

Change of Guard

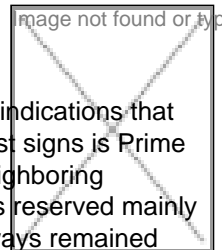
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The New Year has certainly brought good tidings to the fledgling biotechnology industry. There are several indications that biotechnology might finally become mainstream, getting out of the confines of laboratories. One of the surest signs is Prime Minister A B Vajpayee's inclusion of biotechnology as one of the identified areas of cooperation with our neighboring countries after the early January summit of the heads of SAARC governments in Islamabad. So far this was reserved mainly for culture, science and technology and information technology (IT) as trade and other such areas have always remained controversial for any meaningful cooperation between the countries.

IT too was confined to the sidelines till the mid-1990s when the amazing growth rates of software exports caught the national attention. And then every national leader tried to bask in the software sunshine by making use of every available forum to talk glowingly about India's software expertise. The probability of biotechnology attaining similar cult status among the nation's influential person is very high for the simple reason that this "technology of life" can have equally if not more far reaching impact on a much larger section of people than IT.

Another clear sign of the future is the appointment of the new secretary of the Department of Biotechnology (DBT), the apex policy making body of this sector in the government. The secretary-designate Dr Maharaj Krishan Bhan is an acclaimed health care expert as the developer of diarrhea vaccine. Industry watchers feel that the government is sending out a clear signal from Dr Bhan's appointment that the health care aspect of biotechnology requires a clear thrust. This is also clear from

the first ever detailed interview given to BioSpectrum by Dr Bhan where he clearly talks about the need to quickly share the benefits of modern health care biotech developments with the largest number of people through appropriate mechanisms such as balanced price and health care insurance.

Equally important is Dr Bhan's emphasis on forging partnerships with the emerging biotechnology industry in speeding up the regulatory processes, creating awareness about the benefits of biotechnology among people, willingness to partner with the industry to rework the national priorities in this sector as well as the offer to consider all feedbacks from industry leaders.

Why am I really optimistic about the growth of the biotechnology industry? In recent weeks, we have heard not just "feel good" stories about the national economy but also the talk about India becoming a major hub for industrial research and the global hotspot for the manufacture of small cars. Together these sectors have the potential to transform the Indian economy, along with IT-enabled services to an altogether new growth trajectory. To this, we could add another sector: vaccines. As the cover story of this issue indicates, there is every possibility of India becoming one of the world's most preferred destinations for manufacture of a host of essential vaccines. The global market for vaccines is growing at over 10 percent and is currently pegged at \$6 billion. Clearly, with some of our enlightened biotech companies taking the lead in this area, a new world of opportunity to meet the world's vaccine supplies is reaching our doors. Some companies like Serum Institute and Indian Immunologicals have already taken the lead in some products. It is only a matter of time some of the enlightened entrepreneurs grab the opportunities. With Dr Bhan promising a quick, efficient and effective regulatory mechanism, the biotech Moon (or Mars) is within our reach.

