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Clarion call to PM Narendra Modi to increase funding for Science and Education

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THIRUVANANTHAPURAM: In a clarion call to the Union Government to increase funding for science and education in the upcoming budget, Scientists and academicians have launched a signature campaign with an online petition addressed to the Prime Minister Narendra Modi, as a follow up of the March for Science. Though some scientists are hopeful that there would be more share for science and education in the upcoming Central budget unlike last year, they expect more support in terms of GDP. It may be recalled that the 'India March for Science' was organised on Aug 9 last year in 40 cities across the country, urging adequate funding for science, technology, and education, without which the dream of propelling India forward as a scientifically advanced nation is likely to remain unfulfilled. In Kerala, the March was led by noted space scientist and

former deputy director of ISRO's Liquid Propulsion System's P Radhakrishnan.

Though the Indian economy is the third largest in the world in terms of its GDP (purchasing power parity), it is not reflected in the fields of science and education because of the poor support received from the government. India ranks 40th in terms of support for science as the R&D expenditure is only around 0.85% of GDP (PPP). Developing countries like Mexico, Malaysia, Brazil, and Turkey are ahead of India in R&D spending and seven countries in the world spend 3% or more of GDP on R&D, scientists point out.

While the academicians indicate that support for education presents an even more dismal picture. Currently India stands 134th in terms of the expenditure on education as percentage of GDP. In 2012, it was 3.2%, and today it is further down to 2.9%. Around 40 countries including developing countries like Tunisia, Jamaica, Vietnam, Kenya and Venezuela spend more than 6% of their GDP on education.

The petition seeks the Prime Minister to ensure an allocation of at least 10% of GDP (PPP) for education and 3% of GDP (PPP) for scientific and technological research in the upcoming budget. "We also request firm governmental steps for the streamlining of administration, eradication of bureaucratic practices, ensuring greater academic and financial autonomy for universities and academic institutions, and strict accountability at every level," scientists said.

"The online petition to the Prime Minister is launched now and the signature campaign will on for a month. It is to seek more allocation for science and education in the country," Breakthrough Science Society (BSS) secretariat member Rajeevan.P.P said.

"Though there was not much cut in the union budget last year for science and technology, allocation for science as percentage of GDP at 0.85 percent is much less in India compared to other countries. Eventually, there has to be an increase in funding for science," State Science and Technology department principal secretary and Kerala State Council for Science, Technology and Environment (KSCSTE) executive vice president Dr Suresh Das told TOI.

Last year, Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) director general had informed all its 38 labs across the country to generate its own funds for running the labs.

Following that, CSIR-National Institute of Interdisciplinary Science and Technology (NIIST) director A Ajayaghosh had decided to focus on judicious spending for research and to enhance industrial participation. "With strict austerity measures including

energy saving and expenditure cut, could bring down the costs incurred by 10 percent. Of the Rs 50 crore received, we had expended Rs 45 crore," Ajayaghosh said, hoping that in the upcoming budget there would be an increase in funding for science.