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India March for Science: Thousands through the streets seeking better fund for research infrastructure

[India \(/category/india\)](#) [Rishiraj Bhagawati \(/author/rishirajbhagawati\)](#) Aug, 12 2017 15:01:43 IST

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Thousands of scientists, students, educational NGOs and science enthusiasts across the country are coming out on the streets on Wednesday demanding robust funding for scientific research and policies to encourage a scientific temper among the population.

Following in the footsteps of the 'March for Science' movement which was held on 22 April across 600 cities globally, the 'India March for Science' event is being organised at 25 cities in India with the following demands:

- Publicly denounce and put a stop to the propagation of unscientific, obscurantist ideas and religious intolerance, and inculcate scientific temper, human values and a spirit of inquiry in conformity with Article 51A of the Constitution.
- Allocate at least 10 percent of GDP for higher education and at least 3 percent of GDP for scientific and technological research.
- Ensure that the education system does not impart obscurantist ideas that are not supported by scientific evidence.
- Enact policies that are in conformity with provable facts and rational thinking.
- Address the lack of appreciation in our country for the value of science to society, which value has been demonstrated in developing and developed nations the world over.

"Rational thinking and scientific temper as enshrined in the Constitution are necessary for everyday life in general. And this is all we are trying to raise awareness for," Aurnab Ghose from the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Pune, said.

"There is an element of sub-optimal funding in science education and research that has been fat-lining since quite some time. We need to get rational, scientific thinking percolating into society that counters these trends. Anti-scientific elements have always existed and will do so in the future. The effort is to have enough verifiable information flowing around so that these trends can be countered," he said. "This movement is not against the government. We're talking to the populace as much as to our local governments."



Thousands of people across 25 cities in India joined scientists on 9 April as a part of 'India March for Science' to demand funds for research and to enact policies based on evidence-based science. Cyrus Khan

But Mayank Vahia, from the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, Mumbai, says that the situation was not so dire even ten years ago. "The line between reality and fiction wasn't so blur. Now people who make such obnoxious statements easily get away with them. With the way things are going, one would have no problem believing that we can protect the prime minister in an event of a nuclear attack by surrounding his house with cow dung."

"The problem arises when the government or its agencies do not come out and condemn statements made by public officials which are far removed from fact," Deepak Modi from the National Institute For Research In Reproductive Health, Mumbai, said. "Most of these statements are based on blind religious beliefs. This contributes much faster to policy making than we would imagine. Ten people start believing a myth and it comes into policy in no time," he said.

Both Vahiya and Modi argue that the situation is being made far worse by the government by cutting back on funding to science research institutions. Organisers of Wednesday's event claim only 0.8-0.9 percent of the GDP is allocated towards scientific research in India, while South Korea spends 4.15 percent of its GDP, Japan 3.47 percent, Sweden 3.16 percent, and Denmark 3.08 percent when calculated on the basis of purchasing power parity.

"You lose the independence of science research when the government cuts back on funding to the IITs and IISERs of the country. Sometimes this means involving industry partners, but the moment that happens the industry's vested interests bias the science that is coming out and you lose out on the whole point of fundamental research," Modi said, adding, "Also you need to fund government institutions to sustain scientific research for the next generation. We are today reaping the benefits of scientific research and education that was subsidised two decades ago."

The written appeal released by the organisers of Wednesday's march also says, "While we can justly be inspired by the great achievements in science and technology in ancient India, we see that non-scientific ideas lacking in evidence are being propagated as science by persons in high positions, fueling a confrontational chauvinism in lieu of true patriotism that we cherish."

"There is a lot of emphasis on indigenous research that is not based on scientific principles, like Ayurveda, yoga and homoeopathy. Push funding there by all means, but not at the cost of cutting funding for formal scientific research," Modi said.

About the achievements in science and technology in ancient India, Vahia says instead of highlighting the documented achievements of Indian scientists from previous centuries, the focus has shifted to irrelevant subjects. "We do not give importance to scientifically backed teachings and findings. The day is not far when stories about *rishi munis* flying across the sky would find their way into textbooks. This confuses society and achieves nothing."

India is perhaps the only country in the world whose Constitution speaks of developing a scientific temperament among the population: Article 51A, Sub-clause (h), on 'Fundamental Duties' says, "It shall be the duty of every citizen of India to develop scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform." And it is to that end that the marches across the country are being held, the organisers say.

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