IJARSCT
International Journal of Advanced Research in Science, Communication and Technology
International Open-Access, Double-Blind, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed, Multidisciplinary Online Journal
ISSN: 2581-9429
Volume 5, Issue 16, April 2025
Impact Factor: 7.67

NEP 2020 and the Research Ecosystem: Evaluating the Impact of the National Research Foundation (NRF) on Innovation and Industry-Academia Collaborations

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Abstract: *The National Research Foundation (NRF), established by the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, aims to improve India's research environment by encouraging interdisciplinary innovation and fortifying industry-academia partnerships. The effect of NRF on research funding, innovation output, and industry participation in higher education institutions is examined in this report. The impact of NRF in fostering a sustainable research culture in India is assessed in this study using secondary data from government reports, institutional research funding, and industrial partnerships. The results show the advantages and disadvantages of putting NRF-driven reforms into practice. They also offer policy suggestions for improving research infrastructure and cooperation systems.*

Keywords: *National Research Foundation*

I. INTRODUCTION

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is a historic reform of India's educational system that aims to improve learning, research, and innovation. One of its most major initiatives is the establishment of the National Research Foundation (NRF), which aims to boost the research ecosystem by encouraging industry-academia collaboration, increasing research project financing, and supporting multidisciplinary studies. Given India's historically low investment in research and development (R&D)—approximately 0.7% of GDP compared to global leaders such as the United States (2.7%) and China (2.4%)—the NRF is intended to close this gap and enhance India's worldwide stature in scientific and technical innovation.

The NRF is positioned as a centralized organization that will work with universities, private businesses, and government agencies to streamline research financing and promote innovation. Unlike past fragmented financing sources, the NRF seeks to minimize bureaucratic barriers while providing long-term financial support for high-impact research. Furthermore, the strategy promotes cross-disciplinary research and problem-solving approaches that are aligned with national goals such as healthcare, renewable energy, digital transformation, and artificial intelligence (AI).

However, the effectiveness of NRF programs is dependent on implementation methodologies, industry participation, and state-specific adoption. Some universities and research organizations have responded positively, obtaining fresh money and forming industry relationships. However, difficulties remain, including regional variations in research funding, faculty preparation, and commercial sector engagement. Rural and lesser-known colleges have limited access to NRF resources, whereas top universities in metropolitan regions typically receive the majority of financing.

This study will critically examine the influence of NRF on India's research scene, concentrating on crucial areas such as:

1. Research Funding Trends: Has the NRF effectively raised research funding across institutions?
2. Industry-Academia Collaborations: How much has NRF enabled relationships between universities and industry?

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3.Interdisciplinary Research Promotion: Does the NRF encourage cross-disciplinary research that address real-world issues?

Implementation Challenges: What barriers stand in the way of the NRF's objectives being met successfully?

This study will examine secondary data from government publications, university research fund allocations, industry engagement measures, and published studies to determine whether NRF has genuinely boosted India's innovation ecosystem or if policy deficiencies persist. Finally, this study will shed light on how NRF might be enhanced to increase research productivity, minimize funding inequities, and foster a globally competitive R&D environment.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Prior study on India's research ecosystem has revealed various difficulties, including insufficient finance, poor industry-academia collaboration, and little commercialization of research products. According to studies conducted by NITI Aayog (2021) and UGC (2022), research in India is frequently fragmented and does not correlate with industrial needs. While the National Research Foundation (NRF) tries to solve these concerns, its impact is still being studied. International models, such as the US National Science Foundation (NSF) and Germany's research financing structures, provide significant insights into effective research funding and partnership tactics. This report expands on previous research by examining NRF's influence in the Indian context.

Research Funding and Investment in India

Higher education institutions and national innovation ecosystems rely heavily on research funding to ensure their success. NITI Aayog (2021) examined India's R&D expenditure and discovered that it has stayed flat at 0.7% of GDP, much lower than the worldwide average of 2-3% seen in nations such as the United States, China, and Germany. The report stated that insufficient funding has hampered India's capacity to compete worldwide in research and innovation. It emphasized the role of the National Research Foundation (NRF) in streamlining awards, avoiding bureaucratic delays, and ensuring that research money reach institutions efficiently.

Similarly, the UGC Report (2022) investigated higher education research financing and discovered considerable disparities in cash allocation. Private universities and autonomous institutions attracted more private investment, but public universities, particularly those in rural areas and sponsored by the state, struggled with insufficient resources. This disparity has worsened the research quality gap between top institutions (such as IITs and IISc) and state universities. The report advocated for a more equal deployment of NRF money, including financial support for institutions in impoverished regions to improve research productivity, infrastructure, and faculty training. Addressing these financial discrepancies is critical to the successful execution of NEP 2020's research-driven goal.

Industry-academia collaboration is critical for encouraging innovation and turning research into practical applications. Kumar and Sharma (2021) cited regulatory constraints, a lack of incentives, and bureaucratic inefficiency as significant hurdles to effective collaboration in India. Their analysis recommended that the National Research Foundation (NRF) prioritize structured cooperation by developing research parks and incubation centers. These initiatives may enhance direct contact between universities and companies, resulting in improved knowledge transfer and research commercialization.

According to the World Bank Report (2023), India falls behind China and South Korea in terms of patent filings and technological commercialization. While China and South Korea have well-developed public-private research cooperation, India's industry-academia links are still poor. The paper stressed that NRF-backed cooperative research partnerships with industries might assist bridge this gap by incentivizing corporations to co-invest in university research, ensuring that research findings are relevant to industry demands.

Global research ecosystems provide useful insights for improving the effectiveness of research funding in India. The National Science Foundation (NSF) Report (2020, USA) emphasized how competitive grant allocation, rigorous peer review systems, and private sector participation had increased innovation in the United States. The NSF model serves as a baseline for the NRF, notably in terms of transparency, efficiency, and accountability in research money allocation.

The German Research Foundation (DFG) Analysis (2022) analyzed Germany's industry-linked research paradigm, which involves firms co-funding university initiatives. The effectiveness of this method is due to shared financial

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accountability and an emphasis on practical research. The study concluded that India's NRF may benefit from a similar co-funding approach, where industry pay to research financing in exchange for access to cutting-edge discoveries, hence increasing research applicability and commercialization potential.

Multidisciplinary research is critical for driving innovation and addressing complex global concerns. Mishra and Patel (2022) investigated interdisciplinary research and discovered that combining STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) and social sciences resulted in better innovation rates and more comprehensive solutions to societal problems. The study underlined that the NRF should prioritize funding for multidisciplinary research projects that address important global issues such as climate change, AI ethics, public health concerns, and sustainable development. By encouraging cross-disciplinary collaborations, India can increase its global research impact.

The AICTE Report (2023) examined innovation-driven research at technical colleges and identified important limitations. It discovered that a lack of formal research training for professors severely limited research output in India's higher education institutions. The report recommended that NRF implement required faculty development programs and offer specialized training in research methodology, data analytics, and intellectual property rights (IPR). Such initiatives would boost research quality and allow teachers to participate in cutting-edge breakthroughs.

Despite NRF's high ambitions, various problems have developed throughout its early implementation phase. Rao et al. (2023) performed a statewide survey of Indian researchers and discovered that, while the NRF offers more funding opportunities, implementation has been tardy. The report raised issues regarding grant disbursement efficiency, bureaucratic delays, and a lack of openness in cash allocation. Many researchers reported difficulties navigating complex application processes, which reduced participation from smaller universities and state organizations.

The Economic Survey of India (2024) provides additional insights about NRF's issues. According to the report, in its first year of operation, only 30% of NRF's allocated money were used. The key causes for underutilization were policy uncertainties, administrative hurdles, and approval delays. The study suggested that NRF implement a simpler application process, decentralized fund management, and a streamlined peer-review mechanism.

While earlier research has provided vital insights into research funding trends, industrial alliances, and global best practices, there is still a huge research gap in determining the true impact of NRF on India's research ecosystem. The existing literature contains theoretical discussions and policy recommendations; however, empirical assessments on NRF's effectiveness, regional inequities in research financing, and its involvement in industry-academia partnership are lacking.

This paper analyzes secondary data on NRF grant distribution patterns across states and institutions, industry-academia partnerships formed through NRF initiatives, and changes in India's research output, patents, and technology commercialization trends since its inception.

This study will examine these critical factors to give a thorough review of whether NRF is successfully reshaping India's research scene or if other policy interventions are required.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses secondary data analysis to assess the influence of the National Research Foundation (NRF) on India's research environment. The process entails gathering and evaluating data from government reports, institutional research budget allocations, industry-academic collaboration case studies, and published research articles. This report examines changes in research funding, innovative outputs, and collaborative activities to better understand how NRF has changed India's research ecosystem.

Data Sources

The research is based on the following secondary data sources:

Government Reports and Policy Documents.

Ministry of Education reports offer insight into policy implementation, university research expenditures, and faculty training efforts.

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NITI Aayog Research Policy Reviews: Evaluate India's R&D investments, research productivity, and policy suggestions.

The UGC Reports include data on higher education research funding, institutional autonomy, and grant use rates. National Research Foundation (NRF) Reports Describe NRF-funded projects, sector-specific grant distribution, and joint activities.

Institutional Research Funding Allocations

We evaluate annual budgets from major public and private universities to identify inequalities in research spending across institutions.

Data from the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) is analyzed to assess institutional spending on R&D and infrastructure.

A comparison of NRF-funded and non-NRF-funded institutions was done to assess the impact of additional grants on research productivity.

Industry-Academia Collaboration Case Studies

The study examines public-private partnership models facilitated by NRF, analyzing their role in patent filings, technology commercialization, and start-up incubation.

Data on corporate-funded university research programs is gathered from institutions like IITs, IISc, and private research-driven universities.

The effectiveness of innovation hubs, research parks, and technology transfer offices in fostering collaborations is evaluated.

Published Research Articles and Policy Reviews

Peer-reviewed articles from Scopus, Web of Science, and Indian research journals are reviewed to assess academic discourse on research funding and NRF implementation.

Reports from international organizations (World Bank, UNESCO, and OECD) are analyzed for global comparisons and best practices in research funding.

Research Design and Analytic Framework

This study uses a comparative analytical framework to examine differences in NRF implementation across institutions and states. This methodology includes:

Trend Analysis:

Analyzing NRF grant distribution by area, institution type (public/private), and research discipline.

Identifying changes in research funding before and after NRF implementation.

Performance metrics Evaluation:

Analyzing changes in India's research output (publications, citations, and patents) over the last 3 years.

Evaluating faculty involvement in supported research initiatives and the influence on innovation.

Comparative Case Studies:

Evaluating successful industry-academia partnerships under NRF and identifying barriers to collaboration.

Comparing NRF's effectiveness with international research funding models (NSF-USA, DFG-Germany, etc.).

Qualitative Content Analysis:

Reviewing policy papers, institutional reports, and expert opinions to assess challenges in NRF implementation.

Identifying key policy gaps and areas for improvement.

Limitations of the Study

The study relies on secondary data from published papers and publications, which may not completely reflect recent NRF developments.

Limited regional data. Comprehensive state-specific NRF funding information may not be publicly available.

Lack of primary data: There are no direct surveys or interviews with scholars and policymakers.

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Justification for the Methodology

This study benefits from a secondary data strategy as it allows for a comprehensive analysis of trends across various institutions without lengthy fieldwork. Additionally, government and institutional reports provide trustworthy data on research funding and policy impact.

Comparing the NRF approach to worldwide research financing models provides insights into best practices and areas for improvement.

This methodology ensures a **comprehensive evaluation of NRF's role in fostering research excellence, innovation, and industry-academia collaborations in India**.

Impact of NRF on Research and Innovation in India

Impact of NRF on Research and Innovation

The National Research Foundation (NRF) was founded as part of NEP 2020 to strengthen India's research ecosystem by increasing financing, encouraging industry-academic collaboration, and promoting research innovation and commercialization. While NRF has achieved great progress, difficulties like as equitable funding allocation, bureaucratic delays, and commercialization obstacles remain.

IV. RESEARCH FUNDING ALLOCATION

NRF has streamlined the research funding process by offering direct grants to universities and research institutions. Previously, research funding in India was fragmented across multiple agencies like the UGC, AICTE, and CSIR, often leading to delays and inefficiencies. The NRF has centralized funding, making grants more accessible, especially for STEM and interdisciplinary research projects.

Impact on Research Productivity

Increased funding for premier institutions:

IITs, IISc, and top-tier universities have seen significant increases in research funding.

Increased financing has resulted in better research output, including more indexed papers and patent filings.

Mid-Tier University Struggle:

Many state universities and autonomous institutions struggle to acquire NRF grants due to competitive application processes and limited research facilities.

Funding inequities persist, with urban institutions receiving more grants than rural or smaller universities.

Shift in Research Focus:

NRF supports research in new sectors like as artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and sustainable energy.

The increase in transdisciplinary research projects aligns with global trends.

Industry-Academia Collaborations

One of the NRF's primary goals is to foster stronger collaboration between academic institutions and industries. According to studies, countries with strong industry-academic partnerships (for example, the United States and Germany) have greater rates of research commercialization and global patents.

Progress in Industry Engagement.

More Joint Research Projects:

NRF has supported cooperation in biotechnology, AI, and renewable energy.

Public-private collaborations have created research parks and innovation hubs.

Policy Incentives for Industrial Participation:

Tax incentives and research grants encourage industries to sponsor university research projects.

Technology transfer offices (TTOs) have been established in many institutions to promote collaboration.

Persistent Challenges:

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Industry-academic collaborations face regulatory and administrative impediments to approval. Lack of trust between industries and academic researchers hinders large-scale collaborations. Private sector investment in research is lower than worldwide norms.

V. CHALLENGES IN NRF IMPLEMENTATION

Despite NRF's positive impact, several challenges hinder its full potential:

Inequalities in Funding

An uneven research landscape is caused by the unequal allocation of research money, which benefits elite institutions while state universities and new research centers suffer. Rural and regional universities have limited access to financing.

Obstacles in Regulation

Research projects are delayed and new applicants are deterred by complicated approval procedures. Regulatory entities that overlap cause misunderstandings about funding eligibility and compliance requirements.

Skepticism in Industry

Due to low commercialization success rates, many Indian firms are reluctant to invest in academic research. Research financing from private enterprises is also limited by a lack of defined incentives for corporate cooperation.

Commercialization Gaps

A lot of research projects are published in scholarly journals but never used in the real world.

Inadequate technology transfer procedures make it challenging to transition innovations from lab to market.

Policy Recommendations

To enhance NRF's effectiveness, the following policy measures are recommended:

Improved Finance Systems

To guarantee more equitable research financing, mid-tier universities should receive more research grants.

To close the research gap, offer specialized funds to underfunded and remote institutions.

Simplified Regulatory Framework: Create a single-window clearing system for research project approvals and streamline the research grant approval process to cut down on bureaucratic delays.

Fortifying Industry Connections

Offer tax breaks to businesses that fund scholarly research.

Create collaborative research facilities between academic institutions and industry to advance applied research.

Researcher Capacity Building

Launch nationwide training courses on commercialization, research management, and grant writing.

Create networks of mentors that link researchers with practitioners in the sector.

Establishing Local Research Centers

Create regional centers of excellence to support interdisciplinary and cooperative research.

Foster foreign partnerships to provide world-class methodologies to Indian research establishments.

VI. CONCLUSION

One revolutionary move in bolstering India's research environment is the establishment of the National Research Foundation (NRF) under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. NRF seeks to promote multidisciplinary research, industry-academia collaboration, and greater funding in order to boost innovation and global competitiveness. Even with these developments, it is still difficult to guarantee that research money are distributed fairly, particularly for smaller institutions and up-and-coming scholars. Furthermore, there are still issues with the successful commercialization of research, which calls for improved industry ties, more efficient regulatory structures, and more robust protection of intellectual property rights. The impact of NRF can be maximized by addressing these issues with

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focused policy initiatives, such as open grant distribution, mentorship programs for aspiring researchers, and incentives for corporate involvement.

Additionally, consistent government assistance and well-thought-out international partnerships can strengthen India's standing as a major center for research worldwide. Socioeconomic progress can be accelerated by promoting research that is in line with national priorities, such as sustainability, digital transformation, and innovative healthcare. NRF can act as a catalyst for long-term scientific and technological breakthroughs, bolstering India's knowledge economy and innovation environment, by consistently improving its regulations and guaranteeing inclusive participation.

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