

Press Release

All India Peoples' Science Network (AIPSN) says no to centralization and privatization of research funding and asks the Union Government to remit National Research Foundation Bill to Parliamentary Standing Committee on S&T, Environment and Forests for a comprehensive assessment.

The National Research Foundation (NRF) Bill, 2023 seeks to replace the Science and Engineering Board (SERB) Act, 2008 by establishing an entity that will not be a fully publicly funded, dependent on corporates, philanthropic bodies and international foundations for funds, centralized in decision making via the Prime Minister as ex-officio President and the Union Ministers of S&T and Education as ex-officio Vice-Presidents and controlling the directions of academic research across disciplines and domains of application. The original rationale of NRF was to redirect the flow of funds to the state universities to strengthen them as academic institutions. In the five year allocation of Rs 50,000 crores for R&D through the NRF, 72% of will be financed by the private sector (through as yet unidentified process), and only 28% funded by government. The funding structure will seek the establishment of a stronger intellectual property mechanism of the Bayh-Dole kind which has been resisted by the academic institutions. In the current proposal corporates and elite institutions with access to power centers will have an edge.

Only 1% of the institutions of higher education engage in active research. In terms of the percentage of GDP, India's spending on research and development (R&D) is among the lowest in the world. In 2022, India only spent 0.65% of GDP on R&D. The public funding for R&D has come down from 0.8% at the start of the 2000s to about 0.65% now; full time equivalent (FTE) researchers in the higher education sector declined from 39.96% in 2015 to 36.48% in 2018. Researchers employed in the publicly funded research sector declined from 30.32% in 2015 to 23.13% in 2018. The NRF would not be able to address any of these structural impediments to the promotion of academic research and research of societal application and public value. The state universities need more qualified teachers and researchers in permanent posts. Rampant feudalism, gender and caste based oppression, lack of culture of collaboration are major obstacles to the climate for research and innovation. The NRF hands over executive control and channel of funding to the governing body with much say for corporate entities with no representation to state governments in the Union Government funds for R&D.

It is important to involve academics from all over the country, the state higher education councils and the line ministries of the Union Government to ensure decentralized decision making. The NRF can undermine the possibility of harnessing the energy of multiple sources of initiatives. Joint planning is a more effective way of realizing diversity and plurality of missions in the world threatened by climate change and inequality.

AIPSN demands that the "National Research Foundation Bill 2023" be re-examined. This bill should be sent to the Department Related Standing Committee on S&T, Environment and Forests for a comprehensive assessment. The Committee should invite the development authorities, line departments of the union government and state governments, the representatives of organizations working with the scientific community and individuals to submit their views on the Bill. The centralisation of funding, lack of academic oversight, not addressing the existing structural problems, privatisation of funding in NRF Bill needs re-examination and a thorough open scrutiny by the scientific community.

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