

Business Standard

In India, we do not take good research till the last mile: Shekhar Shah

Interview with DG, NCAER

Somesh Jha | New Delhi December 19, 2013 Last Updated at 00:45 IST



After receiving one of the largest private gifts to an independent research body in India, the National Council of Applied Economic Research plans new study initiatives, to redevelop its campus and so on. Director General **Shekhar Shah** talks to *Somesh Jha* about these plans and the problems such think tanks face in India. Edited excerpts:

NCAER has got a Rs 50-cr gift from Nandan and Rohini Nilekani. How do you plan to utilise it?

We are grateful to the Nilekanis. This is not a gift to only us but can also change the nature of philanthropy in India. There are three things: endowment, new research initiative and campus redevelopment. We currently have around Rs 26 crore as endowments and this will be an addition. Some of this will go in NCAER's new India Centre.

Recently, we've seen a surge in funds given to think tanks, another example being Brookings, which entered India recently. Is India becoming more mature in terms of environment for funding such institutes?

I believe philanthropy and gift giving is changing rapidly in India. This is a turning point in some sense and is taking a progressive form. There were fundings going to foreign institutes like Harvard, etc, but this is the first to an economic research institute. It is heartening to see such a contribution coming home. Policy research and data gathering are crucial for policy and evaluation of programmes. I would say it is maturing and a welcome trend. This gift speaks extremely highly of that. So far, not many people have taken this path and I look at it as a trend setter, which will change the nature of research in India.

What problems do think tanks face in our country? Is funding one of these?

Funding has been a constraint for us, given the size of our economy. Also, the nature of funding is important. If we get untied support like this, it changes the ability of institutes like us to push for what we want to achieve. Second, talent. It is important to attract good talent to India in this field. Finally, to improve the ability to reach out. We do not take good research till the last mile in India, in a way that it can be accepted. Hence, this is a combination of finance, human capital and outreach.

What are your plans?

We are going to fund new research initiatives. There is a major redevelopment of our campus taking place, with more space and facility. Further, NCAER plays a bigger role in policy analysis and the country needs it.