

Opinion A fund crunch in the US, an opportunity for India

This may be a once in a lifetime moment for India to reap a rich harvest in pursuit of the country's ambition to become a world-leader in science

Over the past few months, I have watched, with profound anguish, the foundations of the knowledge economy in the United States, the jewel in its crown and the envy of the world, being systematically dismantled. My own university, a symbol of excellence in transformational science, is engaged in a veritable battle for survival. While I am immensely proud of our position in standing up for our values and principles, the consequences of this resistance are painful, not least for young scientists whose careers are vaporising before their eyes. At the same time, I have been watching how other wealthy countries, especially in Europe, are announcing plans to feast on the rich pickings of scientists in the US who are looking to other countries to continue their work. France, for example, through the Aix-Marseille University's Safe Place for Science programme, is offering positions and support to US researchers. Former French President François Hollande has introduced a bill to recognise refugee status specifically for scientists.

It dawned on me that this may be a once-in-a-lifetime moment for India to reap a rich harvest in pursuit of the country's ambition to become a world leader in science. To do so, India would need to recognise that high-quality science is the result of the confluence of a number of key factors, the most important being the scientists themselves, equipped with the right skills and driven by the hunger to generate knowledge. This scientist needs the right environment, typically in research institutions, where they can flourish, often collaborating with others and being mentored by more experienced scholars. And finally, we need the money to pay for the scientists, for creating the environment and for the actual research that will be conducted. In my reckoning, India has both the environment and the money, and the current moment offers the country a historic chance to replenish and enrich its knowledge economy.

Some may be perturbed by the suggestion of using Indian funds to attract scientists from abroad rather than invest in scientists already in India. While that is certainly not my intent, the fact is that scientists in the US, many of whom have completed their foundational training in India, dominate the list of laureates of the most prestigious science prizes, such as the Nobel, Lasker, Brain and Breakthrough Prizes. Even if there is some truth to the gripe that these top prizes are rigged in favour of Western scientists, there is no denying that the dramatic scientific discoveries of the past five decades, which have transformed almost every aspect of our daily lives, have emerged from the

laboratories of scientists in the US. Something special about the scientific environment in the US appears to facilitate the leapfrog opportunity for these young scientists to become stars, and recruiting them may bring some of that gold dust to Indian institutions.

I identify at least two strategies for India to respond to this opportunity.

The first is to fund the ongoing research being conducted in India that is funded by the US government institutions. The abrupt freeze on international research by the National Institutes of Health, for example, has grave implications for some of these projects, not only in relation to the scientific outputs but also healthcare. Let us not forget that while these studies are funded by the US, they involve patients in India and their implementation is being carried out by Indian scientists and field research teams in the country. Here is an opportunity for India to take full ownership of these studies by providing bridge funding to the institutions to complete this ongoing research, for the benefit not only of people in the country but also as a contribution to science.

The second strategy is a dramatic expansion of the current Indian government's VAIBHAV and VAJRA fellowship programmes to attract diaspora and foreign scientists for collaborative research with Indian institutions and build strong international research networks. The first batch of VAIBHAV fellows was selected in early 2024, with a total of about 75 diaspora scientists expected to participate over three years, supported by an outlay of approximately Rs 80 crore. Now is the time to expand the scope of these programmes, going beyond short-term visits to India to relocating permanently to the country, increasing the amounts of start-up funding and resources to enhance the competitiveness of the offers, implementing actions to enable a transparent mechanism for awarding these fellowships and enabling complete freedom to pursue their research. All these actions would also greatly benefit the country's science ecosystem.

None of this will happen without additional money, of course, and while the primary funder for these strategies will necessarily be the government (as is already the case in India and most other countries), there is obviously an opportunity for the several philanthropic foundations that operate in India, some of which have already been playing marquee roles in supporting science through substantive donations to leading Indian institutions. The Indian Philanthropy Report 2025 documents how private spending on the social sector reached Rs 131,000 crore in 2024, and is expected to accelerate to 10–12 per cent over the next five years, largely driven by family philanthropy.

Time is short, especially for the research that is already in progress and is threatened with abrupt cessation as a result of Trump's policies. Those of us who believe that India's development is contingent on it realising its aspirations to become one of the leaders of the global knowledge economy must act now.

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