

## Policy Brief

# ANUSANDHAN NATIONAL RESEARCH FOUNDATION (NRF) BILL, 2023

*Parliament of India passed the Anusandhan National Research Foundation (NRF) Bill 2023. The foundation, first proposed in the National Education Policy 2020 was envisioned as an autonomous body coordinating research funding in the country, especially for the research funding-starved universities and colleges. The NRF Bill will revoke the Science and Engineering Research Board (SERB) established by an act of Parliament in 2008. The bill will repeal SERB and subsume it into NRF.*

### KEY FEATURES OF THE BILL :

- **Objectives of NRF as defined in Clause 4 of the Bill:** NRF as proposed would be the apex body in the country to provide strategic direction for research, innovation, and entrepreneurship in the fields of:
  - Natural sciences including mathematics,
  - Engineering and technology,
  - Environmental and earth sciences,
  - Health and agriculture, and
  - Scientific and technological interfaces of humanities and social sciences.
- Its key features include;
  - Preparing short-term, medium-term, and long-term roadmaps and formulating programs for research and development (R&D),
  - Facilitating and financing the growth of R&D and related infrastructure in universities, colleges, and research institutions,
  - Providing grants for research proposals,
  - Supporting translation of research into capital intensive technology,
  - Encouraging international collaboration,
  - Encouraging investments in the Foundation by private and public sector entities, and
  - Undertaking annual surveys of scientific research, outcomes, and spending.
- A **Governing Board** is constituted (Clause 5), which shall provide high-level strategic direction, and perform and monitor the implementation of the objectives of the Foundation. The board is headed by the Prime Minister of India. Other members of the Board are; the Union Ministers of Science and Technology, Education as Vice Presidents, the Principal Scientific Advisor as Member Secretary, and Secretaries to the Departments of Science and Technology, Biotechnology, and Scientific and Industrial Research. However, the President of the Board may appoint or nominate additional members to the Board. These may include; up to five members from business organisations or industries, a member from the fields of social sciences and humanities, and up to six experts from natural sciences, engineering, and technology. The President may appoint a Chief Executive Officer, who should be of the rank of an Additional Secretary, or above.

- An Executive Council will be constituted (Clause 7), to implement the objectives of the Foundation based on the policy direction and guidance provided by the Governing Board, including the following functions as enlisted under Clause 10, namely: considering applications for the grant of financial assistance; prescribing regulations regarding applications for financial assistance, requirements for extension of assistance, and grounds for revocation of assistance. Facilitating and providing assistance if required in filing applications for intellectual property rights pursuant to research undertaken.
  - Council is also conferred with the task as given under Clause 14 of the Bill, of preparing a budget for the Foundation and maintaining its accounts, preparing an annual report, and furnishing the same to the central government as under Clause 15.
  - The executive council shall be constituted under members nominated by the President, comprising the Principal Scientific Advisor to the Government and the chairperson of the Council. Other members of the Council include; secretaries to various departments of the central government including Science and Technology, Biotechnology, Science and Industrial Research, Atomic Energy Higher Education, Health Research, Agricultural Research, and Defence Research; and the Chief Executive Officer of the Foundation.
  - The President of the Foundation may nominate or appoint to the Council (Clause 7); up to two secretaries of departments not covered under the Bill, and up to three experts.

#### **SUGGESTIONS :**

Experts are concerned for NRF to ensure the overall science R&D budget goes beyond 1% of India's GDP, where it has been hovering for a long time now. Moreover, professors and policy analysts expressed dissatisfaction with the constitution of the regulatory board of NRF with the PM and two ministers at the helm. Although the establishment of NRF is dedicated to the development of the research and education ecosystem in India, with the present regulatory body it is quite unlikely to achieve the said autonomy on the questions about finance and governance. Apart from the organizational structure, the fact that NRF is under the Department of Science and Technology, inhibits its independence. An allocation of Rs. 2000 Cr by Union is certainly made in favor of DST, and not for NRF as a separate organization. In addition to this, there are concerns about whether the private sector would really contribute as the government ideates. Therefore, NRF to achieve the said objectives should have a better financial apparatus and an autonomous body of experts regulating the working and governance of NRF.

#### **CONCLUSION :**

The approval of the National Research Foundation Bill (NRF), 2023, by the Union Cabinet marks a crucial step towards enhancing research and innovation in India's educational and research institutions. With an estimated budget of Rs. 50,000 crores over five years, the NRF aims to promote a strong research culture in the country, bringing together academia, industries, and government departments for collaborative and impactful scientific endeavors. The vision of NRF for what it was initially conceived to be in NEP 2020 seems to be highly appreciated, and deviations from this original idea seem concerning.