SHAPING GOVERNANCE: BUREAUCRATIC LEADERSHIP AND THINK TANK INFLUENCE IN INDIAN PUBLIC POLICY

Laxmi Yadav

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Author Details:
Ph.D. Student,
Department of Civics and Politics,
Mumbai University, India

Corresponding Author:
Laxmi Yadav

Abstract

Public policy-making in India is influenced by the complex interactions among political leadership, bureaucracy, and non-state actors such as think tanks. Among these, the Indian Administrative Services (IAS), popularly referred to as the "steel frame" of India, and policy think tanks such as NITI Aayog, PRS Legislative Research, and the Centre for Policy Research are the main drivers of governance outcomes. This study examines their roles across policymaking stages right from agenda setting, formulation, adoption, implementation to evaluation.

It also examines the complementary and sometimes conflicting relationships between bureaucratic experience and research-based knowledge of think tanks. Bureaucrats ground policies in practical experience, and think tanks enrich debates with research and innovation and having a collaboration between bureaucratic practices and research expertise can make Indian policy-making more effective, inclusive and forward-looking, thereby enhancing democratic governance.

Keywords: *Bureaucracy, Indian Administrative Service, Think Tanks, Public Policy, Governance, NITI Aayog*

Introduction

A comprehensive analysis of the Indian public policy shows that there is more to electoral cycles and charismatic leadership, predicting the institutional structure of policy. The architecture is essentially influenced by two pillars that are interlocked, namely, a stable and hierarchical bureaucracy and a booming policy think tank ecosystem. Together, these actors frame the scaffolding of Indian policymaking, safeguarding both continuity and legitimacy, while also fostering innovation and adaptive governance in response to evolving national and global challenges (Nirvikar Singh, 2004).

The Indian Administrative Service (IAS), along with the related services, has long been the so-called steel frame of the Indian state, the institutional heritage of which can be directly traced to the colonial Indian Civil Service. The scope of this bureaucracy is very wide; it includes both the administration at the district level up to the most significant roles in the process of formulating national policies. With a vital role in the formulation of policy agendas, besides being given crucial responsibility in the execution of political mandates, bureaucratic leaders exist in a critical nexus between politics, administration, and expertise. Nonetheless, this centrality has made the bureaucracy vulnerable to the criticism of rigidity, elitism, and a certain insularity that is so pervasive that it can suppress responsiveness to the needs of the larger society (Vineet Thakur, 2018).

At the same time, a remarkable expansion of think tanks and policy research organizations in India has been seen in the last three decades. These organizations have developed to be significant providers of specialized policy research and policy-debating platforms exemplified by state-affiliated (e.g., Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA)) and globally networked, independent (e.g., Centre of Policy Research (CPR) and Observer Research Foundation (ORF)) organizations. Their growth is also strongly connected with the economic liberalization that took place in the post-1991 years and triggered the general policy changes, and reflects a tendency to turn to evidence-based expertise and international policy networks, as the most effective method of policymaking (Suryakant Ratan Chaugule, 2020).

With the emergence of think tanks, bureaucrats still have major powers over formal procedures, resource distribution, and government execution. Think tanks, in their turn, are placed in the middle ground, outside of the official government, but in many cases as part of powerful policy networks. These give systematic information, critique, and discussion that bureaucratic actors can tap into at their own will; this relationship does not replace, but complements bureaucratic hegemonies. Notably, the policy machinery of India is different from that of other systems, like the United States, where the revolving door system allows people to move to and out of government to think tanks. Zones of interaction in India are overlapping yet have their boundaries,

which strengthen their system where knowledge organizations improve but do not replace state capacity (Muhyiddin Muhyiddin et al., 2017).

It is against this background that the relationship between the bureaucratic leadership and think tanks is both convergent and tension-filled. The bureaucratic leaders enjoy legitimacy because of the institutional continuity and preservation of administrative memory. Think tanks, on the other hand, bring intellectual heterogeneity, international connections, and a new policy discourse medium. The interaction between them can be fruitful and at the same time, can be confrontational, especially in those environments where new knowledge disrupts the previously in place administrative habits (Muhyiddin, 2019).

This paper presents the question, which is to critically examine the historical organization of Indian public policy by bureaucratic leadership; to follow the institutionalization of think tanks in the ecosystem of governance; and to discuss the modalities of harmonizing and confronting bureaucratic power and the aspect of knowledge-based influence (Seema Narain, 2017). The interpretation of such a hybrid form can serve as a valuable contribution to the discussion on governance and innovation in new democracies, as well as explain the possibility of producing a balanced and productive public policy through a combination of the complementary advantages of bureaucratic stability and autonomy of intellectual work (Dhanasree Jayaram, 2024)

Research Methodology

The proposed study will be qualitative, descriptive, and analytic by nature, and will rely solely on the secondary data. The objective of the study is to learn the interaction between bureaucratic leadership and think tanks and influence the general policy in India. A qualitative approach will be used since policymaking in India is founded on institutional traditions, elite networks, and historically developed administrative structures that cannot be appropriately measured quantitatively. The study aims to explain the trends of authority, knowledge, and power in the Indian government system instead of testing any hypothesis.

The study is a non-empirical interpretive study. It is concerned with the dynamics of institutions, discursive practices, and power imbalances between bureaucracy players and policy research organizations. The paper lays stress on continuity and change in the processes of governance, how the bureaucratic power of authority exists in tandem with the increasing importance of knowledge-based institutions. This method is in line with the literature on public administration and governance, where documentary analysis is the main concept of comprehension of the processes of policy formulation.

The study is based on academic literature as the main theoretical basis. Articles in peer-reviewed journals, books, and edited volumes concerning Indian bureaucracy, public administration, think tanks, and policy networks are analyzed. The concept of bureaucratic dominance, institutional continuity, and the process of the creation of think tanks in the Indian policy ecosystem are contextualized by seminal works by Brass (1994), Singh (2004), and Chaturvedi (2020).

A second significant source of data is government publications and policy documents. These are the official reports, findings of committees, the strategic framework, policy statements of the institutions like the Planning Commission, NITI Aayog, the Ministry of External Affairs, the Ministry of Defence, and the ministries of various sectors. Important documents like the Bhore Committee Report and the National Education Policy (2020) are examined to track the bureaucratic leadership in the process of policy formulation and execution.

A third category of sources is the think tank outputs. Articles, Research Reports of the policy Researches Researches published by some of the leading Indian think tanks, such as Centre for Policy Research (CPR), Observer Research Foundation (ORF), Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), and Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW), PRS Legislative Research, etc., conference proceedings are systematically reviewed. Such materials give us information on how policy ideas are produced, framed, and delivered to the bureaucratic institutions.

Moreover, contemporary policy debates and governance scandals are captured by means of reputable media sources and institutional reports. This is done by using publications like Business Standard, ThePrint, and Livemint, and international rankings like the Global Go To Think Tank Index to measure the visibility and influence of think tanks, as well as the regulatory issues.

The data obtained is interpreted through a variety of qualitative methods to attain methodological rigor. To begin with, the thematic analysis method is used to discover the common trends associated with bureaucratic authority, agenda-setting, expertise, ideological alignment, and democratic accountability. The themes are obtained and developed out of close reading and cross-comparison of the policy documents, academic literature, and think tank outputs.

Second, the institutional analysis is employed to analyse formal and informal governance arrangements. This involves the analysis of ministries, advisory committees, and All India Services and informal systems, which are elite networks, policy conferences, and Track-II diplomacy. This approach contributes to the understanding of how bureaucratic superiority is perpetuated even when the dependence on outside knowledge is raised.

Third, a case study approach is taken to make the context more detailed. A few institutions and policy initiatives, including IDSA, ORF, CPR, PRS Legislative Research, Non-Alignment 2.0, and Raisina Dialogue, are examined to provide concrete examples of bureaucracy-think tank interaction. These instances point to differences in access, autonomy, and policy impact.

Lastly, there is a narrow comparative approach through citing the policymaking models in other countries like the United States and China. Such a comparison aids in putting the governance model of India, especially its weak revolving-door system and ongoing bureaucratic centrality in a large global perspective.

Literature Review

The Indian policy and governance have long used the bureaucratic structure as the central focus of the research. Indian Administrative Service (IAS) and other related civil services are often referred to as heirs of the colonial Indian Civil Service system, using hierarchical structure, rule-oriented behaviour, and professional values, which are typically attributed to Weberian bureaucracies (Brass, 1994). The Politics of India Since Independence by Paul R. Brass highlights the role played by the bureaucrats in drawing up and executing plans of economic development of India, negotiating political instability and continuity of institutions through the changing governments (Brass, 1994). Atul Kohli also highlights that the bureaucracy has centralized the developmental model state, particularly in directing the policy within such areas as agriculture, industry, and infrastructure after independence. There are criticisms in the literature, however, which include inflexibility, slowness to change, and the bureaucracy being viewed as elitist. Analysts observe that generalist cadres such as IAS frequently do not have technical expertise in more recent policy areas, such as climate change or cybersecurity, or biotechnology, and are thus dependent on external sources of knowledge. Further, the trends of politicised transfers and appointments have, in most instances, diminished bureaucratic independence and cast doubts on merit, objectivity, and performance.

Along with the debate over bureaucracy is an increasing level of interest in think tanks and their influence over policy discourse. Think tanks are perceived as organisations that generate research and input into policymaking, usually through reframing policy issues, proposing policy options, or holding debates. There are various think tanks in India which operate under various fund-and-affiliation arrangements: some are affiliated with the government, others connected to political parties or corporate sponsorship, and there are comparatively independent ones. One thing that Yamini Aiyar has noted is that think tanks in India are a place of interaction between bureaucrats, civil society, politicians, and academics, which is more deliberative than normal bureaucratic channels would allow (Aiyar, 2018). Think tanks tend to have a visibility and influence problem, with many of their results not appearing in official policy papers. Funding is often constrained, limiting their area of action, and often, they are all based in New Delhi, providing a limited regional voice. The issue regarding bias, either based on the sponsoring agencies or political affiliations, is also raised and may undermine the perceived objectivity.

Bureaucracy, in terms of its interaction with the think tanks in India, has not been well mapped, but what studies that have been done indicate is that the relationship is complementary, yet not equal. Think tanks tend to release reports or policy recommendations, which can be used by bureaucrats in formulating policy, and bureaucrats still have the authority to set agendas and implement them. As an example, the policy circles are circulated with independent policy proposals, and such events as strategic reports or annual dialogues show that the output of think tanks sometimes changes the sphere of bureaucratic discussion, although this does not necessarily result in official adoption of the policy. Opponents warn, though, that in most instances the influence of the think tanks is partisan in that it tends to bolster the status quo rather than questioning some underlying structural problems. Additionally, in cases where the think tanks are ideologically inclined with the leading political forces, policy advocacy can be encompassed with partisan interests, which leaves no room to dissent or different views.

The comparative views assist in putting India into context. In countries such as the United States, think tanks can be more institutional in their presence, researchers transfer to government, or take governmental posts, so that there is a kind of revolving door effect, which enhances their impact. In China, think tanks are mostly subservient to the party-state systems and are employed in experiments of controlled policy. India is somewhere in between: bureaucratic institutions have not been displaced yet, but think tanks have been able to establish independent spaces of discourse and advisory relations, albeit the power and access imbalance is rather strong. Although digital tools and research outsourcing grown, as well as the flows of knowledge across the borders, researchers find many gaps: not much empirical research follows the precise patterns of how think tank ideas percolate into bureaucratic decision-making; the bureaucracies and think tanks on regional and state levels are under-researched; the impact of new governance technologies and data systems and cross-border associations on the process of interactions between bureaucrats and think tanks is poorly understood.

The history of the development of Indian bureaucracy cannot be discussed without referring to the heritage of the colonial Indian Civil Service (ICS) that served as the so-called steel frame of the British Empire, enforcing order in the country, gathering taxes, and implementing colonial policies. Indeed, in the very year of Indian independence (1947), the ICS structure was advocated to remain as it was, albeit reorganized, by leaders like Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, who argued that a weak civil service would endanger the democratic experiment in India. New All India Services comprising of Indian Administrative Service (IAS), Indian Police Service (IPS), and Indian Foreign Service (IFS) came up as constitutionally guaranteed cadres recruited centrally to the Union Public Service Commission. The participation in these services presupposed deployments on the central and state levels in order to overcome parochial devotion to the state and guarantee its continuation in the institution. In the following decades, core policy-making organs like the Planning Commission (established in 1950), ministries of the economy, and intergovernmental negotiating teams were filled with bureaucrats who formulated the early model of development in India. Although the political leadership was shifted so often, the bureaucratic leadership ensured stability, technical expertise, and institutional memory.

Bureaucratic Leadership in India

The key component of the bureaucratic power structure in India is the so-called file system that makes sure that none of the decisions, communications, and policy drafts are made without going through the hierarchical lines in the civil service. The work of the civil servants as policy interpreters and policy framers precedes the intervention of political leaders by a long way: section

officers, undersecretaries, joint secretaries, other secretaries, and secretaries all consult, revise, and polish papers before they reach ministers. This organization gives bureaucrats agenda-control authority: they control the promotion of policy issues, the postponement of policy issues, and the abandonment of policy issues. This control is especially noticeable when there is a shift in political regime, such as the coalition governments of the 1990s, where the continuity of bureaucrats provides consistency on core strategic policies, particularly in foreign affairs and external relations.

The way the economy of India is planned gives a vivid example of the bureaucratic style of leadership. The Planning Commission, under the leadership of P.C. Mahalanobis and others, had broad authority in resource allocation, licensing, and regulatory regime under the License Raj. Although with economic liberalization in 1991, the role of direct bureaucratic control of production had diminished, civil servants remained essential in negotiating structural adjustment, liberalization of international agencies like the IMF or the World Bank, and the formulation of the regulatory regime of previously highly controlled sectors. In the year 2015, when the Planning Commission gave way to NITI Aayog, this exchange was perceived not so much as a loss of bureaucratic influence as a reorganisation: although consultation is better organised with think tanks and experts, the bureaucrats remain the dominant force in leadership roles and decision-making.

Bureaucratic leadership is particularly robust in the area of foreign policy and national security. The Indian Foreign Service and diplomatic cadres have always informed how India takes its world positions, such as in the Non-Aligned Movement, nuclear talks, and currently in climate talks. Senior bureaucrats lead ministries like the Ministry of External Affairs and the Ministry of Defence, and in such ministries, they are in control of policy formulation, treaty negotiations, and international commitment. Critics observe that this dominance sometimes leads to rigidities, for instance, in defence procurement, strategic innovation, or timely adaptation to emerging threats, but supporters argue that it ensures coherence, strategic consistency, and safeguarding of national interest across political administrations.

Bureaucracy has also been facing criticism over its role as a leader. Another noted issue is the lack of specialization: IAS officers are generalists, and they are shuffled between various departments (health to finance) in many cases, without a great deal of technical knowledge of the field. This restricts their ability in new policy fields like environmental science, digital technologies, biotechnology, or public health emergencies. In addition, bureaucratic procedures are frequently characterized as being too procedural and rule-bound and are unfriendly to risk-taking and innovation. Introduction of culture into the transfer and politicization of appointments defeats the autonomy of the bureaucracy and may lead to poor performance. Bureaucracy is prone to being labeled by the masses as elite, inaccessible, and unresponsive to the urgency of the people, particularly where bureaucrats are dilatory in initiating/implementing regulations or where bureaucrats lag in delivering on their promises.

The bureaucracy of health and environmental policy also demonstrates the advantages and disadvantages of this concept further. An early example under the colonial rule is the Bhore Committee (1946), which released a report forming a foundation on integration of preventive and curative services, primary health centres (PHCs), and a three-tier health care delivery system (Bhore Committee, 1943-1946) (Bhore Report Volumes; Bhore Committee Report, 1946). Bureaucratic officers have been in the forefront of major national programs over the years, including the National Health Mission, Ayushman Bharat, and governmental response to the public health crisis (including COVID-19) in terms of designing, coordinating, budgeting, and implementing of those programs on both the central and state levels. Meanwhile, in epidemiology or science in the field of health, expert advice, particularly during times of crisis, can be introduced through external consultants or think tanks, but ultimate decision-making, particularly in times of crisis, is left to the bureaucrats. In environmental and climate policy, too, the ministries that are largely staffed by IAS officers make decisions on the negotiation positions of India (such as in UNFCCC), the priorities of India in development (such as energy security, infrastructure), and the sovereign claims of India (such as common but differentiated responsibility) despite possible think tank-contributions to research or comparative models.

Lastly, the increasing popularity of digital governance, real-time data systems, and massive programmes like Aadhaar (Unique Identification Authority of India) and GST Network (Goods and Services Tax Network) can be seen as a sign of both a willingness toward technical innovation and the ongoing presence of the bureaucracy. Though in many cases such technologies are constructed by individual companies or other partner agencies, the rollout, regulation, and control are usually handled by civil servants. As an example, UIDAI is managed by the leadership of the civil service, and the top bureaucrats determine its extent, regulatory framework, as well as integration with welfare or legal systems. This suggests that as innovation is introduced to the governance process, it is done in the supervision of bureaucracies and must pass what can be referred to as bureaucratic gatekeeping. All these trends indicate that bureaucratic leadership in India is an agent of stability and continuity, as well as a limitation of innovation and inclusivity.

Rise and Transformation of Think Tanks in India

The think tanks in India are seen to have undergone a remarkable change since 1991, when the liberalization of the economy took place and changed them into the main actors in the policy-making process. These organisations have now taken up the research, debate, and bridging roles between the government, the civil societies, the media, and the foreign actors. They are important because policymaking in India is a dual process that continues to grant bureaucrats control over the process of decision and implementation, but increasingly is dependent on external expertise to help negotiate the complexity in areas of international relations, environment, technology, and governance. With increased global interconnectedness, there is an increasing pressure on the need to have think tanks that can address issues in a manner that is appealing to the domestic and international standards.

The beginnings of the Indian think tank scene can be traced to think tanks, Intellectual societies, and universities of the pre-independence era, like the Asiatic Society of Bengal (1784) and the Indian Statistical Institute (1931). After independence, semi-official foreign affairs, defence, and planning institutions were established or sponsored by the state, including the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA, 1943) and the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA, established 1965), which gave the Defence Ministry strategic advice. These were tightly linked organizations in the early days: either government-funded or government-staffed and influenced by state concerns, and having little autonomy.

In the year 1991, the reforms opened the door to a new beginning. The increasing space of think tanks was due to liberalization, deregulation, globalization, and the increasing technical complexity of policy issues. Other more typical sources of funding were private philanthropy, foreign donor grants, and project-based consultancy. Other institutions, including the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), which was established in the period around 1990, increased in stature; more recent organizations, such as the Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW) were created in the 2000s. Think tanks have diversified in both theme, leaving defence and foreign policy to venture into other areas such as environment, health, urban governance, and technology, and in purpose, playing a role in convening debates, writing reports, and interacting publicly outside of the bureaucratic establishment.

There are currently several hundred think tanks (with 612 in the 2020 Global Go To Think Tanks Index) located in India, the third country in the world in terms of the total number of think tanks, although many are located in Delhi and its suburbs (McGann, 2020; "Understanding the Indian Think Tanks Space," 2021). ORF is considered to be the most visible think tank in India. Since 2016, its Raisina Dialogue conferences, which it has held on a basis of co-conferencing with the Ministry of External Affairs, have become a flagship event in the field of geopolitics and geo-economics (Observer Research Foundation & MEA, 2016; News18, 2023). The fact that ORF occupies positions in various categories participating in the Global Go To Index is testimony to its international footprint and impact on the state policy (Business Standard, 2019).

However, this has grown without problems. The issue of dependence on funding is a problem: most of the think tanks are dependent on governmental grants or on foreign funding or on corporate sponsors, which may tend to predetermine the agenda of research or give the impression of bias. In New Delhi, geographic concentration tends to marginalize the regional point of view. Think tanks are often run without any publicity on the utilization of their productions in policy. In addition, in institutions that are ideologically inclined to the ruling party, the issue of neutrality is doubtful. Digitalization, with all the possibilities to expand the reach (webinars, policy briefs, dashboards), requires resources and capacities that a lot of smaller think tanks do not have.

In short, the transformation of Indian think tanks is not only about several actors, but also a number of issues, and people's involvement. However, influence is facilitated through bureaucracies and political environments. Although think tanks are currently rivaling in significance as policy interlocutors, their capacity to influence the inputs that are taken up or not is significantly dependent on the openness, institutional culture, and incentives in government. According to the trend, transparency and funding reforms, and regional inclusion are needed to enhance democratic policy formulation among the think tanks.

Interplay Between Bureaucratic Leadership and Think Tanks

Think tanks in the policy ecosystem serve as idea generators in India, whilst the bureaucracy forms the institutional essence of government. They do not follow a linear or a homogenous relationship, but rather hierarchies of access, bureaucratic gatekeeping, and the political environment shape their relationship (Chaturvedi, 2020). Through encapsulated research, white papers, and comparative global information, bureaucrats often turn to think tanks, but think tanks to gain legitimacy, influence, and access to state resources, do so by participating in bureaucratic networks. This interdependence has been operating in several ways, such as formal committees, commissioned research, Track-II diplomacy, and informal networks, all of which are controlled by discretion, deference, and selective inclusion.

One of the modes of interaction is formal consultations. Ministries, in most cases, form panels of experts that consist of academics, retired officials, and think tank scholars to prepare strategic documents. One of the most notable instances is Non-Alignment 2.0 (2012), which was created by the team of scholars in the Centre for Policy Research (CPR). The report, although unofficially put, influenced the discussions in the Ministry of External Affairs (CPR, 2012). Likewise, the formation of NITI Aayog in 2015 institutionalized cooperation with think tanks, commissioning sector-specific studies in the field of health, climate, and digital governance. Nevertheless, it is often highly selective, giving preferential treatment to ideologically or relationally affiliated think tanks, and is criticized for agenda capture and neutrality being undermined (Jain, 2019).

Another important type of engagement is conferences and Track-II diplomacy. The Raisina Dialogue is an annual conference co-organized by the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) and the Ministry of External Affairs, where ministers and military figures, diplomats, and international experts discuss ideas, providing bureaucrats the opportunity to practice their rhetoric and think tanks the credibility of association (ORF, 2023). On the same note, the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) hosts annual strategy conferences that serve in attendance by the serving officials, thus creating a thin boundary between independent research and government discussion (IDSA, 2022). Elite circuits are strengthened by such forums, which are candid but limit participation by reputation and invitation.

There is also the avenue of commissioned research and policy papers. The Council on Energy, Environment, and Water (CEEW) has been contracted by ministries, including the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy (MNRE) and the Ministry of Environment, Forests, and Climate Change (MoEFCC), to do analyses on solar potential, carbon markets, and energy transitions.

India bases its negotiating options on these outputs (CEEW, 2021). On the same note, PRS Legislative Research, though independent, provides parliamentary briefs which are relied upon by the bureaucrats to predict questions and advise the ministers. However, commissioned work is dangerous to intellectual autonomy, since it can be financed and pressured by bureaucrats, making a person self-censor (Chaturvedi, 2020).

The informal networks and especially the Delhi circuit are extremely powerful yet less visible. The retired secretaries, journalists, and think tank directors have good relationships with the serving officers, which influence the policy drafts and ministerial speeches through informal means. Also, the structural composition of bureaucrats on the boards of think tanks, i.e., ICWA, IDSA, or ORF, contributes to mutual trust but supports dominance by rank, which restricts knowledge flow in either direction, in contrast to the U.S. system of the revolving door (Jain, 2019).

International cooperation is a mutually supportive form of involvement that puts bureaucrats at risk of international competence. The cases of the partnerships between Carnegie India and other global climate networks reflect an example of how think tanks can serve as a portal to comparative policy-making, making India a more effective negotiator and more knowledgeable on the technical aspects (Carnegie India, 2022).

The National Education Policy (2020), the U.S.-India Civil Nuclear Agreement (2005-08), and the Smart Cities Mission are case studies that prove that formal consultations, Track-II diplomacy, and commissioned research tend to be combined. Nonetheless, they are still asymmetrical as bureaucratic gatekeeping favors some think tanks, political orientation affects access, and Delhi-centrism bars regional and grassroots views (Chaturvedi, 2020; Jain, 2019).

The bureaucratic-think tank relationship in India is conflicting in general. It encourages policy invention, international openness, and knowledge sharing, but is limited by status, privilege of the elite, and selective acquiescence to knowledge. Think tanks are legitimate, intellectual, and internationally connected, yet bureaucrats are the ultimate decision makers. The institutionalization of transparent, inclusive, and pluralistic consultation processes is the key to whether this relationship will develop into a truly collaborative knowledge ecosystem or not.

Case Studies of Bureaucracy–Think Tank Influence

The case studies of Indian think tanks show that there are diverse intersections of bureaucratic leadership with policy research in order to influence governance. Examples of variability of origin, orientation, and involvement with the state include institutions like the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), Observer Research Foundation (ORF), Centre for Policy Research (CPR), India Foundation, and PRS Legislative Research (PRS), and overall indicate the diversity of influence in the policy ecosystem of India.

The minister of defence formed the Manohar Parrikar Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses in 1965, which is a quasi-government institution that lies at the heart of the defence and security policymaking (MP-IDSA, n.d.). The government finances it by financing its activities, and bureaucrats in the field of defence and foreign affairs receive strategic reports, threat assessment, and training modules provided by the IDSA, which are managed by senior officials. Its closeness to the state is the guarantee of high impact, but the matter of its autonomy is also problematic because the critical or dissenting views can be limited (IDSA retains top position, 2018).

The Observer Research Foundation is a privately-supported foundation founded in 1990, which has become notable with such activities as the Raisina Dialogue, co-hosted with the Ministry of External Affairs. It is a high-profile forum that gathers ministers, bureaucrats, academics, and global leaders and enables input into the domestic policy as well as facilitating an international viewpoint (Raisina Dialogue; Business Standard, 2025). Although ORF boosts bureaucratic visibility and soft power, its corporate support and reliance on official benevolence might restrict its Non-Governmental Critique.

Having an academic focus, the Centre for Policy Research is an academically oriented think tank that assists in the formulation of policies on urban governance, constitutional law, and the Smart Cities Mission. It is most effective in evidence-based policy suggestions, but it does not have such prominence in more diplomatic and ceremonial arenas and has sometimes been subjected to political questioning over funding and advocacy.

The India Foundation is an ideologically-based group that aims to use its connections to political and bureaucratic elites to affect the discussion of Indian national security and foreign policy. PRS Legislative Research, on the contrary, is in a technocratic, non-partisan situation, providing legislative briefs and analytical services to ministries, improving parliamentary discussion over high-level strategic policy.

These examples collectively reveal the range of the think tank influence in India, ranging between government-reliant and brand-conscious, to scholarly sound, ideologically minded, or technocratic, revealing how much of a complex balance between expertise, access, and policy influence.

In India, the policymakers incorporate the use of think tanks that influence policy indirectly through the process of shaping narratives, giving evidence, and piloting ideas, whilst the final decision-making power rests with the bureaucrats. Power is based on prestige, access, political affiliation, and credibility of research. The state patronage and formal aspects of institutions such as IDSA and ORF are an advantage compared to independent think tanks such as CPR or PRS, whose acknowledgment stems from the quality and practicality of their work. The bodies, such as the India foundation, which have an ideological orientation, have easier entry yet are considered partisan. Based in the national capital, the influence of think tanks tends to be based on

closeness rather than regional spread, excluding smaller regional institutions. Finally, the question of which ideas get into policy is decided by bureaucratic leadership.

Challenges, Critiques, and Democratic Consequences of Bureaucracy-Think Tank Relations

The connection between the bureaucrats and think tanks in India has deepened in the 1990s, which has led to innovation and policymaking that relies on knowledge. There are, however, big dilemmas that arise when it comes to accountability, independence, inclusivity, and democratic legitimacy, with such a nexus. There is still the presence of power asymmetry, where bureaucrats have the final authority when it comes to making decisions, and the think tank provides knowledge. This means policy processes are quite often mediated through personal networks, ideological proximity, or bureaucratic discretion, so that greater access is given to institutions based in Delhi and elites compared to smaller or regional think tanks. This type of gatekeeping reduces the scope of views during consultations and gives strength to the elites.

Neutrality is further inhibited by politicization and ideological bias. Think tanks holding closer ties with ruling parties, like India Foundation, have privileged entry, where independent or critical institutions, like CPR, might suffer marginalization. These difficulties are compounded by variations in government, which interferes with policy counsel and discourages opposing opinions. This is enhanced by financial dependence. It has been argued by many that many of the think tanks take government grants, corporate sponsorships, or foreign funding, and regulatory pressures such as the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) discourage provocative or critical research (ThePrint, 2025; Livemint, 2023).

The lack of transparency and accountability makes the democratic issues worse. In contrast to jurisdictions where disclosure is formal, India has no means to monitor the effects of think tank contributions to the policy-making process, and the unelected actors are left to influence governance through opaque environments. Elite capture can be found in that the attention is paid to urban, metropolitan issues, and rural, regional, and marginalized voices are mostly left out. In the same way, commissioned research is more likely to look at short-term sector-specific products than structural or transformative policy reform.

Such mechanisms provoke the fear of technocracy taking over the democratic deliberation, which would destroy the trust in people. To overcome these problems, institutional changes are needed to instantiate openness, diversify engagement, increase local philanthropy and expand the geographical and thematic boundaries of research. India can tap the vast pool of expert knowledge and support democratic governance by facilitating the openness, accountability, and inclusivity in the bureaucracy-think tank relations.

Recommendations

Some reforms are needed to enhance the interface between the bureaucracy and the think tank and to protect the democratic ideals. To begin with, make transparency a policy with the publication of sources of funding of think tanks, the criteria of who to include in official consultations, and summaries of advisory inputs utilized in the policy. This would lower the levels of visibility and increase the level of accountability. Second, increase diversity of participation by fostering inclusion of the regional, grassroots, and marginalized voices in policy-making. The networks of think tanks that should be expanded outside of Delhi can make sure that the national strategies are based on local realities. Third, promote the independence of think tanks by promoting local philanthropy, less dependence on government grants, corporate donations, or foreign donations. Fourth, ensure long-term, structural research is encouraged by funding research studies that transcend short-term, action-driven deliverables by promoting transformative policy proposals in areas like climate change, social equity, and governance of technology. Fifth, establish ethical standards and codes of conduct in contacts between bureaucrats and think tanks, which will eliminate ideas of ideological capture and reduce the excessive influence of party-oriented institutions. Lastly, build upon digital platforms and open-access repositories so that research outputs can be publicly accessible, so that the citizens, civil society, and legislators can access evidence-based insights into policy.

Conclusion

Due to bureaucracy and think tanks in India, there has been a focus on knowledge-based policymaking, internationalization, and sector-specific reforms. Although this partnership has contributed to policy innovation, it is not symmetric as bureaucrats are in control and influence and ultimate decisions. Elitism, politicization, reliance on government funding, and relative lack of inclusivity continue to be challenges to democratic legitimacy. This relationship can be changed by introducing reforms to enhance transparency, the spread of participation, and the protection of autonomy so that it becomes a collaborative policy ecosystem rather than a hierarchical knowledge gatekeeping. By doing so, India can combine the benefits of both the stability of bureaucracy and the use of think tanks by generating evidence-based, participatory, and responsive governance that meets various needs of society.

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