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Indo-US Science and Technology Forum

20 July 2000 saw the formal launch of the new Indo-US Science and Technology Forum. The US President Bill Clinton's visit to India in March this year put final shape to the agreement on the Indo-US Science and Technology Forum, leading to yet another chapter in Indo-US relations. On 23 June 2000, the Forum was registered as a non-profit society under the Societies Registration Act-XXI of 1860.

Speaking on the occasion of the formal launch of the Indo-US Forum, Science and Technology minister Murli Manohar Joshi said 'the structure of the Forum reflects the new spirit of partnership of equality'. The Forum he said 'has been given an identity of its own and an ability to outlive Governments'.

For this a corpus fund has been created. US Ambassador to India, Richard F. Celeste handed over a cheque of Rs 32 crore on behalf of his country for creating an endowment. The Secretary of the

Department of Science and Technology (DST), V. S. Ramamurthy in turn presented a cheque of Rs 10 lakh as the first instalment of India's contribution. The Government of India will provide the Forum each year with matching funds that are equal to the annual interest earning from the endowment. The annual interest from the endowment and the Indian contribution would be used to support the functioning of the Forum ensuring its self-reliance and operational autonomy.

The Forum will comprise seven members from each side. Of these, four members will come from the government and the remaining members from industry, academia and private organizations. While the exact governing body is yet to be finalized, an interim council has been formed.

Previously, Indo-US bilateral agreements included the Department of Science and Technology-National Science Foundation (DST-NSF) Science and Tech-

nology Cooperation, DOS-DST and NASA-NOAA memorandum of understanding for Research in Atmospheric Sciences, Indo-US Vaccine Action Programme (VAP) and Contraceptive and Health Research Programme.

A member of the interim governing body expressed the view that the Forum encompasses 'anything and everything which is good for the two participating countries, subject to the availability of funds'. Further, the Forum has 'no fixed target with objectives of the Forum being flexible and depending on the need of society'. He added that the Forum was open to 'imaginative ideas' like garnering funds from NRI business and alumni. Regarding an action plan of the Forum, the reply was that 'details are not yet

A look at the Forum's public domain website at <http://www.ind-ussstf.org> provides an insight into possible ventures to be taken up by the Forum. The website

contains the full text of all the speeches made by the distinguished speakers present at the Indo-US Round Table Dialogue on S&T Cooperation at Hyderabad held on 24 March 2000. A few of the ideas expressed are highlighted here.

In his welcome statement, V. S. Ramamurthy said the Forum would 'further strengthen the science and technological base' between the two countries. In his view 'intellectual isolation' is the biggest threat to an Indian scientist followed by 'resource constraint and access to international facilities'. In view of present globalization trends, Ramamurthy felt that S&T must also move forward with 'collaborations and participation in major facilities' for efficient functioning. Improvement of the educational system is necessary as it is the nucleus for the 'scientists of tomorrow' he added. India needed to invest 'now', for the future. He reiterated the need for a road map for 'cooperation in competition', working towards the 'total welfare of the entire humanity'.

The Scientific Secretary to the Principal Scientific Adviser to the Government of India and Executive Director of Technology Information, Forecasting and Assessment Council (TIFAC), Y. S. Rajan pointed out the importance of 'linkage of science to commerce'. The Forum he felt would gain from the US experience 'of selecting science for the market and to market scientific results to commercial ends'. Rajan spoke further that the Forum must select 'simple criteria that helps Indian economy though it may not be very exciting to our US friends as scientific and technological challenges'. TIFAC by its Vision 2020 exercise aims at filling these gaps by creating new avenues. The Vision 2020 documents along with a CD-ROM were presented by A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, Principal Scientific Adviser to the Government of India, to US President Bill Clinton during the latter's visit to India, outlining reachable targets.

R. A. Mashelkar, Secretary, Department of Scientific and Industrial Research and Director General CSIR, was of the

view that embarking with small funds was not a constraint as 'networking' of available resources could get maximum effect. Networking in India had been quietly taking place. General Electric's second largest R&D Centre in Bangalore is next only to their Schenectady Centre. Other instances of networking are the Indian Institute of Petroleum with Mobil Oil and Amoco, Indian Institute of Chemical Technology with SmithKline and Beecham and National Chemical Laboratory, Pune working in close collaboration with several clients from the USA. All of them are driven entirely 'on the basis of outsourcing of knowledge'. In the realm of higher education he felt the need for 'newer models' to create new institutions to replace the outdated ones. He cited the 'Indo-US Global Institute of Science and Technology (GIST)' as the 'brainchild' of Indian Silicon Valley entrepreneurs with a start-up fund of one billion US dollars. This is one way the private sector could help in the infrastructure for higher education.

Perspectives for the biotechnology of the future were outlined by Manju Sharma, Secretary, Department of Biotechnology (DBT) in her speech. Future areas for joint ventures could include vaccine research, combating cancer, agriculture, plant, animal and environmental biotechnology. The collaborative agreement by DBT with National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) of National Institute of Health, USA for setting up the National Brain Research Centre (NBRC) at New Delhi was mentioned.

P. N. Tandon, representing the medical profession at this dialogue said that the Forum would be of 'immense benefit' in the fields of medical and health sciences. The Forum would expedite the work already begun in the area of combating diseases such as tuberculosis, malaria and HIV. Brain research in particular required the 'need to work together'.

The Chairman of M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, Chennai, M. S. Swaminathan, stressed that the knowledge system should be put in place in order to 'achieve sustainable food and

livelihood security'. Empowerment of rural folk, by dissemination of information via 'Knowledge Centres', managed by themselves would create a 'cadre of eco-entrepreneurs'. Information regarding soil, health care, water, pest and energy management, post harvest technology, farming systems design and marketing would be provided through these 'Knowledge Centres'.

U. R. Rao, Member, Space Commission, in his speech to the distinguished gathering present recalled the excellent cooperation that existed between the two countries in space research. The significant advances made by India in the application of space research for national development were outlined. These included communications, TV broadcast, education, meteorology, management of natural resources, environmental monitoring and disaster management, and weather forecasting. In addition, Indian space scientists have combined space and biotechnological advances for achieving increased agricultural yield.

Several other eminent delegates present also expressed their views for the success of the Forum. These are available in full text at the Forum's website.

In his concluding remarks, Neal Lane, Assistant to the US President for Science and Technology spoke of the 'scientific cooperation across borders' that would accelerate the pace of S&T initiatives and provide applications for the mutual benefit of people. He felt that the present discussions were achieved under the 'umbrella of transition to sustainability' and looked forward to future meetings of the Forum.

The Indo-US Science and Technology Forum has in its initial deliberations expressed a desire for achieving goals for the mutual benefit of the two countries. The citizens will have to wait and watch these aims being translated into action.

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