

A conversation with Milan Vaishnav and Lea Kenig, February 5, 2016

Participants

- Milan Vaishnav, PhD –Associate, South Asia Program, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (Carnegie)
- Lea Kenig, PhD – Deputy chief development officer, Carnegie
- Elie Hassenfeld – Co-Founder and Co-Executive Director, GiveWell

Note: These notes were compiled by the Open Philanthropy Project and give an overview of the major points made by Dr. Vishnav and Dr. Kenig.

Summary

The Open Philanthropy Project spoke with Drs. Vaishnav and Kenig of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (Carnegie) to follow up on a grant that Good Ventures made to support Carnegie's work in India and to learn more about policy-oriented philanthropy outside of the United States. Conversation topics included the opening of Carnegie India, Carnegie's new India-based South Asia research center, and some key differences between the Indian and U.S. think tank sectors.

Opening of Carnegie India

Carnegie recently opened its Delhi-based South Asia research center, Carnegie India. The formal launch for the center will be held in April 2016. Carnegie is in the midst of a significant front-end effort to raise 20 million dollars for a corpus fund that would allow the center to be self-sustaining. This has been a main focus area for Dr. Kenig over the last several years. To date, roughly 11 million has been raised, and the center's activities will gradually ramp up as fundraising efforts continue.

Leadership recruitment

In identifying a director for the new Carnegie India center, Carnegie's senior management was looking for a candidate who met all of Carnegie's leadership recruitment criteria:

- Academic pedigree and capacity for independent, intellectual thinking
- Unaffiliated with a political party, movement, or organization
- Long-term vision for the center, and willingness to build it from the ground up

Dr. C. Raja Mohan met all of these criteria, and was hired as Carnegie India's Director. To complement Dr. Mohan's academic background, Shivnath Thukral was hired as Managing Director. Carnegie had collaborated with Mr. Thukral on another project, and so was familiar with his work. His duties are similar to those of a Chief Operations Officer (COO), and primarily involve overseeing the center's administrative operations, including human resources and budgeting. Dr. Mohan and Mr. Thukral began work on February 1st, 2016. During the first few months,

they will work on staff recruitment (Dr. Mohan will focus on identifying the right researchers to hire) and solidifying the Center's priority research areas.

Other staff recruitment

By the end of its first year, the Carnegie India office will likely have between 6 and 8 employees: Dr. Mohan, Mr. Thukral, an office manager, 1-2 junior research assistants, and 1-2 associates.

Priority areas for policy research

Carnegie India's policy research will focus on three main priority areas:

1. **Interplay between public policy and technology:** This subject has become an important theme across Carnegie's centers. In India, it has significant resonance, and involves two dimensions:
 - a. International issues, such as cybersecurity and surveillance.
 - b. Domestic issues, such as net neutrality; data sharing, privacy, management and access; and projects experimenting with unique ID biometrics. All of these have a range of governance applications. This dimension might also include private economy issues, including e-payments and services like Uber.
2. **Foreign policy:** Dr. Mohan has significant expertise in this area and it is a core strength of Carnegie, more broadly.
3. **Political economy of reforms:** Despite general agreement on India's economic reform priorities, reform efforts still face a significant number of bureaucratic and political obstacles. A researcher with expertise in areas such as state capacity, public sector performance, and political coalitions would be well-equipped to focus on these challenges.

Following the model of other Carnegie centers, Carnegie India researchers will have relatively free reign to define their priority area's agenda within these three categories. For instance, when hired to work on India's political economy, Dr. Vaishnav was given a wide berth to shape the domain based on his strengths and priority issues.

Key differences between the U.S. and Indian think tank sectors

There are three key differences between the U.S. and Indian think tank sectors:

1. **Government influence:** A large number of Indian think tanks, including some prominent ones, are either state-funded or quasi-state entities. Some directly accept government contracts, while others receive indirect government funding. This funding likely influences the types of issues think tanks investigate and, perhaps, the conclusions they are able to report.
2. **Research delivery mechanisms:** U.S. think tanks engage with policymakers on a continual basis and aim to present their policy recommendations in a digestible format. Carnegie, for example, has

increased its use of social media, graphics, and other data visualization tools to communicate research results more effectively. Indian think tanks (not affiliated with the public sector) are more removed from government (though this distance has lessened), which limits their interaction with policymakers. To be fair, this also has to do with the government's aloofness from "outsiders" as well. Indian think tanks also tend to follow a more traditional research model that does not always prioritize translating results into actionable recommendations.

3. **Willingness to hire junior scholars:** In general, Indian think tanks tend to be less willing to hire young researchers as research fellows. The Delhi-based Center for Policy Research (CPR), is a notable exception. Under the leadership of Pratap Bhanu Mehta, it hired a group of young, innovative thinkers with training in new, highly rigorous research methodologies. While they were relatively junior at the time of their hiring, many of them are now seen as among the country's leading experts in fields such as energy, accountability, climate, and infrastructure.

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