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# Scientists hampered by dearth of quality research equipment in government's e-Marketplace

The rule that mandates procurement via the GeM is meant to encourage Indian MSMEs, but often results in delayed purchases of poor quality materials and equipment, hindering scientific research

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GeM – an initiative of the Commerce Ministry – was introduced to give Indian Medium Small and Micro Enterprises a relative advantage over foreign suppliers of products, and to promote the government's Make in India initiative. Image used for representative purpose. | Photo Credit: Getty Images/iStockphoto

**While the Ministry of Science and Technology has announced its intent to galvanise research in India through the National Research Foundation Bill, 2023, scientists say that the mandatory procurement via Government e-Marketplace (GeM) is a major stumbling block, impeding the sourcing of equipment and materials necessary for research.**

Several researchers told *The Hindu* — on condition of anonymity as they are not permitted to speak to the media — that while the GeM process is useful for mass-manufactured products, it does not help in the procurement of specialty chemicals, niche biological products, and customised hardware and software.

## **‘Lowest quality’**

**GeM – an initiative of the Commerce Ministry - was introduced to give Indian Medium Small and Micro Enterprises a relative advantage over foreign suppliers of products, and to promote the government's Make in India initiative.** “What actually happens is that the system is littered with vendors, who source the lowest quality of components, aggregate it and (by virtue of being registered as an Indian vendor) quote a lower price, and we're forced to buy it,” said a scientist affiliated to a prominent Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) laboratory. “It can take months to procure, or if the equipment is faulty, return and claim a refund. There is also no system of blacklisting an errant supplier,” the scientist added.

**While the GeM has been in force since 2017, scientific organisations were exempt from the mandate until 2019. This meant they could continue to invite bids after setting out requirements, or reach out to known suppliers.** While it is still possible to directly reach out to a foreign vendor if needed, the individual scientists must show that they tried to procure the product on GeM and were unsuccessful.

## **‘Delayed results’**

**“This entire process can take months. An experiment often means several parts or chemicals must be available at the right time, else it can't be done. That means results cannot be quickly generated and papers can't be published,”** said another scientist affiliated with a prominent Central University.

A senior official in the Ministry of Science and Technology said that, following several complaints, scientific departments were again permitted a “degree of relaxation” from the mandate. “They still must show that they were unsuccessful at GeM. Except that now, a request to procure from a specific vendor can be cleared by the Secretary of the Department instead of the Expenditure Secretary in the Ministry of Finance,” the official said.

The GeM has “...over 66,000 government buyer organisations and more than 58 lakh sellers and service providers offering a diverse range of goods and services,” according to a February statement by the Press Information Bureau. “The portal features over 11,000 product categories with more than 29 lakh listed products, as well as over 270 service categories with more than 2.5 lakh service offerings. Based on various studies, the minimum savings on the platform are about 10%, which translates into a savings of over ₹ 30,000 crore worth of public money,” it added.

## ‘Death of science’

Tardy procurement means that researchers often reduce the scope of their investigation or do not spend the allotted funds on the project which leads to inadequate spending on research. The problem was severe enough that an early draft of the proposed National Research Foundation Bill, set out for public discussion by the Office of the Principal Scientific Advisor in 2019, suggested that the GeM no longer be mandatory for scientists. The NRF Bill, 2023, is listed to appear in the Monsoon Session of Parliament though the latest version of the Bill has not yet been made public.

“Scientists should be made accountable for the science they do and not be burdened with ensuring that their equipment is procured at the lowest cost. Such restrictions spell the death of science,” said Binay Panda, Professor, School of Biotechnology, Jawaharlal Nehru University.

## ‘Exempt research equipment’

Products ranging in cost from ₹5 lakh to ₹200 crore must be procured via India-registered companies, the rules dictate. “Much of the equipment that is necessary for research falls into this price band and needs to be sourced internationally. This became a problem during COVID-19, and after several requests to government, about 2,000 items were

exempted. However, GeM is still mandatory,” said L.S. Shashidhara, Director, National Centre for Biological Sciences, Bengaluru. “There have been representations to exempt research equipment,” he added.

Another scientific administrator with a science Ministry told *The Hindu* that GeM, through its **insistence on a centralised procurement system, only created a new ecosystem of contractors and vendors, rather than actually encouraging the desired *Atmanirbharta* (self reliance)**. “The intent is good: encourage Indian manufacturers and minimise corruption. While there have been instances of scientists misusing public money, the [GeM] system doesn’t actually fix it. Institutions like the IITs, IISERS have greater flexibility by virtue of better corpuses but the true victims are the thousands of smaller universities, entirely dependent on government grants, who have to make do with either **substandard**, or no equipment, and therefore fall further behind in their science,” the administrator said.



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