provide invaluable, nuanced perspectives essential for robust policy development.

For India to effectively navigate and influence the intricate global political economy, it requires strong, indigenous intellectual voices. Think tanks serve as crucial platforms for projecting this leadership and shaping international discourse. Investment in think tanks fosters a vibrant public policy ecosystem, bridging the critical gap between government, academia, and industry, and attracting talented individuals to the public policy space. Diversified domestic funding sources enhance the credibility and perceived neutrality of think tanks, reducing reliance on single or foreign recurring donors and ensuring that Indian perspectives remain independent and authentic. Think tanks are vital conveners, linking government, business, civil society, and academia; they facilitate collaborative approaches to address complex national challenges, from economic development to climate resilience.

Short-term, project-specific grants are insufficient to unlock the full potential of Indian think tanks. What they fundamentally require is core funding. This enables them to support their staff, cover operational costs, and engage in long-term strategic planning. Core funding allows think tanks to attract and retain top intellectual talent, invest in advanced data analytics and research methodologies, develop robust communication strategies to disseminate their insights effectively, move beyond individual-led models to build sustainable institutions, and cultivate resilience, providing the freedom to pursue innovative ideas and offer independent perspectives without being constrained by immediate funding cycles.

India's journey towards true global leadership hinges not just on its economic might, but on its intellectual prowess. There are two critical gaps currently facing Indian think tanks: A significant funding deficit and a need for greater strategic vision. Indian companies are uniquely positioned to bridge both. By supporting domestic think tanks, India Inc. can play a transformative role in shaping the nation's future, fostering an intellectual ecosystem that truly reflects the spirit of Atmanirbhar Bharat.

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