



Think tanks in South Asia

Analysing the knowledge-power interface

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December 2011

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Acknowledgements

The author gratefully acknowledges the feedback and insightful comments offered by Ajoy Datta of the Overseas Development Institute, London. Thanks are also owed to Pallavi Mishra, Research Scholar, Centre for International Politics, Organisation and Disarmament, Jawaharlal Nehru University, for excellent research assistance.

For sharing their insights and experience, I am grateful to Prof. Anwarul Hoda, Acting Director and Chief Executive, ICRIER, New Delhi; Mr. Pradeep Mehta, Secretary-General, CUTS International, Jaipur; Prof. Kuldeep Mathur, former Professor of Political Science at the Centre for Political Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, and Founding Academic Director, Centre for the Study of Law and Governance, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi; Dr. Ajay Darshan Behera, Associate Professor, Academy of Third World Studies, Jamia Milia Islamia, New Delhi; Prof. Hasanuzzaman Chowdhury, Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Chittagong, Chittagong, Prof. Partha S. Ghosh, Professor, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi; Mala Liyanage, Executive Director, Law and Society Trust, Colombo; Dr. Ajay K. Mehra, Honorary Director, Centre for Public Affairs, Noida, and Associate Professor, Shahid Bhagat Singh College (Evening), University of Delhi, New Delhi.

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Contents

Contents

Acknowledgements		
Contents		i
Abbreviations		ii
Executive Summary		1
1	Introduction	3
2	Definitional issues, typology and methodological concerns	4
3	The knowledge–power interface	5
3.1	Think tanks’ position at the interface of knowledge and power	5
3.2	Analytical framework: two-level embedded autonomy	5
4	The emergence and the growth of think tanks in South Asia	8
4.1	Bangladesh	8
4.2	India	11
4.3	Pakistan	20
4.4	Sri Lanka	24
5	South Asia: the larger picture	29
5.1	The endogenous level	29
5.2	The exogenous level	29
5.3	Two-level embedded autonomy	30
6	Conclusions and explorations	33
	References	34

Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
BAKSAL	Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League
BIDE	Bangladesh Institute of Development Economics
BIDS	Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BNP	Bangladesh Nationalist Party
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
CUTS-CITEE	CUTS Centre for International Trade, Economics & Environment
CSDS	Centre for the Study of Developing Societies
CUTS	Consumer Unity and Trust Society
DFID	UK Department for International Development
ESCAP	Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
GDN	Global Development Network
ICES	International Centre for Ethnic Studies
ICRIER	Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations
ICSSR	Indian Council of Social Science Research
ICWA	Indian Council of World Affairs
IDRC	International Development Research Centre
IFC	International Finance Corporation
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ISI	Indian Statistical Institute
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
Norad	Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation
PIDE	Pakistan Institute of Development Economics
RPC	Research Programmes Committee
SANEI	South Asia Network of Economic Research Institutes
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation
SEWA	Self-employed Women's Association
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNCTAD	UN Conference on Trade and Development
UNDP	UN Development Programme
US	United States
USAID	US Agency for International Development

Executive Summary

This paper maps the broad contours of thinking space in the different countries of South Asia, in which each unique matrix has shaped the trajectories of think tanks, although the commonalities of their post-colonial histories account for many of the common threads.

Analysis suggests that, in the post-independent era of state-led growth, much of the space has been structured by government to garner policy advice and data, with international institutions such as the UN and its sister agencies, the Bretton Woods institutions, private foundations and other donor agencies also playing a major role. For these reasons, think tanks' functioning is largely constrained and episodic as far as policy inputs are concerned, although the nature of the regime and also the relative autonomy of the state from international agencies have also affected their space, especially in terms of the structuring of the research agenda.

The distinction between the state's 'despotic power' and its 'infrastructural power' by Mann (1984) has been adapted to explain the different spaces think tanks occupy in the countries of South Asia. The despotic power refers to 'the range of actions which the elite is empowered to undertake without routine, institutionalised negotiation with civil society groups', whereas infrastructural power refers to 'the capacity of the state to actually penetrate civil society, and to implement logistically political decisions throughout the realm'. The first sense denotes power by the state elite itself *over* civil society. The second denotes the power of the state to penetrate and centrally coordinate the activities of civil society through its own infrastructure (Mann, 1984).

The democratic Indian state has a propensity to marshal infrastructural power rather than despotic power as far as think tanks are concerned, making their space relatively autonomous as compared with those in other countries. There is also an acceptance of the plurality of discourse and the need to nurture deliberative democratic space, which makes the research agenda more flexible, even though it is not completely autonomous from global paradigms.

The welfare state in the early years of Sri Lanka's independence largely eclipsed the space for think tanks in the policy domain. Protracted ethnic strife also armed the state with much greater despotic power. Under the democratic set-up, however, the state maintained an ambivalent position towards the think tank community, occasionally marshalling infrastructural power, but also keeping despotic power under check as far as think tanks were concerned. Its initial all-pervasive role bred a patron-client relationship between the state and action-based think tanks in particular. Only when faced with complex issues relating to conflict and refugees, for example, did the Sri Lanka state begin to engage systematically with the voluntary sector, a move also supported by international donor agencies.

Pakistan and Bangladesh, on the other hand, have had long periods of military rule, with both states exercising despotic power to control think tank activities, although both have also marshalled some infrastructural power and conceded greater space to international agencies.

Since their basket of funding is diverse, think tanks claim functional autonomy from both governments and international agencies, but their dependence on donors – whether government or private – belies this and is an important constraining factor. Most people interviewed for this study underlined that, to become functionally independent, a think tank would need to be able to muster a robust endowment/corpus fund.

Given the near-complete absence of critical research in most countries, think tanks as knowledge producers are failing to fulfil their most important obligation, that of producing a range of policy options (as opposed to legitimising or supporting existing policies or approaches to addressing particular policy problems). So far, policy research undertaken by think tanks in South Asia has focused exclusively on policy-relevant research within strict disciplinary boundaries, with economics dominating as a discipline. Reorienting research to focus on 'irrelevant' topics in a multidisciplinary framework might fulfil the long-term knowledge needs of society and may also be crucial to exploring new horizons of research and laying the groundwork for true thinking space in South Asia. Further intensive field-based

research would be useful into the unexplored life histories of think tanks and the genealogy of their evolution; their interface with various levels of the policy-making process, especially in terms of framing the agenda in different issue areas; and the role of individual leaders, personalities and strategies which both individually and collectively contribute to shaping institutional success stories, as well as collective failures.

1 Introduction

The contemporary narrative of politics, characterised by pluralism and 'trans-nationalisation', encapsulates a number of social, economic and political actors jostling for political space. Of particular relevance in recent years has been the role of think-tanks in the political landscape of different countries across the globe, albeit with varied levels of capacity and influence.

This paper analyses the space and role of think tanks in four selected countries in South Asia – Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.² It looks at the context, evolution and role of think tanks, both historically and in recent times, to understand the broad pattern of political process that conditions their role in these polities. The analysis assesses think tanks with regard to the nature of state and in doing so presents an analytical framework of two-level embedded autonomy to conceptualise the politics of knowledge production in South Asia seen through the prism of think tanks.

The paper is divided into five sections. After this introduction, Section 2 outlines definitions and the methodology. Section 3 locates think tanks within the knowledge–power interface and lays down the analytical framework for understanding their role and functions in South Asia. Section 4 presents country-specific case studies in light of the analytical framework, with Section 5 then giving a South Asian overview. Section 6 offers conclusions and explores direction for future research.

² The use of the term 'think tanks in South Asia' throughout the paper refers to these four countries alone.

2 Definitional issues, typology and methodological concerns

This paper uses a broad definition of think tanks as a heterogeneous group of organisations, engaged primarily in research-based policy advocacy. The definition includes research centres/institutes, policy institutes, academic think tanks and research foundations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) involved in research-based advocacy. It does not include universities as a whole, although research institutes affiliated to universities or deemed universities fall within its ambit. This is because, while the university system produces substantial research output, and its members may also offer advice to government as members of expert committees, they are not engaged actively in policy advocacy, even though their research may have a significant impact in the policy domain.

Think tanks in South Asia perform a variety of functions. They identify their primary role as producers, repositories and disseminators of knowledge and expert policy advice based on research on policy-relevant issues. They are involved in research projects, field surveys, data collection and analysis and publication of journals, books and research reports, etc. They are also a forum for policy dialogue, capacity-building and networking, through the organisation of training workshops, seminars, public lectures and conferences. All of this is geared towards policy advocacy, which they perceive as their principal function.

Within this umbrella definition, four kinds of think tanks dominate the landscape in South Asia, although sometimes the boundaries between them may overlap:

- Primarily research-based think tanks, involved in project-specific research for policy advocacy. These are engaged much more closely with public policy, either by offering expert advice on a contingency basis or by lobbying with policy-makers for policy shifts;
- Action-based think tanks which are largely non-governmental advocacy organisations that rely more on activism and pursue a variety of avenues for policy advocacy, such as media campaigns, judicial recourse and public protests and demonstrations, but whose campaigns are backed by a substantial body of research work;
- Hybrid think tanks, which were initially set up as research institutes but have over a period of time acquired degree-granting powers, many of them as deemed universities, while carrying out their policy-oriented research;
- Private foundations and trusts which are engaged in educational and research activities, such as research scholarships, conference grants and research projects, etc., but which in some cases also envision carrying forward the legacy and vision of their founders or the person in whose memory/name they were instituted.

Methodologically, the paper relies on analysis of secondary literature on think tanks in select countries of South Asia, as well as insights from both practitioners and academics, solicited through face-to-face meetings and telephone conversations. Interviews conducted with think tanks' heads were conducted after a set of written, structured questionnaires was sent out.³ The websites of think tanks, as well as those of relevant government sources and international agencies, were used to identify aims and objectives, research focuses, sources of funding and roles in the policy domain.

³ Responses were for the most part not returned in writing but in some cases provided a basis for discussion.

3 The knowledge-power interface

3.1 Think tanks' position at the interface of knowledge and power

The mainstream narrative visualises think tanks as a bridge between knowledge and power (UNDP, 2003) or as a transmission belt of knowledge between state and society. Functionally, therefore, they are seen as enhancing the knowledge base; informing, educating and advising policy-makers and the public at large; encouraging public discourse; and providing evidence to legitimise decision-making. This framework assumes the existence of a pool of knowledge at the policy-makers' disposal, which can be used on a contingency basis but remains to a large extent separate from the policy domain: that is, researchers and policy-makers inhabit different worlds. Caplan's (1979) 'two communities' theory discusses the behavioural differences, or 'cultural gap', between researchers and policy-makers, arguing that researchers are interested in 'pure' science, abstract and esoteric issues, whereas policy-makers are concerned with action-oriented and practical issues (in Neilson, 2001). Unless policy-makers see research as pertinent in the immediate context, it is branded futuristic and irrelevant to the practical world.

Stone (2007) claims that such a false ontological divide between theory and practice creates a boundary between the two separate worlds of science/research/theory and politics/policy/practice, even though think tanks, 'far from standing between knowledge and power, are a manifestation of the knowledge/power nexus. In short, knowledge and policy are symbiotic and interdependent.' In fact, this dichotomous worldview is at the heart of the difficulty in achieving satisfactory and constructive relationships between research and policy and is driven by the instrumental or problem-solving use of research (Neilson, 2001).

Taking this argument further, a more pertinent question relates not to the instrumental function of research but to its conceptual and critical aspect, which roughly corresponds with Carol Weiss's (1977) idea of its enlightenment function.⁴ This entails a gradual but decisive shift in perspectives towards a potential long-term transformation of the discursive structure of the polity. Such a process is crucial for both providing critical insights and setting the stage for innovative knowledge creation. However, in general, think tanks have most often been required to focus on short-term, 'policy-relevant' research, and have rarely had the space to genuinely critique public policy and provide a range of policy options. Indeed, whether knowledge is 'relevant' or 'irrelevant' rests on an artificial schism that largely insulates the *status quo* in the policy process, wherein research/knowledge often becomes a tool to legitimise certain policy premises.

Given this crucial interplay between knowledge and power, it is important to locate think tanks within the state-societal complex, which is also inhabited by global agencies (de Souza, 2009; Mathur, 2009). Rather than treating them as a bridge between knowledge and power, they should be seen as a site reflecting the knowledge-power nexus borne out of the complex interplay between endogenous and exogenous political processes and actors.

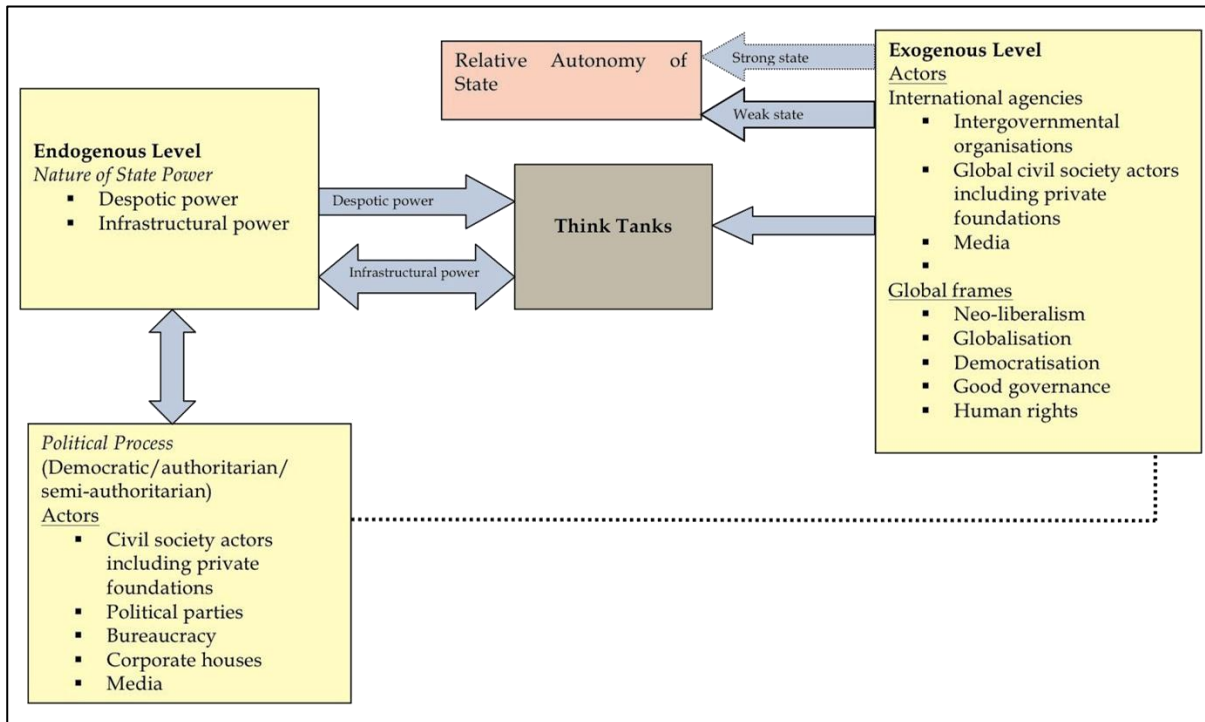
3.2 Analytical framework: two-level embedded autonomy

Think tanks in South Asia, despite some obvious contrasts, show a great degree of functional similarity in terms of the knowledge being produced. A common analytical anchor can capture their role, accounting for common threads and also the obvious contrasts. A dynamic interplay between endogenous and exogenous factors determines the knowledge-power interface –

⁴ Weiss's seven uses of research are: knowledge-driven, problem solving, enlightenment, political, tactical, interactive and intellectual.

termed a two-level 'embedded autonomy' (Evans, 1995)⁵ – embedded in the state–society milieu alongside international agencies and global frames, which in turn is mediated by the political process (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Knowledge-power interface in South Asia: the two-level embedded autonomy framework



The endogenous level

At the endogenous level, the mechanics of state power conditions the framework within which politics are conducted by prescribing and proscribing particular types of articulations. The complex process of political articulation in turn determines the character of the state. Thus, as Hall and Ikenberry (2003) argue, 'the state can be too distant from society as well as too constrained by it: gaining, exercising and maintaining state capacity is an extremely complicated matter, in which there is a perpetual dialectic between the state seizing and being granted authority'.

Mann's (1986) classification of the nature of state power helps to explain the different spaces think tanks occupy in the countries of South Asia. He differentiates between the state's 'despotic power' and its 'infrastructural power': despotic power refers to 'the range of actions which the elite is empowered to undertake without routine, institutionalised negotiation with civil society groups', whereas infrastructural power refers to 'the capacity of the state actually to penetrate civil society, and to implement logistically political decisions throughout the realm'. The first sense denotes power by the state elite itself *over* civil society. The second denotes the power of the state to penetrate and centrally coordinate the activities of civil society through its own infrastructure'.

Mann visualises four types of state in this regard. The feudal state is the lowest in both despotic and infrastructural power vis-à-vis civil society groups. The imperial state has limited capacity to penetrate civil society without the assistance of powerful groups and has low infrastructural power. In the authoritarian state, which is an institutionalised variant of despotism, both infrastructural and despotic power over civil society groups is high. Finally, the

⁵ "Embedded autonomy" refers to a combination of Weberian bureaucratic insulation from external influences albeit with intense connection to the surrounding social structure' (Evans, 1995). The same term has been used to refer to how think tanks exist within a web of constraining influences.

bureaucratic state of most capitalist democracies is steered by civil society groups, with decisions enforced through the state's infrastructural power. Mann also identifies three groups of elites in the remit of civil society activities – economic, ideological and military – and looks at their power with reference to the state.

The level of exercise of despotic and infrastructural power is crucial in determining the nature of the state and its relationship with civil society, which in turn explains the nature of think tanks and the type of knowledge output. The marshalling of despotic power curtails the functioning of think tanks by enmeshing them in a web of regulations and reporting requirements. The lesser exercise of despotic power, the greater the space for deliberative democracy, pluralism and participation, and thereby the more vibrant and diverse the space for think tanks. Authoritarian and semi-authoritarian states thus shrink the space available for think tanks. The infrastructural power of the state has been instrumental in establishment of numerous think tanks and also their research activities through funding research projects, seminars, conferences and other activities, etc. either directly through government agencies/ ministries or through national-level research councils. Based on division of labour between government and think tanks the latter were set up to develop and offer a pool of expert policy advice. Such an exercise of infrastructural power makes think tanks subject to the vagaries of the state's agencies thus limiting their autonomy. Simultaneously, it has been a formidable factor in curtaining the influence of external agencies.

All states combine both despotic and infrastructural power in their engagement with societal actors, think tanks included, although in a democracy despotic power may not be exercised, and if so not in a draconian manner. The continuously evolving balance between the two is in turn mediated through complex political processes, in which political parties, the bureaucracy, private foundations, corporations, the media and other competing societal and individual/civil society actors impinge on the degree of autonomy in think tanks' operational environment.

The exogenous level

At the exogenous level, the role of international agencies, intergovernmental organisations and private foundations and global frames has been an important influence on the nature and functioning of think tanks. The capacity of a state to both marshal and exercise infrastructural power determines its relative autonomy in relation to external forces. States with weak infrastructural power have less leeway, in terms of both resources and expertise, in their relationships with international agencies, and are likely to vacate space (willingly or not) to enable a greater role for international institutions, donor agencies – both public and private – and global frames in terms of structuring the thinking space. A despotic state is also likely to be more vulnerable to exogenous factors.

4 The emergence and the growth of think tanks in South Asia

4.1 Bangladesh

The birth of Bangladesh after the partition of Pakistan in 1971 was a tumultuous event for the region as a whole. The Sheikh Mujibur Rahman-led Awami League won the first parliamentary elections in March 1973 with a huge majority and focused on relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction of the economy and society. Under an ambitious project of nation-building, the new government assumed an all-pervasive role for itself. A planned model of development, marked by nationalisation of the entire economy relied heavily on experienced civil servants and the state apparatus.

For think tanks, infrastructural power was invoked through the First Five-year Plan (1973-1978) which, apart from state-building and development, envisaged establishing an apex social science research council to provide adequate infrastructure to social scientists to carry out interdisciplinary research on 'real' issues through a problem-solving approach. The council was to offer planning and policy advice to the government and act as a national coordinating body for social science research by 'establishing a systematic channel of communication and information dissemination so that the planners, policy-makers and administrators receive regular feedback from the social science researchers'.⁶ It had an ambitious set of functions which included, among other things, formulating a national policy for social science research; acting as grant-in-aid for research projects and publications; organising and sponsoring conferences, seminars and workshops; disseminating research outputs; running a documentation centre; and publishing a directory of social science research organisations and a national register of social scientists. However, after the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, a much-limited council was set up under the Planning Division of the Ministry of Planning in 1976. Here, it worked as a national coordinating body for closer interactions with and between local and international bodies and organisations to promote research as well as to facilitate better utilisation of research outputs, but suffered from limited resources.⁷

After the declaration of independence, some of the think tanks that Bangladesh inherited were rechristened to match the new nation. For instance, the Bangladesh Institute of Development Economics (BIDE) predated the creation of Bangladesh: it had been established in 1957 as the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE), based in Karachi and staffed by a number of distinguished Bengali and foreign scholars. It was moved to Dhaka in January 1971 and was renamed after independence. In 1974, under a Parliamentary Charter, it was renamed once again, this time as the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), to reflect its multi-disciplinary focus.⁸ Another legacy of partition was the Bangladesh Institute of Law and International Affairs in Dhaka, which was set up in 1972 after the dissolution of the Pakistan Institute of Law and International Affairs. This focuses on research into law, jurisprudence, human rights, international affairs, peace and security.⁹

At independence, Bangladesh was faced with a very weak economy and the lack of any significant indigenous economic base, and massive poverty and underdevelopment. The weakness of the state resulted in a greater role for international agencies such as the Ford Foundation, the World Bank, the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC), the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the US Agency

⁶ www.bssrcbd.org/html/objectives_and_functions.html

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Initially, it was incorporated as an autonomous body, governed by a high-powered Board of Trustees under the chairmanship of the Minister of Planning, and received regular budgetary support from the government. In 1983, in order to reduce its dependence on a regular government budget and make it functionally independent, an endowment was created, supplemented by donor agencies and foundations. www.bids.org.bd/bids-bd/about/index.htm.

⁹ www.biliabd.org/research.php.

for International Development (USAID) and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), among others. The massive inflow of US aid into Bangladesh soon after independence prepared the ground for the penetration of Western influences into the country's thinking space, eclipsing any significant role for India or the erstwhile Soviet Union.

By 1974, massive corruption and inefficiency had contributed to famine, economic stagnation and mounting civilian strife, leading the state to take recourse to despotic power, effectuated through long periods of emergency. In December 1974, a state of emergency was imposed, with Mujibur Rahman assuming the role of executive president and instituting a one-party system under the Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League (BAKSAL), leaving very limited space for pluralism and democracy, which likewise shrunk the space for think tanks. Much of Bangladesh's post-independence history is characterised by authoritarian rule. Even when elections were held (between 1971 and 1990, 14 general elections took place at the national level – parliamentary, presidential and referendum – along with 15 local-level elections), they were rigged and manipulated by the powers at the top.¹⁰

During the volatile period following the military coup in 1975, under the 1977-1981 rule of President Major General Ziaur Rahman, Bangladesh turned away from its commitment to secularism. Government policies propagated Islamic identity and pan-Islamic solidarity and Islamic religious education was introduced as a compulsory subject in schools. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), established in 1978 by Ziaur Rahman, won a landslide victory in the 1979 elections and began to implement centre-right, free market policies.

During this period, the state was instrumental in setting up and supporting a number of autonomous think tanks, especially in the areas of international and strategic studies. For example, the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies was set up in 1978 to undertake and promote research and deliberation on international affairs, security and developmental issues and to advance knowledge and understanding of such issues in national and regional perspectives.¹¹ This was in line with the similar emphasis by other newly independent countries on undertaking research on international relations and strategic studies in order to improve their respective position in the world order. For Bangladesh during this period, distrustful of its big neighbour India, such a thrust was all the more imperative given considerations of strategic alignment and/or realignment. Meanwhile, the field of international studies, very much like economics, was seen as technical and complex, requiring expertise and specialised knowledge. A focus on environment and sustainable development, also seen as 'technical' issues, led to a diversification of focus areas within the think tank community. The Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies in Dhaka, established in 1986 with an exclusive focus on sustainable development, is one such representative example.

At the beginning of the first decade of independence, the dismal state of the economy and massive poverty saw the emergence of a range of action-based think tanks. In fact, Bangladesh has one of the largest numbers (around 19,000) of action-based think tanks, working in the field of poverty alleviation, health, education, etc.¹² This is mainly on account of the failure of the state to deliver on developmental promises and the preference of aid agencies to route aid through such think tanks. From the late 1980s in particular, frustrated with the slow pace of reform and the inefficiency of the state's delivery mechanisms, the donor community increasingly shifted the direction of aid to primarily action-based think tanks working in the fields of health, education, poverty alleviation and microcredit (Nobusue, 2002).

The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC)¹³ (1972), the Grameen Bank (1976) and Proshika (1976) are prominent examples of the country's many action-based think tanks. The Grameen Bank's microcredit initiative caught the fancy of international agencies for its efficiency and high rates of return. The awarding of the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize to the

¹⁰ www.femabd.org/.

¹¹ www.bjiiss.org.

¹² www.thp.org

¹³ Initially known as Bangladesh Rehabilitation Assistance Committee and then as the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, now known as Building Resources Across Communities, having internationalised.

Grameen Bank and its founder Muhammed Yunus 'for their efforts to create economic and social development from below' is well known.¹⁴ However, critics say that microcredit agencies such as the Grameen Bank benefit finance capital and have done little to alleviate the abject poverty of masses.¹⁵ With interest rates as high as 30-40%, and coercive debt collection practices, it in fact contributes to perpetuating poverty. Meanwhile, Muhammed Yunus is accused of diverting funds meant for the poor and is currently under investigation for malpractice and corruption. Overall, the past has shown that elite groups are happy with the *status quo*, as they may benefit from an underdeveloped economy and a weak state and make a fortune by diverting funds from official development assistance (Nobusue, 2002). Thus, think tanks' space is not immune to power dynamics, and is the arena through which power is not only legitimised but also exercised.

These specific accusations notwithstanding, the Fifth Plan document (1997/98-2001/02) incorporated a partnership model for government and action-based think tanks, giving the latter an important space as part of the participatory development paradigm (Nobusue, 2002). One initiative geared towards ensuring a greater interface between think tanks and policy-makers is the Centre for Policy Dialogue in Dhaka (1993), which strives to provide a platform for dialogue between the government, civil society and political parties, while also focusing on capacity-building of policy-makers through research. Also, in response to the widespread electoral malpractices that have plagued Bangladesh's politics, the Fair Election Monitoring Alliance was set up in 1995 in Dhaka to promote credible elections and democratic practices while proposing far-reaching electoral reforms. This came at around the time of intense debate over constitutional reform, culminating in an opposition-led strike against the February 1996 election, which all major political parties then boycotted.¹⁶

In the 1990s, apprehensive of the impact of globalisation and the international trade regime, some think tanks strived to chart a somewhat different path. ECOTA was set up in 1990 as a networking and coordinating body for small and medium-sized fair trade enterprises, to promote more sustainable livelihoods in Bangladesh based on the principles of the fair trade movement. Other think tanks focused on tempering the negative impact of globalisation. For example, the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies, set up in 1995, aimed to 'provide training, undertake study and research and share information on labour and related subjects with a view to promote harmonious industrial relations and social justice'.¹⁷

The early years of the 2000s, continuing the trend of the earlier period, saw the birth of a number of new think tanks aided by international agencies. These included the Institute of Governance Studies (2005), which serves as a training and teaching institute at the BRAC University in Dhaka, and Research Initiatives Bangladesh (2002), which focuses on participatory approaches to poverty alleviation and was set up with the assistance of the government of the Netherlands. Alongside these, donors continued to work on microcredit, despite the controversies. The Palli Karma-Sahayak Foundation Dhaka had been set up in 1990 with help from agencies such as the World Bank, ADB and USAID. Most of these had been informed by global frames of governance, participation and neo-liberalism, etc.

Overall, however, think tanks' actual influence on government policy is limited and tenuous. Moreover, their space is regulated by the despotic power of the state through a spate of legal provisions: all non-governmental bodies are subjected to state regulation, which is much more pervasive under authoritarian/semi-authoritarian rules. Bangladesh think tanks are governed by the Societies Registration Act 1860, the Voluntary Social Welfare Agencies (Registration and

¹⁴ www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2006/.

¹⁵ Hasanuzzaman Chowdhury, interview, 2010.

¹⁶ The ruling BNP government won the election but lacked legitimacy, and met with a non-cooperation movement led by its main rival the Awami League, led by Sheikh Hasina. This period also saw violent clashes between political parties and an attempted coup by General Abu Saleh Mohammad Nasim on 20 May 1996. The tumultuous events finally led to the formation of a caretaker government in June under a 13th Constitutional Amendment (26 March 1996). The election held in June 1996 was one of the first to be seen as fair and relatively free of violent incidences. The Awami League took office, but the BNP again won a majority of seats in October 2001. The 2007 elections were cancelled after a state of emergency was declared owing to political turmoil.

¹⁷ www.bils-bd.org/.

Control) Ordinance 1961, the Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Ordinance 1978, the Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Rules 1987 and the Foreign Contributions (Regulation) Ordinance 1982. All legal non-governmental bodies must register with the government and all foreign donations require prior permission from the government. Donors also require government approval in making contributions (Nobusue, 2002).

Authoritarian/military regimes may use such provisions to curb the activities of some organisations while letting those run by their kith and kin go about their business as usual. This accounts for the thriving sector of action-based think tanks. Strong kinship ties run from think tanks to the corridors of power: think tanks are largely run by retired military generals, bureaucrats or their relatives, and are largely insulated from changes in regime. In addition, the majority of think tanks in Bangladesh have overt and covert links with political parties, and hence have a tendency to adopt 'narrow partisan or otherwise biased angles' rather than issues that concern public interests (Hossain, 2008). Some, such as BRAC committee members, have fought for and won local-level elections, with chequered records of success.

The quality of research think tanks produce is wanting in most cases. Research is often done through consultancy and is driven by the requirements of donor agencies – both foreign and domestic. In addition, the introduction of Bangla as the medium of instruction in the university system (which has the potential to promote the production of more home-grown solutions in the longer term) and policy-makers' preference for research to draw on international best practices have acted (in the shorter term) as a major barrier to the free exchange of ideas and a larger public debate, leaving only few foreign-educated, English-speaking experts to give policy advice (Chatterjee, 2002b). These experts are seen as distant from the masses and referred to as 'liaison lieutenants'.¹⁸

Most importantly, the knowledge–power interface has been cemented by the fact that periods of authoritarian and military rule in Bangladesh have bred a culture of conformity and de-politicisation, which prevents 'a sustained, systematic and critical examination of the relation between social thought and society' (Chatterjee, 2002b). Moreover, material and ideational dependence on international agencies leaves little room for any critical indigenous research enterprise.

4.2 India

India has the widest range of think tanks in South Asia. This is a legacy partly of the plurality of discourse that characterised the nationalist movement and partly of the complex range of problems the post-colonial state faced. According to one estimate, approximately 860 think tanks are engaged in social science research, although this is not necessarily of high quality (ICSSR, 2007).¹⁹

The think tank trajectory in India goes back to before independence, when a number of such institutions were set up to develop an indigenous pool of knowledge to address the needs of the nation. Gokhle Institute of Politics and Economics in Pune, set up in 1930, is one of the oldest institutions for the teaching of and research in economics and politics in India.²⁰ The Indian Statistical Institute (ISI),²¹ one of the most prominent think tanks, was established in 1931 in Kolkata by P.C. Mahalanobis to,

'[...] promote the study and dissemination of knowledge of statistics, to develop statistical theory and methods, and their use in research and practical applications

¹⁸ Hasanuzzaman Chowdhury, interview, 2010.

¹⁹ According to an estimate by the National Social Science Documentation Centre, a division of the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR).

²⁰ This was founded with an endowment offered to the Servants of India Society by Rao Bahadur R.R. Kale, Member of the Satara Legislative Council. The Servants of India Society, founded by the late Shri Gopal Krishna Gokhale, who was regarded as the 'political guru' of Gandhi, are the institute's trustees. In 1993, it became a deemed university. See www.gipe.ac.in.

²¹ In 1959, this was given the status of an institute of 'national importance'. It has branches in New Delhi, Bangalore, Chennai and Tezpur.

*generally, with special reference to problems of planning of national development and social welfare [...] for purposes of planning and the improvement of efficiency of management and production.*²²

In 1936, the Sir Dorabji Tata Graduate School of Social Work was established to impart social work education and undertake social research. In 1944, it was renamed the Tata Institute of Social Sciences.²³ Further, in 1943, with independence looming, the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) was established by a group of Indian intellectuals, as a think tank for the study of international relations and foreign affairs to promote India's relations with other countries.²⁴

In the first two decades after independence, the early think tanks occupied pride of place in the policy domain, notably because of the expert advice they offered as well as their proximity to those in power. For example, founder of ISI Prof. P.C. Mahalanobis was instrumental in the production of the blueprint for India's Second Five-year Plan and was considered close to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Similarly, ICWA provided a platform for regular parleys between government, especially Nehru, and intellectuals on foreign policy.

During the early years, there was widespread consensus on the ideological premises of the Indian state under a state-led social and economic developmental model, although there were some disagreements as to the means necessary to reach this goal. This was cemented by the Congress system (Kothari, 1964) and the near-dominance of the Congress Party. The centrality of state-led growth and the presence of a unified civil service made it imperative that the latter, 'remains influential as gatekeepers of all information reaching the decision-makers and the most important group of advisors to the government' (Mathur, 2009).

Most of the think tanks worked in tandem with the government and depended on government for funding through the Planning Commission. This meant heavy exercise of infrastructural power by the state. The Planning Commission-led research agenda was instrumental in setting up a number of government-assisted research institutes on economics and developmental issues, and its Programme Evaluation Division turned to these for independent evaluation of its plans on a project basis. No incongruity was seen in having a government representative as a Board member, as was the case for most of these institutes. In fact, this was seen as a conduit of influence into the policy-making process (Mathur, 2009). 'The relationship with the policy-makers — both past and present — appears to be one of the most effective channels of communication. The excellent connection with influential ministers and serving bureaucrats [...] helps in communicating the research findings to the powers that be' (Chakrabarti and Sarkar, 2006).

The Planning Commission's own Research Programmes Committee (RPC), set up in 1953, consisted of leading economists and other social scientists and was a beacon in charting the research agenda.²⁵ As a result, most of the think tanks, with few exceptions, prioritised

²² www.isical.ac.in

²³ In 1964, it became a deemed university.

²⁴ In 1955, the Indian School of International Studies was set up within ICWA as the pioneering institute for the systematic study of international relations. In June 1970, it was incorporated into the newly established Jawaharlal Nehru University and rechristened the School of International Studies. ICWA continued with its activities in the field of international relations and foreign affairs, experiencing a heyday in its first two decades, with speeches given by the likes of Margaret Thatcher and Kurt Waldheim and patronage from stalwarts such as Sarojini Naidu and S. Radhakrishnan.

²⁵ Under the First Five-year Plan, Rs. 50 lakh 'for research and investigations into economic, social and administrative problems of national development [...] was proposed to organise investigations into selected problems of development in cooperation with universities and other institutions.' This identified four broad areas of research: 1) savings, investment, employment and small-scale industry; 2) problems relating to regional development with special reference to rapid urbanisation; 3) land reform, cooperation and farm management; and 4) social welfare problems and public administration. Under the Second Five-year Plan, the focus of RPC shifted to analytical studies, focusing on seven theme areas: 1) resources for planning, including questions relating to capital formation, incidence of taxation and mobilisation of small savings; 2) urban-rural relationships; 3) effects of construction projects on employment in different regions; 4) problems of decentralisation, including studies on what would constitute the minimum economic and social overheads to ensure decentralised development of cottage and small-scale industries; 5) economics of house construction; 6) studies of agrarian legislation, land reform and community development; and 7) socio-economic problems of tribal people (www.planningcommission.nic.in/plans/planrel/fiveyr/2nd/2planch12.html).

research on economic dimensions to promote growth as well as generating data for better and effective implementation of government policies. As a result, those set up in the 1950s were largely in sync with the overall prioritisation of development and economic growth of the new country. For example, the National Council of Applied Economic Research, New Delhi (1956); the Indian Institute of Population Sciences, Mumbai (1956);²⁶ the National Institute of Rural Development, Hyderabad and New Delhi (1958); the Institute of Economic Growth, New Delhi (1958); and the National Institute of Rural Development, Hyderabad and New Delhi (1958) were set up with substantial funding from the government to offer advice, data and research, etc., on various aspects of planning, implementation and evaluation. A few large Indian corporate houses, especially the Tata Group, through its Sir Dorabji Tata Trust, also made forays at this time into establishing educational institutions and think tanks.

This period also witnessed the golden age of the international private foundations in India, particularly Ford and Rockefeller, which worked with the government of India in development planning and in the health and education sectors. As early as 1952, the Ford Foundation established its office in New Delhi at the invitation of then-Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Its representative, Douglas Ensminger, because of his proximity to Nehru, exercised a great deal of influence, calling himself a 'change agent' 'in a society tied up in tradition, static, going nowhere, but desperately needing changes' (Gordon, 1997). The Ford Foundation was instrumental in setting rural developmental strategies and supporting India's community development programme. It made assessments of the first three five-year plans and also extended grants to various think tanks, as well as to specialised programmes through project-based support to think tanks (Mathur, 2009). Its intellectual inputs became the basis for the setting-up of national-level think tanks funded by the government of India.

One such think tank was the Indian Institute of Public Administration (1954), with Jawaharlal Nehru as its first president. This was a product of a survey of public administration commissioned by the government of India in 1953 by Paul H. Appleby, who was a consultant to the Ford Foundation. Its purpose was to enhance the leadership qualities and managerial capabilities of executives in government and other public service organisations.²⁷ Altogether, since its establishment, the New Delhi office of the Ford Foundation²⁸ has, made more than 3,500 grants, totalling approximately \$508 million, to nearly 1,250 institutions.²⁹

The Rockefeller Foundation's association with India goes back to the pre-independence era – to 1916 – primarily in the field of medicine and public health. It set up its India office in 1935, with some of its notable roles in think tank activities including the establishment of the All-India School of Hygiene and Public Health in 1932³⁰ and sponsoring malaria research by offering fellowships to Indian doctors and other health professionals. The focus of the foundation's work expanded to agriculture and humanities in the post-independence phase.

During 1950-1975, the Rockefeller Foundation worked in tandem with the government, the Ford Foundation and USAID and played a significant role in fostering agricultural education as well as developing of high-yielding varieties of grains, which laid the foundations of the Green Revolution. Modest grants to the humanities laid an emphasis on linguistics and Indian languages and produced seminal works such as V.K. Menon's books on the Transfer of Power and Khushwant Singh's History of the Sikhs (Gordon, 1997).

The government of India was always very keen to exercise control and guarded think tanks' space quite zealously, especially in its relationships with international agencies. Towards the end of the 1950s, this came to strain the early cordial relations between government and international foundations. Then-Finance Minister Moraji Desai, who in 1977 went on to become

²⁶ This was set up jointly by the UN and the government as a functionally hybrid think tank to act as a regional centre for teaching, training and research in the area of population studies in the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) region (www.iipsindia.org/).

²⁷ www.iipa.org.in/about.html.

²⁸ The New Delhi office also operated in a limited way in Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

²⁹ www.fordfoundation.org/.

³⁰ It withdrew in 1947 as part of its policy to kick-start the institute for later funding by local sources (Gordon, 1997).

prime minister of the first non-Congress government, preferred greater government control and was quoted as saying, 'if donors are unwilling to extend their aid in due humility and through procedures which protect the self-respect of the recipients, India will gladly do without their gifts' (in Gordon, 1997). The perceived closeness of the foundations with the US Central Intelligence Agency and their top-down approach to development added to the discomfort on the Indian side. In 1973, the Rockefeller Foundation pulled out of India. The Ford Foundation scaled down its operations and worked more through NGOs (encouraging many of them in the process), but the earlier bonhomie between them and the Indian government came to an end (Gordon, 1997).

Such assertions of independence by the Indian government in the 1960s were marked by the beginning of the non-aligned movement in 1961, which opposed bloc politics and Western colonialism and aimed at pursuing an independent foreign policy and autonomous model of development. The Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) was a product of this age. Set up in 1963, it is one of the few think tanks voicing Southern, 'third world' or indigenous perspectives (Chatterjee, 2002b).³¹

The environment meant a massive mobilisation of infrastructural power in the space of think tanks. The Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR), set up by the government of India in 1969,³² became instrumental in supporting the activities of think tanks in a major way (CSDS being one of them), even though select ministries and departmental bureaucracies continue to remain important. As the nodal agency for social science research, ICSSR works on inter-governmental exchange programmes, as well as supporting other research activities, such as bibliographical and documentation services (maintaining the National Social Science Documentation Centre (New Delhi) and regional social science documentation); administering research, publication and conference grants; conducting training on research methodologies; disseminating research; etc., to facilitate social science research.

In addition to direct support to social science research, ICSSR has been instrumental in laying down the groundwork for research, especially by funding activities across India in collaboration with state governments. For example, the Institute for Social and Economic Change, Bangalore (1972) was set up for the southern region of the country, with support from the government of Karnataka and ICSSR. This was the first think tank funded by the ICSSR, anchored in a multi-disciplinary as well as a regional and local focus. Likewise, the Centre for Economic and Social Studies, Hyderabad (1980), receives grants from ICSSR and the government of Andhra Pradesh. However, with a few notable exceptions (Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Karnataka, Orissa and Uttar Pradesh, for example), state governments have been rather tardy in facilitating and promoting research in social science. Such apathy is reflected in the fact that quite a few states, 'chronically fail to match the contributions made by the ICSSR, which is often a prerequisite of the grant-in-aid scheme. While the level of ICSSR grants has systematically gone up, the states' contributions have in many cases stagnated' (Ghosh, P.S, 2010).

Through its grant-in aid, ICSSR has supported 27 think tanks across India. These are located in only 12 states and 2 union territories (of 28/7). New Delhi dominates, with 5 ICSSR-

³¹ With its focus on multidisciplinary research and its propensity to challenge mainstream models of development, CSDS is, 'known for its scepticism towards any one conception of modernity and received models of development and progress and has sought ways to make creative use of local traditions in the making of multiple and alternative modernities [... and promotes] the idea that dissent is crucial for creative conversation between cultures and societies'. In its early years it focused on electoral studies; it later expanded to research grassroots movements' political and human rights, comparative democracy, media, cities, the public domain and social and political theory, as well as Indian languages. It also anchors the Institute for Chinese Studies and publishes two journals: *China Report* is the only Indian journal addressing China and East Asia, whereas *Alternatives* promotes critical, normative and interdisciplinary approaches to understanding contemporary world realities. www.csds.in/index.php?inc=aboutCSDS.

³² ICSSR was set up as an 'autonomous' institution, fully funded by the Union Ministry of Education (now known as Ministry of Human Resource Development). It was established at the time of a 'plan holiday' in 1966-1968, when the formulation of the Fourth Five-year Plan ran into difficulties. At this time, a proposal was made to transfer funds administered by RPC to an autonomous institution that would promote research institutes and sponsor independent research.

supported institutes, reflecting India's quasi-federal character.³³ Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh have three think tanks each,³⁴ and Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh have two each.³⁵ Assam, Bihar, Kerala, Maharashtra, Orissa, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal and the union territory of Chandigarh have one institute each.³⁶ ICSSR has also created regional centres in different parts in India: the North-eastern Regional Centre at Shillong as well as others in Chandigarh, Hyderabad, Kolkata, Mumbai and New Delhi. However, its regional outreach remains limited, given that a high number of states and union territories do not have any ICSSR-funded think tanks (Ghosh, P. 2010).

Overall, the infrastructural power of the state is manifested in the substantial government funding extended to think tanks, either through ICSSR or through concerned ministries/department and the Planning Commission – and yet think tanks have managed to retain a great degree of operative freedom. As Sobhan (2000) suggests, use of ICSSR as a source of public funding has been particularly conducive to preserving the autonomy of state-level research institutes such as the Centre for Development Studies, the Centre for Policy Research and the Centre for Social Studies, which have often been highly critical of national policies. This suggests that, within the democratic milieu, the Indian state is loath to exercise despotic power on routine basis as a result of which think tanks are largely functionally autonomous.

The infrastructural power of the Indian state seems most pronounced in the case of think tanks concerned with international economy, trade, military and security issues, with some coming directly from the relevant ministry with ministers and secretaries as *ex officio* Board members, despite the think tanks being registered as autonomous bodies.

First, in keeping with the prioritisation of international relations, a number of autonomous think tanks working on international politics, trade and economics were set up by different government ministries and agencies. The Indian Institute of Foreign Trade, New Delhi (1963), was set up to, 'professionalise foreign trade management and increase exports by developing human resources; generating, analysing and disseminating data; and conducting research'.³⁷ This paralleled the demands of other developing countries for greater participation and equity in international economic affairs and contributed to the emergence of the Group of 77 in 1964 at the end of the first session of the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) to, 'enhance their joint negotiating capacity on all major international economic issues within the United Nations system, and promote South-South cooperation for development'.³⁸

Second, the external security environment impinged heavily on the vigour attached to the study of security and defence. Wars with Pakistan in 1947 and 1965 and the 1962 war with China made this an imperative. For example, the Ministry of Defence helped establish the Institute of Defence and Strategic Analysis in New Delhi in 1965.

³³ CSDS; the Institute of Economic Growth; the Centre for Policy Research; the Institute for Studies in Industrial Development; and the Centre for Women's Development Studies.

³⁴ Respectively, the Council for Social Development (Hyderabad and New Delhi), the Centre for Economic and Social Studies (Hyderabad) and the Institute of Public Enterprises (Hyderabad); the Sardar Patel Institute of Economic and Social Research (Ahmedabad), the Gujarat Institute of Development Research (Ahmedabad) and the Centre for Social Studies (Surat); and the Giri Institute of Development Studies (Lucknow), the Govind Ballabh Pant Social Science Institute (Allahabad) and the Gandhian Institute of Studies (Varanasi).

³⁵ Respectively, the Centre for Multi-Disciplinary Development Research (Dharwad) and the Institute of Social and Economic Change (Bangalore); and the Institute of Social Science Research (Ujjain) and the Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar National Institute of Social Science (Mhow).

³⁶ Respectively, the OKD Institute of Social Change and Development (Guwahati); the A.N. Sinha Institute of Social Studies (Patna); the Centre for Development Studies (Tiruvananthapuram); the Indian Institute of Education (Pune); the Naba Krishna Chowdhury Centre for Development Studies (Bhubaneswar); the Institute of Development Studies (Jaipur); the Madras Institute of Development Studies (Chennai); the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences (Kolkata); and the Centre for Rural Reconstruction and Industrial Development (Chandigarh). West Bengal started with two institutes, but only one has remained functional.

³⁷ www.iift.edu/iift/about_iift.asp.

³⁸ www.unctad.org/.

The focus on international affairs continued in the 1980s, with the setting up of the Research and Information System for Developing Countries (1984). This functions as an autonomous body, supported by the Ministry of External Affairs, to work on South-South cooperation and capacity-building of developing countries on economic issues. However, this receives funding for projects from a diverse set of donors, both national and international. Later, amid growing global economic interdependence, the Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, Mumbai (1986), fully funded by the Reserve Bank of India, was set up to carry out research on development in a multidisciplinary framework. This subsequently became a teaching cum research think tank. It also focuses on understanding the impact of international trading, financial and economic systems on developmental strategies of developing countries and works towards fostering economic and technical cooperation among developing countries and their strategies for international forums and negotiations.³⁹

Within the privileged position of economics as a discipline, the neoclassical approach has dominated and continues to do so, despite inputs from diverse traditions including Marxism (given deliberative space although not necessarily policy space) (Papola, 2005). ICSSR funding is also dominated by economics. According to the Fourth Review Committee (ICSSR, 2007), economics took up the most funding, with 21.9% of research projects (although this was down from 30% during 1980-1985), followed by sociology (18%) and political science (13.8). Interdisciplinary studies received only 2.3%, environment 1.5% and social work a mere 0.4% (ibid.). In fact, even some of the multidisciplinary think tanks, such as the Centre for Development Studies in Tiruvananthapuram, the Madras Institute of Development Studies in Chennai, the Institute of Social and Economic Change in Bangalore and the Sardar Patel Institute of Social and Economic Research in Ahmedabad were headed by famous economists in the early years of their existence (Mathur, 2009) – a trend that continues even today.

The foundation of ICSSR also coincided with fracture in the national polity beginning in the middle of the 1960s. The Congress system began to disintegrate, with the Congress Party losing in many states in the fourth general elections (Sato, 2002). This finally led to its split into two factions, led by K. Kamraj and Indira Gandhi. Along with the foreign exchange and food crisis and the limited penetration of government policies, this led to high incidence of social unrest and the rise of Naxal movements in many parts of India. The Congress Party led by Indira Gandhi was able to sway the national mood by using populist slogans such as *garibi hatao* ('eliminate poverty'), abolishing privy purses and nationalising the banks, and began massive government-led rural development and poverty eradication programmes. The Seventh Five-year plan (1985-1990) did call for involving action-based think tanks in specific government schemes but only as intermediaries in government programme implementation, not as part of the institutionalised mechanism of cooperation (ibid.).

The political environment led to the growth of many grassroots initiatives, which had historically had a long tradition in India, and the establishment of many action-based think tanks, as the state increasingly failed to meet people's expectations. For example, the Self-employed Women's Association (SEWA), Ahmedabad, was registered as a trade union in 1972; this works to strengthen women's leadership and the bargaining power of the poor, focusing on self-employed women workers in the unorganised sector, which employs nearly 94% of the female labour force in India. An estimated 100,000 action-based think tanks exist in India, of which only 25,000-30,000 are active (the vastness of the terrain makes it difficult to be certain) (Mohanty and Singh, 2001). These work on diverse issues ranging from community development to environment, education, public health and human rights.

The existence of these think tanks owes partly to the trend among international agencies to involve civil society in ensuring the more efficient delivery of policy goals. In addition, local realities were deemed important for successful policy outcomes, leading many of the existing think tanks to adopt an inter-disciplinary approach and new ones to focus on research on issues as diverse as women's studies, consumer rights, institutional reform, decentralisation, participation and local governance. The Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi

³⁹ www.ijidr.ac.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=18&Itemid=54.

(1980); the Society for Participatory Research in Asia, New Delhi (1982); the Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi (1985); the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi (1973); and the Consumer Unity and Trust Society (CUTS), Jaipur (1984) are products of this generation. CUTS later diversified its focus towards international trade and economic issues.

The 1970s and 1980s saw many more think tanks⁴⁰ working on environment and sustainable development, as by then the issue had assumed significance, as underlined by the first UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972. These included Development Alternatives, New Delhi (1983); the Centre for Science and Environment, New Delhi (1980); the Institute of Development Studies, Jaipur (1981); Navdanya, which started as a part of the Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology (1982) in Dehradun, now based in New Delhi; and the Energy Research Institute, New Delhi (1974),⁴¹ set up with support from the Tata Group. All these think tanks work on various aspects of environment and livelihood issues, including sustainable use of natural resources, improvements in irrigation, water rights, water management, biodiversity conservation, climate change, energy, etc.

Of them, along with the Centre for Science and Environment, Navdanya is one of the most prominent action-based think tanks on environment, challenging the mainstream model of development using a variety of policy advocacy campaigns, including direct action, the media and judicial activism. Its work became more pronounced after the opening-up of the Indian economy in the wake of contemporary globalisation beginning in the 1990s and the accompanying reform and liberalisation. Some action-based think tanks have anchored and supported social movements against the processes and symbols of globalisation, such as big dams, multinational corporations, special economic zones, land acquisitions, etc.

As a counter to such anti-reform trends, the Liberty Institute, New Delhi, was set up in 1996 to espouse limited government, free markets, individual rights and the rule of law.⁴² Other think tanks set up to harness the positive fruits of trade liberation and globalisation included the Centre for Trade and Development, New Delhi (2005), instituted to strengthen the ability of governments and communities to make trade and globalisation work for developing countries in South Asia.⁴³ Some existing think tanks diversified their activities to incorporate political and economic analyses of trade and development issues from a developing countries' perspective. The CUTS Centre for International Trade, Economics & Environment (CUTS CITEE), Jaipur (1996), is one such example.⁴⁴

The 1990s were also marked by debates over the global shift in power, particularly after the fall of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a multi-polar world. Given India's projected role as an emerging power, new think tanks were set up to research various aspects of international affairs from an Indian strategic perspective. The Delhi Policy Group, New Delhi (1992) aims to build consensus on issues of national interest (political economy, peace, conflict, governance and science and technology). The Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi (1996) builds partnerships for a global India. Under the auspices of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, which comes under the Ministry of Culture, the Centre for Contemporary Studies was set up in 1990 to promote research on modern history, development and changing trends in the world economy and polity from an Indian perspective. Others concerned with international issues include the Institute for China Studies, New Delhi (1990). The regional dimensions of international affairs find expression in certain think tanks' focus on South Asia in relation to specific areas such as Europe, the Americas, Africa and Latin America, etc.

The 1990s also saw the emergence of a number of think tanks devoted to conflict and peace studies in the regional framework in response to the growing problem of insurgency and conflict in various parts of India, particularly in the northeast and the tribal belts spread across

⁴⁰ Some of these received foreign funding subject to foreign exchange clearances. The Indian state assisted in various ways, including giving land to institutions at concessional rates, which is part of its exercising infrastructural power.

⁴¹ Originally called the Tata Energy Research Institute.

⁴² www.indefenceofliberty.org/.

⁴³ www.centad.org/aboutcentad.asp.

⁴⁴ www.cuts-citee.org/.

various states. The Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, New Delhi (1996),⁴⁵ deals with security issues in the South Asian region. The Institute for Conflict Management, New Delhi (1997), focuses on internal security in South Asia. Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace, New Delhi (1999), facilitates the leadership of women in the areas of peace, security and international affairs in the region. Security and Political Risk Analysis (SAPRA), Uttar Pradesh (1995), focuses on international relations, political risk, terrorism and security-related issues pertinent to the South and Central Asian context. In 2002, the Centre for Security Analysis was set up in Chennai on the initiative of Lt. Gen. (Retd.) V.R. Raghavan and M.K. Narayanan, former National Security Advisor, to work on conflict resolution, peace-building, human security and governance.

This period also saw the emergence of coalition politics with the formation of the Bharatiya Janata Party- (BJP-) led coalition government in 1999. The associated pluralisation of the polity led many new policy-relevant issues to emerge on the political horizon. In focus were issues of governance, transparency and accountability as well as development from a human perspective. The National Centre for Advocacy Studies, Pune, was set up in 1992 to work towards participatory, people-centred policies that enable people at all levels of society to advocate for human rights and social justice. Its sister organisation, the Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability, New Delhi (2002), analyses the Union Budget and public policies from the perspective of the poor and marginalised. The Institute for Human Development, New Delhi (1998), was set up to analyse policy-relevant issues related to poverty, livelihoods, labour and human development, etc.

Liberalisation and privatisation policies in the 1990s renewed the vigour with which private domestic donors and international agencies entered the thinking space. These quickly occupied the space vacated by the state in support of various think tanks, predominantly project-driven and with a limited research agenda that emphasises policy-relevant research. As in the past, this continues to obstruct the emergence of an independent and critical research agenda. What is most disquieting is the, 'shrinking of funding for research that could enhance knowledge in all aspects of social science discipline, so as to improve overall understanding of socio-economic development and its processes' (Papola, 2005).

Although traditional players such as UN agencies, international foundations and the government continue to be influential in the think tank space, new entrants include private research consultancies and indigenous corporate houses, which partner as well as fund think tanks, often motivated by commercial concerns and partisan interests. These include Tata Sons, Maruti Udyog Ltd., Hindustan Aeronautics Limited, HDFC Bank, ACC Ltd., Reliance, Kotak Mahindra and Infosys, to name a few. Many private grants are meant for project-specific research, which very often borders on being 'sponsored' research. Such research is also 'rarely [...] of any serious academic significance' (Chatterjee, 2002a).

With science, technology and innovation identified as crucial to national development, there is substantial apathy in India towards the social sciences. Private philanthropic funding amounts to a trickle,⁴⁶ limited to awards such as the Infosys prize.⁴⁷ Very few corporate houses are willing to support social science research, with the exception of the Tata Group – the force behind the Energy Research Institute, New Delhi, the Tata Institute of Social Science, Mumbai, and some premier social science libraries – although the Ajim Premji Foundation recently extended massive funding to the education sector. Absence of tax incentive laws to facilitate

⁴⁵ This and the Institute for China Studies above are mini-institutions set up under the umbrella of CSDS and receive funding from government as well as supplementary grants from numerous other agencies.

⁴⁶ According to Bain & Company's Indian Philanthropy Report 2011, private charity contributions in India have grown to 0.3-0.4% of gross domestic product, from 0.2% in 2006; compared with 2.2% in the US and 1.3% in the UK, this is miniscule: high net-worth individuals in India increased in worth by 50% from 2008 to 2009 (Ghosh, A., 2011).

⁴⁷ This is awarded annually by the Infosys Science Foundation since 2009 to, 'elevate the prestige of scientific research in India and inspire young Indians to choose a vocation in scientific research'. There are five categories: physical sciences – physics, chemistry and earth science; mathematical sciences – mathematics and statistics; engineering and computer science – all branches of engineering; life sciences – biology, biotechnology, medicine and agriculture; and social sciences, with two subjects considered per prize year – economics, history, sociology, anthropology and political science. See www.infosys-science-foundation.com/about_prize.html.

such activities, as well as red tape, inefficiency and infrastructural bottlenecks, mean they often take their philanthropy abroad. Grants by Indian corporate giants like Tata, Infosys and Kotak Mahindra to Harvard University (Martin and Mehta, 2010)⁴⁸ represent a telling example.

Meanwhile, the despotic power of the state remains at its command through the legal framework for the regulation of think tanks. At the outset, any association with more than seven members requires registration under the Societies Registration Act 1860. Other laws that cover the activities of NGOs and think tanks are the Cooperative Societies Act 1912, the Charitable and Religious Trust Act 1920, the Trade Union Act 1926, the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act 1976 and the Public Trust Act 1982, and corresponding state legislations where applicable. In particular, the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act, which regulates overseas donations to voluntary agencies including think tanks, is 'known for arbitrariness in procedures of granting permission' (Sato, 2002). In some cases, registration must be renewed every five years, with mandatory reporting requirements for societies, and the Income Tax Act 1961 keeps close surveillance over funding to such bodies.

Moreover, government donations of land or sales of land at concessional rates for the construction of think tank offices, income tax exemptions and the granting of deemed university status are other ways of exercising despotic influence. In addition, any foreign non-profit organisation that sets up a base in India is required to seek permission from the Reserve Bank of India and the Ministry of External Affairs. This gives the government enough of a handle to regulate the activities of international agencies – and there is now a demand for a centralised authority to regulate the sector.

The exercise of despotic power is most pronounced in the appointment of chief executives of government-aided think tanks, which is always subject to political considerations and is crucial to controlling and limiting the research agenda. Also, given think tanks' heavy reliance on government's infrastructural power through government grants, any blip in funding affects their operating space. During the late 1980s and the 1990s, when the troubled ICSSR froze its grants to sponsored institutes, many of these faced an existential crisis, which forced them to look to non-state funding sources, including international agencies (Chatterjee, 2002a). The most telling case is that of CSDS which over the years has diversified its sources of funding. It now receives additional funding from a combination of agencies, including the Ford Foundation, Hivos, the Netherlands government and the Langlois Foundation for the Digital Arts. The Ford Foundation has given an endowment grant of \$1 million for the recruitment of faculty, with an additional \$200,000 grant for infrastructure. 'By Indian standards, such a comprehensive and sudden turnaround in fortunes is definitely rare' (Chatterjee, 2002b).

However, for the most part, the lack of regular and assured funding has been one of the major impediments to the independence of research and the quality of knowledge production.⁴⁹ Chatterjee (2002b) laments the decrease in state funding, much of it to do with the freeze in ICSSR grants and also the difficulty in finding matching grants from respective state governments. Despite a certain level of recovery in 2000, ICSSR funds are subject to further limitations, including bureaucratic procedures, red tape and, most prominently, continued shortages of funding for ICSSR itself. Even though funding from the Ministry of Human Resource Development during 1971-2005 grew at a compounded rate of 14% in absolute terms, in real terms the flow of funds to ICSSR saw a steady decline. As early as 1979, to overcome fund constraints, an agreement was arrived at with the Ford Foundation to provide a sum of \$250,000 during the period 1979-1982, which was subsequently extended up to 30 September 1984 (Ghosh, P.S 2010).

More importantly, and as we have seen, government funding means the research agenda is informed largely by the needs and requirements of the state, with an exclusive focus on policy-relevant research. In the early years of ICSSR, an attempt was made to bridge the 'two worlds'

⁴⁸ Infosys has donated \$5.2 million (Rs. 23 crore) to Harvard University to initiate a new series on the literary heritage of India. Tata Group has extended \$50 million (Rs. 220 crore) to Harvard Business School. Mahindra Humanities Centre received \$10 million (Rs 44.5 crore) from Anand Mahindra.

⁴⁹ Ajay Mehra, interview, 2010.

of academia and policy-making. J.P. Naik, who was also an advocate of a national social science policy, made a strong case for earmarking equal funding for both theoretical and empirical research and went on to advocate setting aside, 'as a matter of policy, some fund for non-priority areas because much new and innovative research tends to emerge there' (Chatterjee, 2002). However, the debate was resolved in favour of policy-relevant research, leaving little space for critical thinking.⁵⁰

Although most think tanks in India claim to be non-partisan, there are numerous ones working as national foundations/trusts in the name of national leaders, ostensibly to consolidate their legacy and also to promote their vision of India through research and related activities such as scholarships for higher studies. Notable foundations include the Gandhi Peace Foundation, the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Trust, the Indira Gandhi National Foundation, the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, the Shyama Prasad Mookerjee Research Foundation, the Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar Foundation, etc. Most of these receive grants from the government and are headed by either a government nominee or a member of the family concerned, most notably the Gandhi family. For example, the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, which also houses the Rajiv Gandhi Centre for Contemporary Studies, is headed by Mrs. Sonia Gandhi. Likewise, the D.R. Shyama Prasad Mookerjee Research Foundation, which claims to be a centre for civilisational values and policy research, is headed by Tarun Vijay, a former editor of *Panchajanya*, a weekly publication of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, which is the ideologue of the BJP. The public-private distinction becomes blurred in these cases as such foundations become conduits for political parties to exercise influence. At the same time, these think tanks serve as sounding boards for new ideas and expert advice for the political parties concerned.

Overall, the relationship between the state and think tanks in India can be said to be based on contingent collaboration, in which think tanks rely heavily on the use of infrastructural power by the state. The strong infrastructural power of the state has been able to keep the influence of international agencies at bay or functioning under the framework dictated by the state. Nevertheless, think tanks' autonomy remains largely intact in India, because of the democratic political process and the resultant weak despotic power of the state. This means that, for the most part, India has a vibrant landscape of think tanks capable of engaging with critical research facilitated by an environment that respects dissent and promotes plurality of discourse, much more so than any other country in South Asia.

4.3 Pakistan

Pakistan's long periods of military rule and a centralised, feudal and bureaucratic state have suppressed freedom of expression, which has adversely affected the growth of independent research thinking, a trend that has resulted in rather narrow and conformist social science research (Shah, 2005). The resulting culture of patronage and favouritism,

'[...] ignores and overrides institutions, norms and even legality [... which leads] to a sycophantic culture, where individuals and groups, even those belonging to some section of the intelligentsia, will appease [...] to benefit from its largesse. It breed[s] conformity and conservatism, with intellectuals and their pursuits compromised in their quest for power, recognition and acceptance' (Zaidi, 2002).

As in Bangladesh, heavy Western assistance flowed into Pakistan in the period immediately after independence, which made resistance to international influences difficult. Soon after independence, the scale of technical and economic aid was over \$100 million per year from the US and over \$20 million per year from the UK, Canada and Australia under the Colombo Plan, not to mention assistance from the UN and its various agencies (Gant, 1959). The early years of independence saw an emphasis on economic planning and institutional management. As in other countries in the region, economists dominated the think tank arena, with an

⁵⁰ Critical theory questions the very conditions of the world and asks whom and what purposes such theory/research serves. By doing so, it opens up the possibilities of a different world. This is unlike problem-solving theory, which takes the world as given and does not question existing power relationships, instead merely focusing on solving certain problem within the existing framework and hence ending up perpetuating the *status quo*.

overemphasis on policy-relevant research in the field of development and planning. In the 1950s and 1960s, the influence of US and British experts was crucial in this regard.

The state conceding policy space to external agencies is exemplified by the fact that the Ford Foundation was instrumental in setting up the Pakistan Planning Board in 1953 and also, discreetly, in writing the first two five-year plans, through Harvard advisors funded by Ford grants. In the early years of independence, the Ford Foundation also made forays into the knowledge and education sector by establishing three polytechnic institutes and a college (later increased to three) of home economics. It also extended assistance to Pakistan's Village Agricultural and Industrial Development programme.

In this period, international foundations also supported the activities of think tanks in Pakistan. One of the early entrants was the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE),⁵¹ set up in 1957 in Karachi with the help of the Ford Foundation and the government of Pakistan.⁵² This continues to work in the field of development economics and draws a number of leading economists, including Nobel laureates such as Robert A. Mundell. The institute's work on 'demography and anthropology and interdisciplinary studies increasingly define the widening scope of research that must be undertaken for proper economic policy and development'.⁵³ Another early think tank was the Institute of Development Studies, Peshawar (1953), which in 1981 became a hybrid think tank, undertaking both research and teaching, when it merged with the Agricultural University, Peshawar, in 1981. This 'assembles information, conducts studies and provides trainings, for sustainable improvement of resources use, productivity, and socio-economic well being'.⁵⁴

Beginning in the late 1960s, growing tension between the eastern and western part of Pakistan saw a greater research focus on issues relating to inequality, nationalism, rural development, tribal areas development, economics of Pakistan's neighbours and women's studies, etc.

Numerous action-based think tanks, engaged in civil rights advocacy with a special emphasis on women's rights, social welfare and rural development, also exist in Pakistan. These are mostly run and dominated by urban elites, such as doctors, lawyers and retired government and military officials (Nejima, 2002). According to another estimate, nearly 45,000 non-profit organisations exist, a large proportion of which (46%) are involved in religious education (Ghaus-Pasha et al., 2002). However, their role in rural areas is limited, as feudal practices continue to hold sway, perpetuating inequality. The power base of the rural elite is further cemented by the fact that they hold power in the state apparatus, thus limiting the manoeuvrability of action-based think tanks in such areas (Nobusue, 2002).

The Zulfikar Ali Bhutto regime (1971-1977) provided a more liberal environment for academia and research. The state, exercising its infrastructural power, funded, partially and fully, a number of think tanks, many of which were aligned with the university system. For example the Applied Economic Research Centre was set up in 1973 at the University of Karachi, funded by the University Grants Commission.⁵⁵ In 1976, the Pakistan Study Centre was established under an Act of Parliament, as part of the University of Karachi since 1983. This works on, 'the study of languages, literatures, social structure, customs, attitudes and motivations of the people of various regions of Pakistan'.⁵⁶ Other notable institutes set up during this period are the Institute of Policy Studies, Islamabad (1979) and the Islamabad Punjab Economic Research Institute, Lahore (1980).

⁵¹ Originally called the Institute of Development Economics.

⁵² In 1964, PIDE became an autonomous research organisation. After partition, it was relocated to Islamabad as part of Quaid-i-Azam University. In 2006, PIDE was granted degree-awarding status.

⁵³ www.pide.org.pk.

⁵⁴ www.aup.edu.pk/aboutus.php. This was established in 1953 as the Board of Economics Enquiry and upgraded to the Institute of Development Studies in 1981, when it merged with the Agriculture University.

⁵⁵ This undertakes research on applied economics, with a focus on urban and regional economics, agricultural economics, human resource development, public finance and poverty, health and nutrition, industrial economics, trade, globalisation, poverty, public finance, environment and gender issues. www.aerc.edu.pk.

⁵⁶ www.uok.edu.pk.

The Bhutto reign saw some landmark initiatives in terms of foreign policy, the most notable of which was the 1972 Shimla Treaty signed with then-Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Bhutto also strengthened Sino-Pak and Saudi-Pak relations and hosted the second meeting of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference in 1974 in Lahore, which brought attention to the importance of research on foreign policy and international affairs. This period saw the establishment of the Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad (1973), by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in keeping with the country's prioritisation of international relations and strategic and security concerns in the regional and international context, especially after Pakistan's partition. Its establishment was also seen as a response to the setting up of the Indian Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses in New Delhi in 1965.

Perhaps as a spinoff effect of the Bhutto period, the early years of Zia ul Haq's authoritarian rule saw the establishment of the Institute of Regional Studies, Islamabad (1982), to undertake research on international affairs, with a particular focus on the foreign policy of other powers and on South Asia, Southwest Asia (Iran, Afghanistan and the Gulf), China, Central Asia and the Indian Ocean region. This also researches economy and industry, science and technology and socio-cultural and security-related issues in a regional perspective.

Despite these isolated cases, Zia's regime brought an end to the liberal climate for think tanks in favour of a focus on Islamic conceptions of nationhood and also Islamic orientations within research. As a result of the exercise of despotic power during Zia's regime, 'economics became Islamic economics, anthropology Islamic anthropology, [...] the only sort of history that began to be promoted was that related to the Pakistan Movement' (Chatterjee, 2002b).

Think tanks are subject to the state's despotic power, as enumerated in various legislations, a trend which became even more pronounced during the military period. Although there is no legal requirement, registration is considered essential to an organisation for achieving social credibility and recognition. Registration also entitles them to income tax exemptions, but the implementation of this is procedurally opaque and arbitrary. The Societies Registration Act 1860 regulates organisations involved in culture, science and charity work; the Trust Act 1882 deals with trusts for charitable purposes, which have a high degree of functional independence; the Cooperative Societies Act 1925 regulates consumer societies, housing societies and banking societies; the Voluntary Social Welfare Agencies Registration and Control Ordinance 1961 covers organisations dealing with social welfare issues, such as education, health and women; the Companies Ordinance 1984, Section 42, applies to not-for-profit companies formed to promote 'useful objects'; and the Income Tax Ordinance 2001 sets out eligibility criteria for tax exemptions (Nejima, 2002).⁵⁷ In 1994, the Social Welfare Agencies (Registration and Regulation) Act was introduced to restrict the scope of activities of action-based think tanks and control the flow of foreign funding (ibid.). Foreign action-based think tanks are required to register with the Economic Affairs Division; those which receive government funding register with the Central Board of Revenue. Most action-based think tanks (around 80%) are registered under the Societies Registration Act.⁵⁸ Once registered, think tanks are required to fulfil numerous reporting requirements.

The democratic interlude from 1988 until 1999 under the Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif regimes witnessed the birth of a number of new think tanks, to which different international agencies and the government of Pakistan extended varying degrees of support. These address a wide range of issues, from development to environment, consumer rights and education. The Social Policy and Development Centre, Karachi (1995), is funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). The Mahbub ul Haq Human Development Centre (1995) is funded by the UN Development Programme (UNDP). The Sustainable Development Policy Institute was set up in 1992 on the recommendation of the Pakistan National Conservation Strategy to, 'serve as a source of expertise for policy analysis and development, policy intervention, and policy and program advisory services'.⁵⁹ This is funded by the government as

⁵⁷ Also, www.ngoregnet.org/.

⁵⁸ www.ngoregnet.org/.

⁵⁹ www.sdpi.org/.

well as CIDA. Other think tanks set up during this period are the Social Policy Development Centre, Karachi (1995); the Islamabad Policy Research Institute (1999); the Consumer Rights Commission of Pakistan, Islamabad (1998); the Policy Research Institute, Islamabad (1999); and the Institute for Educational Development at the Aga Khan University (1993).⁶⁰

In this period, the Eighth Five-year Plan (1993-1998) acknowledged the role of action-based think tanks, but partly because of external influence such as the joint World Bank and ADB Social Action Programme, which underlined the role of community organisation. This, then, shows the entrenched influence of international institutions in Pakistan's polity (Nejima, 2002). In fact, since the end of the 1980s, international agencies such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) had become more entrenched in Pakistan's economic policies and the research agenda was correspondingly reoriented in line with the Washington Consensus. There was little debate over the fallout of these policies within government, although it found a ready audience in the public at large, expressed in a number of public protests against neoliberal policies (Zaidi, 2002).

As an overview, then, in the 1960s, the focus of research was on economic planning. In the 1970s, this diversified to include agriculture and the impact of the green revolution, the industrial sector and issues of inequality. The Islamic economics school of thought thrived in the 1980s, while in the 1990s, under the influence of the Bretton Woods institutions and international donor agencies, research focused on issues of environment public finance, poverty and public debt, structural adjustment programmes and other governance-related themes (Chatterjee, 2002b: 36). The issues that have dominated the research focus since the 1990s are governance, decentralisation, local government reform and poverty, etc. Poverty and governance research in particular has been steered by the World Bank and has grown in direct proportion to the flow of funds (Zaidi, 2002: 3648).

The 2000s saw the establishment of the Collective for Social Science Research, Karachi, (2001), which focuses on economics, education, development policy, gender studies, health, labour, migration, poverty and urban governance, in a multidisciplinary framework. In view of the high incidence of religious violence and 'Talibanisation', the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies, Islamabad (2006), was set up to analyse political, social and religious conflicts that have a direct bearing on both national and international security. Engagement of think tanks in policy-making has been rather thin, except when desired by the powers that be. For example, General Pervez Musharraf included some NGO leaders – Attiya Inayatullah and Omar Asghar Khan – in government, a move that was seen as positive as far as the influence of action-oriented think tanks is concerned. However, this was more an exception than a general trend.

Overall, Pakistan's think tanks are conditioned by both the visions of the state and global frameworks, which are so deep-rooted that researchers are not able to produce alternative visions (Saigol, 2005). As in Bangladesh, long periods of military and semi-authoritarian rule have left a void as far as critical research is concerned. The Pakistani state has in different phases exercised its infrastructural power by supporting the development and activities of think tanks that focus on economic, developmental and international issues relevant to Pakistan's policy, most of the time driven by international agencies, to which the state has readily conceded a great degree of autonomy because of its overarching despotic orientations.

Moreover, as the flow of donor money increases, research in Pakistan becomes a tool to supplement income rather than serving society at large. Hence, it is not undertaken unless someone funds a project (Chatterjee, 2002b), which means a donor-led research agenda often leading to skewed priorities divorced from local realities. This is combined with an emphasis on policy-relevant research, with disciplines such as political science and history in particular seen as having little practical application (Zaidi, 2002). Knowledge in Pakistan is thus a prisoner of the 'relevance' debate, just as it is conditioned by the despotic state and its willing complicity with the international agencies and global frameworks.

⁶⁰ This latter aims to promote high-quality research and policy analysis capacity and to create opportunities for dialogue and deliberations regarding educational issues and reforms.

4.4 Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, the think tank landscape is to a large extent mediated by its troubled ethnic history, with emergency provisions operating right since the early years of the country's independence from British rule in 1948, even though it remained a functioning democracy. Minority groups, particularly the Tamil population, were not happy with the unitary nature of government and its pro-Singhalese policies, which resulted in intermittent incidences of ethnic violence right from the start, but which escalated from the 1970s onwards. In response to the growing religious and ethnic schism, the Study Centre for Religion and Society, Colombo (1951) was set up, to explore the theological and social implications of the Christian faith in Sri Lanka. This early think tank recognised the need for interfaith studies and dialogue, especially between Buddhism and the minority Christians, as well as other faiths and ideologies.⁶¹ The long history of church involvement in education, social welfare and charitable projects made it an important player here. For example, the church-backed Centre for Policy Alternatives, Colombo (1996), works on governance, conflict resolution and peace analysis.

The overall democratic environment and high levels of literacy allowed for a vibrant public discourse and a liberal space for the growth of think tanks, unlike under the overwhelmingly despotic power exercised in Pakistan and Bangladesh. For a long period of time, registration of think tanks was voluntary, and they were largely free to manage their own funds (Arai, 2002). They can register under different laws (as societies under the Societies Ordinance Office or as non-profit organisations under the Corporation Act or the Voluntary Social Service Organisations Act). Once registered, they are entitled to government subsidies; if they are in receipt of these or are undertaking projects with the government, they must report to government agencies. International NGOs and/or action-based think tanks are required to sign a memorandum of understanding with ministries concerned with planning and implementation.

In 1993, in response to a massive flow of funding to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) through NGOs, a new Regulation Concerning Non-government Organisations required all think tanks receiving more than Sri Lankan Rs. 50,000 to register. All bodies receiving more than Rs. 10,000 were required to submit an audited annual report. In addition, the Voluntary Social Service Organisations Act was strengthened to enhance auditing requirements and regulate funding, especially foreign donations to the non-governmental sector (Arai, 2002).

Associations to further the cause of social science research were set up in the early years. The Ceylon Association for the Advancement of Science,⁶² which was incorporated by an Act of Parliament in 1966, was set up in 1944. This integrated social sciences in 1953, and one of its working committees, the Social Science Research Committee, focuses on anthropology, archaeology, demography, education, economics, geography, psychology and sociology. In the 1970s, this committee provided a platform to unite Marxist social scientists, whose networking with likeminded researchers in developing countries was strengthened after the 1976 meeting of the nonaligned movement in Colombo. Sri Lanka thus became a hub of third world economists, which gave considerably more strength to the social science research agenda (Chatterjee, 2002b).

The period from 1972, when Sri Lanka changed its name from Ceylon and became a republic, was characterised by ethnic conflict of a much greater intensity. The Tamil New Tigers militia (later known as the LTTE) was formed in 1972 to seek an independent homeland for ethnic Tamils in the north and east, using violent methods in response to systemic discrimination. The bloodbath ripped apart Sri Lankan society and the state had to rely excessively on the use of despotic power, in particular a range of emergency provisions. For instance, in response to a Maoist insurgency by the People's Liberation Front in 1971, Mrs. Bandaranaike declared a state of emergency for six years. For almost 60 years, the government has used a relic of colonial

⁶¹ www.sites.google.com/site/eisdcolombo/. In 1977, the centre was renamed the Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue and became an autonomous body independent from the control of religious bodies and institutions.

⁶² This was geared primarily towards promoting the advancement of pure and applied science, establishing contacts between scientists, disseminating scientific knowledge and giving a direction to national research.

rule, the Public Security Ordinance 1947, to enable it to declare a state of emergency and suspend human rights, and the Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act 1979 has become a 'permanent' feature of repressive laws. In 2005, under powers derived from the Public Security Ordinance, the government enacted two more pieces of emergency legislation: Emergency (Miscellaneous Provisions and Powers) Regulation 1 2005 and Emergency (Prevention and Prohibition of Terrorism and Specified Terrorist Activities) Regulation 7 2006. Since the breakdown of the peace process in 2006, more than 20 new emergency regulations have been operationalised. 'Due to the proliferation of these laws, it is arguably more difficult than ever for Sri Lankan citizens to know and understand the legal boundaries that affect their everyday lives, creating a chilling effect on the *exercise of free speech and association*' (International Commission of Jurists, 2009) (emphasis added).

Moreover, the leftist United Front coalition government of 1970-1977⁶³ adopted a socialist, regulated economy model, which led to import substitution; large-scale nationalisation of private industry and large tea and rubber plantations; and free education and medical programmes, food subsidies and social security, etc. This made the bureaucracy the central anchor for the drafting and implementation of the Five-year Plan (1972-1977) and national development. This expanded welfare role of the state in the nation-building project led by the centralised bureaucratic apparatus, alongside high incidence of ethnic violence, left little room for the development of a vibrant community of think tanks. Furthermore, the implementation of nationalised, free public education in the vernacular, which was part of the national development project, acted as a major constraint to the emergence of critical social science research: it closed avenues for the free flow of ideas and engagement with the wider knowledge pool (Little, 2007) for a large section of population, leaving the policy domain open only to a small English-educated elite known pejoratively as 'Colombo liberals'.

In this period, government granted subsidies to numerous community-level action-based think tanks to deliver welfare services, in a model which perpetuated the patron-client relationship. These think tanks were strongly political and maintained close contacts with political parties and parliamentarians. Later, village councils were established to bring together community-level professional, religious and aid association members, such as those from young farmers clubs, women's organisations, rotary clubs, development and reconstruction organisations, consumer societies, Christian, Buddhist, Muslim and Hindu associations, school development associations, etc. (Arai, 2002).

Government's engagement with think tanks and its infrastructural power remained ambivalent and fractured as far as research was concerned, leaving room for the involvement of international agencies. These helped set up a number of think tanks in response to the changing socioeconomic and political realities, especially in the 1970s, when the state's outreach began to sag. Economic stagnation, high unemployment and low standards of living led to large-scale dissatisfaction and anti-government protests in 1971. In the domain of knowledge, this led to some critical rethinking of the statist paradigm, causes of underdevelopment and the debate over economic cycles and economic imbalances. The Marga Institute: Centre for Development Research, Colombo (1972), was set up with the help of the Ford Foundation, the Friedrich Naumann Foundation and IDRC to critically evaluate past and ongoing development processes in Sri Lanka – economic, social and political – using a multi-disciplinary framework. This was conceptualised as a centre for studies of practical relevance to policy-makers and, at one stage, a plan was afloat to affiliate it with Sri Lanka's Planning Ministry. However, government's involvement with Marga is limited, although it does support some projects and involve Marga's faculty in some committees and consultations (Guhan, 1994). The institute has done some commendable work on land reform and other political economy issues, such as economic growth cycles.⁶⁴ Another international foundation-led initiative is the Sri Lanka Foundation Institute, Colombo (1974), set up with the support of the

⁶³ Of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Communist Party of Sri Lanka.

⁶⁴ www.margasrilanka.org.

Friedrich Ebert Foundation. This is a non-formal centre for adult labour education and training, with a specific focus on democratisation through training and knowledge dissemination.⁶⁵

After 1977, which also saw the opening-up of the Sri Lankan economy, greater liberalisation presented many more opportunities for the activities of international agencies in the space of think tanks. Efforts were also made to develop and strengthen indigenous research and networking. The Social Scientists' Association was set up in 1977 in Colombo, bringing together Marxist social scientists in research on peace, democracy, pluralism, ethnic harmony, gender equity, social transformation, labour and human rights.⁶⁶ In 1985, economists formed two separate associations: the Sri Lanka Association of Economists and the Sri Lanka Economic Association, which in 2000 merged to form the Sri Lanka Economic Association.

Since the mid-1980s, against the backdrop of ethnic conflict, there has been a huge expansion of social science research on ethnic conflict and related issues, such as devolution, comparative federalism, minority rights, women and development and security. In most cases, studies have been funded by external donors, although on occasions the government has also been involved. In 1982, the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES) was set with the support of the Ford Foundation, and also CIDA, IDRC and the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad). This devotes itself to understandings of ethnicity, identity politics, ethnicity and multiculturalism, and particularly South-South cooperation. Located in two different places – Kandy and Colombo – the two heads over time developed ideological differences. ICES Colombo was headed by its Founding Director, Dr. Neelan Thiruchelvam,⁶⁷ who advocated human rights, federalism and devolution and was closer to the Tamil United Liberation Front. ICES Kandy was headed by Kingsley de Silva, who was closer to the United National Party and was more statist and focused on empirical research.⁶⁸ The power struggle has led over time to the institute's relative decline. Meanwhile, there has been controversy over the appointment and succession of directors, especially in the case of Dr. Rama Mani (an Indian national), who was sacked in January 2008 on the grounds of financial irregularities and administrative malpractice but later (February 2008) reinstated by the ICES Chairman, Kingsley de Silva, at the request of the staff and the Board of Directors. Meanwhile, the despotic power of the Sri Lankan state was marshalled in this case, as Dr. Rama Mani's initiative to align ICES with the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect was seen as interference and as undermining the country's sovereignty of Sri Lanka. On the grounds of an intelligence report, her visa was cancelled, forcing her to leave the country (Sunday Island, 2007). The ramifications of such developments for the institutional functioning of ICES cannot be underestimated.

Parallel to the relative decline of what were once vibrant think tanks, a number of new think tanks emerged. As part of the growing international thrust on the gender dimensions of conflict, women's studies in particular got a boost in the 1980s. New think tanks included the Centre for Women's Research, Colombo (1984), and the Women's Education and Research Centre, Colombo (1982). The former emerged in view of the paucity of data available to address the disadvantaged position of women, in research and action-oriented programmes relating to women. The latter aims to increase women's awareness, resources and opportunities for their effective participation in the economic, political and social life of the country. Another important issue, particularly in view of the basket of emergency regulations, was the high incidence of human rights violations perpetrated by the state. In this regard, the Law and Society Trust, Colombo (1985), led by local intellectuals and international donors, was set up to conduct documentation, research and advocacy on human rights.

⁶⁵ www.srilankafoundation.lk/.

⁶⁶ www.ssalanka.org/.

⁶⁷ From 1982 until his assassination in 1999. After the death of Neelan Thiruchelvam, the post went to Ivy League-educated Dr. Radhika Coomaraswamy, who served as Director from 2000 until 2006. Dr. Rama Mani, who had a PhD from the University of Cambridge, was Executive Director of Colombo office from January 2007 to March 2008; from April 2008 this office was headed by Mr. C.D. Casie Chetty.

⁶⁸ Partha S. Ghosh, interview, 2010.

In the 1980s, a rise in the number of refugees and physically challenged persons as a result of prolonged military conflict, as well as issues relating to an ageing population left behind by migrant family members working abroad in the Gulf countries, generated a rethink of the traditional security paradigm. Action-based think tanks received some recognition in the corridors of power, and special projects to assist such groups (partly in response to advice from the UN and other international organisations) were developed in partnership, with the action-based think tanks emerging as a mediator between government and the people (Arai, 2002). In areas where ethnic strife was intense, government relied on such think tanks to provide relief and aid to its target groups. Thus, the government allowed action-based think tanks to become involved in social and welfare work on a selective basis (*ibid.*).

Similarly, the government used its infrastructural powers to support research-based think tanks in a few cases. For example, the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka was established by Act of Parliament in December 1988 and formally set up as a legal entity by gazette notification in April 1990, with the joint support of the Sri Lankan government and the Netherlands government. The institute functions under the key government economic policy ministries; over a period of time it has diversified its income sources and become fully financially independent, but it still works closely with the government.⁶⁹

Another government-led initiative is the Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies. This was set up in 2006 in Colombo under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and acts as, 'a focal point for research and discussion, both anticipatory and reactive, on global and regional issues and their impact on Sri Lanka [and] assisting the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, when required in policy planning and formulation of policy alternatives and responses'. Bandaranaike International Diplomatic Training Institute functions as the training arm of the institute.⁷⁰ In the field of international relations, the Regional Centre for Strategic Studies (1993) was set up to deal with conventional and non-conventional sources of conflict, with an educational and problem-solving perspective on South Asian strategic and security issues.

However, think tanks and the policy community in Sri Lanka remain largely divorced from each other. Government funding for social science research is scarce. According to Prof. Jayadeva Uyangoda, Head of the Department of Political Science and Public Policy at the University of Colombo, 'the social scientific community is not consulted in the process of public policy-making except when advice is sought from individual academics'. He also noted 'the lack of social-scientific rigour in most of the donor-driven research in Sri Lanka' (in Liyanage, 2003). Think tanks' independence is subject to the desires of the country's leaders. For example, President Premadasa suspended the activities of Sarvodaya – one of the largest action-based community think tanks, involved in village-level development activities such as road repair and irrigation – setting up an investigation committee to enquire into its functioning. Similarly, President Rajapaksa, aided by the country's emergency regulations, has consolidated political power in the executive and limited the freedom of the media and the role of civil society in politics. Action-based think tanks, particularly those working on human rights issues, are under constant surveillance and investigation, making their functioning very difficult, as they are seen as 'enemies of the state'.⁷¹

The 1990s saw the entry of consultancy firms, advocacy groups and associations in a big way, attracting significant foreign funding. In recent years, under the influence of external donors, research has focused increasingly on poverty, governance and empowerment, albeit without any critical engagement with such issues (Chatterjee, 2002b). For example, the Centre for Poverty Analysis (2001) is registered as a non-profit company to carry out independent

⁶⁹ The government's grant to the institute was staggered over four phases to allow it to gradually diversify its income and resource base. During this period, it was successful in establishing its own Endowment Fund and became fully financially independent in December 2004.

⁷⁰ www.mea.gov.lk/.

⁷¹ Mala Liyanage, interview, 2010.

analysis of the causes, characteristics and impacts of poverty. Its assignments are usually for clients such as donors and international NGOs, and sometimes local NGOs and government.⁷²

However, this space is inundated with the Colombo liberals, devoting themselves mainly to policy-oriented empirical research. In addition, consultancy firms, advocacy groups and associations have proliferated to attract foreign funding. This means not only that the 'two worlds' (of policy-making and academia) theory holds true for the most part in Sri Lanka, but also that researchers are again often oriented to Western frameworks. There is thus a, 'division among social scientists concerned with the present who use theoretical and conceptual frameworks emanating from the West to think about their own world, and those social scientists that are unaware of these trends or deliberately distance themselves from them' (Chatterjee, 2002b). Overall, researchers, 'instead of guiding policy-makers, have either become bystanders or succumbed to political pressures' and are thus subservient to the exigencies of power (ibid.).

⁷² www.cepa.lk.

5 South Asia: the larger picture

5.1 The endogenous level

The post-colonial state in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, seen as the culmination of nationalist aspirations, assumed an all pervasive-role under the nation-building project. They exercised their infrastructural power to lay down the foundations for think tanks and also to draw expert policy advice from them. Bodies such as planning commissions, government ministries/departments and state-supported research councils played a major role in establishing and supporting the activities of think tanks by offering grants (seed money, land, endowment grants, building funds, etc.) and also by commissioning and supporting research projects.

This infrastructural power has made think tanks largely dependent on government funding, not to mention their 'closeness' to those in power as the only way to ensure more policy influence. To ensure easier access to the corridors of power, the majority of think tanks in the four countries are located in the capital cities, with a very small minority located in state capitals and other big cities. Such 'locational fixity', structurally speaking, is a reflection of the centralising/quasi-federal setup in these countries, but is also driven by a practical need to ensure access to good human resources and adequate infrastructure.

The legacy of the emergence of think tanks-in South Asia, especially their financial support from government (and international agencies), continues to impinge on their autonomy, especially in terms of the way the research agenda is structured. The challenge for think tanks is how to maintain independence from those in power while being dependent on them for funding as well as the exercise of influence. Since almost all think tanks call themselves non-partisan, autonomous and independent, a fine distinction is often made between agenda and outcome. This essentially means that, while the agenda is largely determined by the state or donor agencies, the outcome – independent research – is not compromised.⁷³ In practice, such a fine distinction is difficult to operationalise, more so when funding is crucial for survival.⁷⁴

States also use despotic powers vis-à-vis think tanks: they have a basket of laws to regulate activities, which can be used at their discretion to restrict think tanks' functioning, often in an arbitrary manner. Since all think tanks have a legal personality, they are governed by the relevant laws, with states' marshalling of despotic power resulting in instances of curbing of the functioning of think tanks. Inquiries into their working are not uncommon in countries of South Asia. State regulations on lobbying, donations, taxation and funding also have a bearing on think tanks functioning (Schneider, 2002) although, under democratic polities, the despotic power of the state is tempered to a great extent.

5.2 The exogenous level

At the exogenous level, international agencies and global frameworks have had an important influence on the nature and functioning of think tanks. The different countries in South Asia vary in this respect. The smaller and weaker states have less leeway, in terms of both resources and expertise, and are more likely to give a greater role to international institutions – both public and private – with regard to structuring the thinking space.

In most countries, international agencies – both public and private – have played a major role in supporting the activities of a number of think tanks since the early phase of independence. Private international foundations such as Ford and Rockefeller and, more recently, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation have been much in evidence, as have the McCarthy Foundation, the Sasakawa Foundation and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. Government agencies include

⁷³ Anwarul Hoda, interview, 2010.

⁷⁴ Pradeep Mehta, interview, 2010.

USAID, Norad, the US Department of State (of which the Fulbright International Educational Exchange is notable in the field of knowledge), IDRC, CIDA, SDC, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the Netherlands Directorate-General for International Cooperation (DGIS). Also present are the World Bank and ADB and other international organisations such as Freedom House, in addition to various other UN agencies.

In recent years, in a massive push to the activities of think tanks, a multi-donor programme called the Think Tank Initiative has been launched.⁷⁵ This is supported by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, IDRC, DFID and DGIS and is aimed at supporting think tanks that are 'oriented primarily toward issues of national-level policy-making with medium-term horizons and whose research focuses on general issues of social and economic policy related to growth, equity, and poverty reduction' (IDRC, 2009).

International donor agencies are also giving huge support to regional think tanks and network initiatives. The World Bank-led Global Development Network (GDN)⁷⁶ (which formally separated from the Bank in 2001 to become an autonomous non-profit organisation) has been instrumental in developing regional networks across different regions, including the South Asia Network of Economic Research Institutes (SANEI).⁷⁷ This, along with the South Asia Centre for Policy Studies (SACEPS), was chosen as the implementing agency for the ADB's 2007 \$1.2 million grant for Supporting Network of Research Institutes and Think tanks in South Asia Phase II.⁷⁸

Funding is mostly project-based and *ad hoc*, which means it is not sufficient to allow think tanks to pursue an autonomous research agenda. The donor agencies are more likely to focus their donations on their own agenda (in recent years usually on governance and democratisation). Thus, despite the multitude of donors, a positive research environment is not obtained. Think tanks run from one project to another with little emphasis on pursuing long-term analysis in a holistic framework.

5.3 Two-level embedded autonomy

Taken together, think tanks as a knowledge industry in South Asia are largely structured by the state and carry the flavour of global paradigms, and thus function within the framework of two-level embedded autonomy. As a result, they largely follow the exigencies of those in power – both the state and international agencies and frameworks. Their space for manoeuvre is extremely limited and their influence is contingent on their individual rapport with policy-makers, often through membership of government committees. The state is also wont to pursue patronage politics in choosing individuals and institutions for policy advice. This is

⁷⁵ This provides up to 30% of the institute's overall budget over the funding period and covers operating and research costs as well as institutional strengthening activities. Initially, core grants will be either a four-year or a two-year renewable grant, complemented by capacity development. In Bangladesh, recipients of funds include the Centre for Policy Dialogue and the Institute of Governance Studies. In India, the list includes the Centre for Study of Science, Technology and Policy; the Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability; the Centre for Policy Research; the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies; the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, New Delhi; the Institute of Economic Growth; the Institute of Rural Management; the National Council of Applied Economic Research; and the Public Affairs Centre. The two think tanks in Pakistan are the Social Policy and Development Centre and the Sustainable Development Policy Institute. The Sri Lankan think tanks are the Centre for Poverty Analysis and the Institute of Policy Studies.

⁷⁶ The GDN, 'was founded on the premise that good policy research, properly applied, can accelerate development and improve people's lives'. Its objective is to promote the generation, sharing and application to policy of multidisciplinary knowledge for the purpose of development in a multidisciplinary framework. It also strives to bring together both researchers and policy-makers, and extends, 'the first step in facilitating greater exchanges between local policy-makers and the local research we support'. For details see www.gdnet.org.

⁷⁷ SANEI was established in 1998 to foster strong inter-linkages in the region. It has a rotating secretariat which moves between member countries' institutes. It was established in New Delhi with ICRIER as the anchor. Later, the secretariat moved to PIDE in Islamabad. It is now housed in Dhaka at BIDS. It supports networking among South Asian institutes and think tanks and researchers and has produced a number of collaborative research projects between institutes in the region. In fact, on some occasions, collaboration between two of more countries has been a requirement for funding under SANEI. While this has been one of the more successful networks in the region, the coming together of researchers from South Asia has largely been a response to external stimuli.

⁷⁸ www.saceps.org/.

compounded by the fact that there is little effort to put in place practices that would institutionalise them. Think tanks seem to have a shelf life that is more or less congruent with that of the founder director – ‘as the founder left the scene the bridges that these institutes had built with the government weakened’ – while new ones struggle to establish themselves (Mathur, 2009).

Much of the history of think tanks is thus a narrative of the decline of institutions once in their prime. A three-phase trajectory – heyday, decline and revival – is not uncommon, in consonance with the decline of ethics in the polity as a whole. One such example is ICWA in India, which housed one of the premier research libraries in its first few decades and became an institution of great national and international importance. By the 1980s, though, under the presidency of Harcharan Singh Josh, the rot had set in as a result of misappropriation of funds and embezzlement. In 1990, a series of parliamentary debates and committee reports culminated in a writ petition in the High Court demanding the implementation of recommendations made by a Lok Sabha Standing Committee for a takeover by the government (Nagaraj, 1999). Harcharan Singh Josh accused the BJP-led government of ‘saffronisation’ of an eminent institution, a charge the government vehemently denied (George, 2000).⁷⁹ Since its takeover by the Ministry of External Affairs in 2001, plans for a revival have been in circulation. Similarly, the bitter feud in ICES in Sri Lanka over the appointment of Dr. Rama Mani as Executive Director and power struggle exemplified its institutional decline. Such institutional skirmishes have left the institute in a state of limbo, as a result of which it has not produced any significant research output.

While think tanks are generally referred to as autonomous, non-partisan bodies, their actual influence and functioning are contingent on a host of factors, as discussed above. The research agenda of institutes in South Asia revolves broadly around issues of development and poverty alleviation within the mainstream debate structured by the state wherein ‘dissent’ is largely unwelcome. A number of think tanks also work on international, economic and strategic issues – areas seen to require technical and scientific vigour. In recent years, environment and sustainable development, especially climate change, have also emerged as important concerns. In Sri Lanka, ethnicity, identity and refugee issues dominated the agenda from after the outbreak of civil war, just as nationalism and identity issues were debated in Pakistan on the eve of partition in the 1970s. Under the influence of international donors, the agenda has also encapsulated human rights, governance, democratisation and participation, etc.

The agenda is driven primarily by what is termed ‘policy relevance’, given donors’ preference for such research. The trend in most countries in South Asia is thus for empirical, short-term, immediate, instrumental, micro-level and incremental knowledge rather than critical and theoretical research. Some think tanks in India and Sri Lanka do give weight to the tradition of historical thinking (Chatterjee, 2002a) and critical research, but these are notable exceptions. Further, the use of a sectoral and issue-based focus, rather than a multidisciplinary framework, means that the complexity of the problems facing these countries is not captured in its entirety.

Overall, the research agenda, following the direction of both the state and global paradigms, often views the social sciences as a ‘soft’ discipline with little practical application. Such a state of affairs is also driven by the general approach towards the discipline, which is one of apathy and disdain. For example, in Pakistan, some sections of government regard the social sciences and humanities as worthless, with little connection to ‘practical life’, marketability and employability (Chatterjee, 2002b).

Language can also act as a major barrier to critical thinking. English is predominant in the policy domain, and yet lack of English education and/or an emphasis on the vernacular, especially in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, is one of the obstacles to carrying out critical social science research. Ideas from the West continue to dominate the research agenda, but a failure to engage with such literature leaves little scope to challenge them. The language factor also breeds contempt towards what are often seen as Western-educated urban elites: one can

⁷⁹ ‘Saffronisation’ (after the saffron robes of Hindu clerics) refers to right-wing Hindu nationalism.

discern a disconnect between the world of think tanks and the public at large, who see think tanks as driven by Western-educated intellectuals, retired bureaucrats and ex-army generals or their relatives. The terms 'Colombo liberals' in Sri Lanka and 'liaison lieutenant' in Bangladesh capture the general negative perception in these countries of think tank members as sitting in ivory towers oblivious to and unconcerned with the real issues facing the nation.

Within this broad matrix, what acts as an intervening variable in the functioning of think tanks is the nature of the state regime – democracy, authoritarian or semi-authoritarian – along with the level of plurality and the space for deliberative democracy that prevails within each society. A chequered pattern is thus discernable in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Overall, democratic India and Sri Lanka, in contrast with Bangladesh and Pakistan (which have both experienced authoritarian or semi-authoritarian rule), have a more vibrant and diverse think tank community, as well as relatively more autonomy from international agencies and global frameworks in terms of the research agenda. Figure 2 sums this up.

Figure 2: The knowledge-power interface in South Asia through the framework of two-level embedded autonomy

		Bangladesh	India	Pakistan	Sri Lanka
Endogenous Level					
<i>Nature of State Power</i>	Despotic Power	High	Medium	High	High*
	Infrastructural Power	Low	High	Low	Medium
<i>Political Process</i>		Periods of authoritarian/semi-authoritarian rule with democratic interludes	Democratic	Periods of authoritarian semi-authoritarian rule with democratic interludes	Democratic albeit protracted ethnic conflict
Exogenous Level					
International Agencies		High	Medium	High	Medium
Global Frames		High	Medium	High	High
Think Tanks' Autonomy		Low	Medium	Low	Medium
* due to long-drawn conflict					

6 Conclusions and explorations

Think tanks are a critical lynchpin in comprehending the knowledge–power interface in South Asia. Their space and functioning are determined by a dynamic interplay between endogenous and exogenous factors, which can be seen as two-level embedded autonomy – within the state–society milieu and within the demands of international agencies and global frames. This setting is mediated by the political process to generate a variable matrix for think tanks across different countries in South Asia.

All South Asian states, relative to their exercise of infrastructural power, have been instrumental in supporting not only the establishment of think tanks but also their research activities. They do so either directly through government agencies or ministries or through national-level research councils. Such exercise of infrastructural power makes think tanks subject to the vagaries of the state’s agency, thus potentially limiting their autonomy. Meanwhile, the exercise of despotic power subjects think tanks to a basket of legal regulations and reporting requirements which, depending on the political process, are marshalled on a contingent basis, albeit in variable proportions.

International agencies, informed by global frames, have been a crucial anchor to the development and activities of think tanks. Two distinct patterns of relationship between state and international agencies can be discerned in South Asia, not necessarily in successive stages. In the first, the state and international agencies act as cohorts; in the second, the relationship is marred by acrimony and mutual distrust. The relative autonomy of the state in relation to these is linked to its external position as well as to its internal political processes, and is also a function of its infrastructural power. The more infrastructural power the state exercises, the better position it is in to control international agencies, should the political context require this.

Lack of regular funding is the most critical factor impinging on the autonomy of think tanks. Some have been able to generate their own revenue, but such instances are few and far between: the majority are vulnerable to a donor-led research agenda. The search for a stable source of funding leaves them with little space to pursue long-term research, as most available sources of funds support short-term research aimed at an instant ‘impact factor’.

The research the majority of research institutes pursue is largely done within the framework of problem solving, rather than based on a critical approach towards knowledge building.⁸⁰ It is largely context-specific and related to contemporaneous issues and demands, which are in turn informed by both local and global policy frames. The prime focuses of research themes carried out by think tanks include issues of development in all its myriad dimensions; international and strategic studies, including peace, terrorism, trade and economic issues; human rights; consumer rights; environmental issues; institutional reforms; gender; empowerment; conflict analysis; good governance; and democratisation.

All such factors in concert stifle the possibility of developing innovative research horizons and a critical knowledge pool. In the knowledge–power interface in South Asia, therefore, knowledge has regrettably proved to be the victim, structured as it is by the vagaries of power.

⁸⁰ Critical theory questions the very conditions of the world and asks to whom and what purposes such theory/research serves. By doing so, it opens up the possibilities of a different and alternative world. This is unlike problem-solving theory, which takes the world as a given and does not question existing power relationships, merely focusing on solving certain problems within the existing framework and hence ending up perpetuating the status quo.

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