

Oliver Ridley Scheme

“Reversing the American Brain Drain- Is the Indian Government’s scheme Enough?”

Indian Express, 25 October 2025

A recent newspaper report (IE, October 22, 2025) mentions that the government is considering a scheme to attract “Indian origin star faculty” in STEM areas to come and work in Indian institutions. The idea is to capitalize on the recent Trump administration policies of squeezing higher education and research in the US and strengthen the research ecosystem in our country.

While the recent policy changes in the US could act as a push factor, the government is also considering making the scheme attractive enough to act as a pull factor. Thus, the returning researchers will be given positions in premier research institutions and a substantial set-up grant to establish research infrastructure. The institutions include the research institutes as well as the IITs.

The idea of harnessing NRI talent is not new one- previous schemes offered them short term positions for collaborative research. These schemes were not terribly successful and in many instances were used by the NRIs as a paid vacation to visit their relatives, give their children a taste of Indian culture etc. This one is different since it is designed for longer term engagement. Globally, several countries are also offering incentives for researchers who would want to escape the stifling research environment in the US.

On the face of it, the scheme sounds like a win-win for all. The researchers will get to work in a relatively benign environment, be closer to their roots, and possibly feel a sense of pride in contributing to the motherland while we would gain from their experience and competence. However, as they say, the devil is in the details.

Setting up research infrastructure would involve equipment as well as human resources. A “substantial set-up grant” only makes the funds available. Procurement is another story altogether. Given the financial rules for spending government money, buying anything from state-of-the-art equipment to humble laptops can be a trying experience. The tendering process, the objections of the finance departments, delays in

disbursement of funds, etc. are extremely time consuming and tiresome. One frequently hears researchers complaining that they spend more time chasing files in the administration and finance departments than in pursuing research. The bureaucratic maze is one of the biggest headaches for even the resident researchers though they have learned to navigate through it over time. Procedures for hiring of qualified staff are also needlessly complicated with multiple levels of oversight and regulation.

Since the researchers will be based in existing research institutions, there is also the question of cultural adjustment. Every institution has an institutional culture to which the resident scientists have gotten accustomed. To be suddenly air-dropped into an existing cultural environment of the institution and adjust to it could be challenging especially for scientists who are used to a totally different institutional ethos in the US. Although some of our research institutes might boast of world class scientific infrastructure, it is the overall working atmosphere which the returnees might find difficult to get used to. There is also the issue of the huge differentials in salaries (even with PPP-based exchange rates) that the researchers would need to get used to.

The returning researchers, especially if they are coming for longer periods would also be faced with the usual problems that living in India entails. The abysmal public services, the difficulties of finding suitable housing, organizing children's education etc. are all essentials which can test even a hardened resident and might be totally frustrating for the NRI used to relative seamless transitions from one city to another in the US. Add to this the fact that since most research institutions are based in metros, the quality of air is unhealthy to put it mildly. Since most of the researchers would have children, this could be a huge deterrent.

Giving all kinds of incentives to the returning researchers would also have an impact on the existing manpower in the institutions. This officially sanctioned system of privileges would breed resentment among those who have spent their lives in those institutions and have a potentially demoralizing impact in the long term.

One of the countries which have had a similar scheme with some degree of success is China. The scheme, officially called the Thousand Talents Plan ensures lavish grants, housing as well as easier visa process (something which we should think about given the recent cases of academicians being deported from airports). The returnees are

colloquially referred to as “sea turtles” which in Mandarin is a homophone for the phrase meaning returning from abroad.

The Chinese situation is different from ours- firstly, Chinese origin scientists have been having immigration and visa problems in the US and Europe for a much longer time. Secondly, by any metric, the number of truly world-class institutions in China is much more than in India. These include not just research institutes but also universities which regularly feature very high in institutional rankings. The overall spending on R&D in China was 2.7% of the GDP while in India it is a measly 0.65% of a much lower GDP. Interestingly, there have been reports of a growing resentment among the native Chinese scientists of the implicit apartheid in treating the returnees as royalty.

The stated aim of utilizing the experience and competence of NRI scientists is of course a noble one. However, making India a scientific and technological powerhouse needs sustained action on many fronts. These include a massive increase in R&D spending, implementing “ease-of-doing-research” regulations, broad-basing our scientific institutions especially the universities where the future manpower is to be trained (instead of focusing solely on elite institutes) and a commitment of long-term funding. If we ensure all these things, there will be no reason for the Oliver Ridley turtles not to return to their birthplace.

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