India's Scientific Social Responsibility Policy

The Government of India, through the Department of Science and Technology (DST)[1], has released a draft of the new Scientific Social Responsibility (SSR) Policy on 9 September 2019 for public comments. The Policy is intended to promote social responsibility in the scientific establishments on the lines of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). It encourages S&T institutions and individual scientists to discharge their social responsibility through proactive engagement with society, and through sharing of knowledge and resources for bridging the gap between science and society. If enacted, India would be possibly the first country in the world to implement a national policy on scientific social responsibility.

While inaugurating the 104th session of the Indian Science Congress in Tirupati on 3 January 2017, when the Prime Minister Narendra Modi called for inculcating the new concept of SSR on the lines of CSR for connecting scientific institutions in the country with different stakeholders for creating an environment for sharing ideas and resources[2–4], nobody ever imagined that this concept will soon take the shape of a policy.

The Constitution of India (Part-IV, Article 51A(h)) also mandates for developing the scientific temper, humanism and spirit of enquiry as part of the fundamental duties of a citizen. This idea has been carried forward in all the earlier science policies of India (Scientific Policy Resolution 1958, Technology Policy Statement 1983, Science and Technology Policy 2003 and Science Technology and Innovation Policy 2013) that propagate for taking the message and benefits of science to society and for bridging the gap between the two.

The new draft SSR Policy is an effort to make scientific institutions and individual scientists more responsible to society and other stakeholders. Scientists have an ethical obligation of 'giving back' to society when they use taxpayers' money for doing science.

According to the draft policy document, SSR is 'the ethical obligation of knowledge workers in all fields of science and technology to voluntarily contribute their knowledge and resources to the widest spectrum of stakeholders in society, in a spirit of service and conscious reciprocity'. Here, knowledge workers include anyone who participates in the knowledge economy in the areas of human, social, natural, physical, biological, medical, mathematical and computer/data sciences and their associated technologies.

The main objectives of this Policy are to harness the unexploited voluntary potential of the scientific community in India to strengthen the linkages between science and society, and to make the S&T ecosystem in the country more vibrant. The Policy is directed towards developing an enabling knowledge ecosystem for ensuring easy access to scientific knowledge and sharing of ideas and resources, transferring the benefits of science to meet the existing and emerging societal needs, promoting collaborations to identify problems and develop solutions, and inculcating social responsibility among S&T institutions and individual scientists.

A central and nodal agency would be set up at DST to supervize, monitor and implement SSR activities in the country. Once formalized, the policy requires all the Central Government Ministries, State Governments and S&T institutions to make their own plans to implement SSR according to their mandate. Each S&T institution would be required to sensitize its knowledge workers about their ethical responsibility toward society, to have an SSR monitoring system to assess institutional projects and individual activities, and to publish an annual SSR report. Appropriate indicators would be developed for monitoring SSR activities at both institutional and individual levels, while measuring their impact on short-term, medium-term and long-term bases.

Individual scientists or knowledge workers would be required to devote at least 10 person-days of SSR per year for activities related to scientific social responsibility and for sharing scientific knowledge with society and other stakeholders. Such SSR/science outreach activities at the individual and institutional levels would be adequately recognized and incentivized with necessary budgetary support. At the individual level, scientists would get due credit for their SSR activities in their annual performance-based appraisal and evaluation system.

At the institutional level, a knowledge institution would not be allowed to execute its SSR activities through any outsourcing or sub-contracting. This provision would have a direct impact on all the institutions to create an encouraging environment for all their knowledge workers to engage in SSR activities, and to sensitize and mobilize their scientists to proactively engage in such activities. It would also require appropriate measures for skill development and capacity-building for effectively implementing and executing SSR.

To effectively implement the SSR Policy, a national digital portal will be set up to identify societal needs requiring scientific interventions, and as a platform for implementers and for reporting SSR activities. It also requires the funding agencies to support SSR through (a) funding individual SSR projects, (b) fixing a certain percentage of every project for SSR, and (c) recommending appropriate SSR requirements for any given project received for funding.

If implemented properly and efficiently, the SSR Policy, while strengthening the existing efforts in science outreach, would play a transformative role in bringing scientific and innovative solutions to societal problems, uplifting the life standard of marginalized sections of society through capacity-building, skill development, facilitating rural innovations, empowering women and weaker sections, helping industries and start-ups, etc. It will also contribute in achieving Sustainable Development Goals, environmental goals and Technology Vision 2035.

1. https://dst.gov.in/sites/default/files/Final%-20SSR%20Policy%20Draft_2019.09.09_0.pdf (accessed on 10 September 2019).
2. https://pib.gov.in/newsite/erelcontent.aspx?relid=156086 (accessed on 16 September 2019).
3. https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/pm-calls-for-scientific-social-responsibility-on-lines-of-csr/story-QIKOaLddfxLIvTDt-MFa8CK.html (accessed on 11 September 2019).
4. https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/nation/must-develop-scientific-social-responsibility-pm/345374.html (accessed on 11 September 2019).

Abhay S. D. Rajput, Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology, Pune 411 008 and BITS-Pilani, Pilani 333 031, India.
e-mail: abhaysdr@gmail.com