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CII show discusses on biotech reach

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The Biotech India 2005 tradeshow and conference, part of the 16th International Engineering & Technology Fair (ITEF) 2005, saw the gathering of top industry leaders, academicians, foreign delegates from the global biotechnology industry. The event was organized by the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII).

Dr MK Bhan, secretary, Department of Biotechnology was the chairperson for the event. In his keynote address during the inauguration of the conference, he elaborated on the forthcoming national biotechnology policy. He said: "The ultimate goal of the government is to move towards a single regulatory authority, where all composites of the sector would be brought under one structure. The aim is to make decision making faster and pro-active, thereby making it more professional and a solid structure".

Dr Bhan further stated that all the simplifications concerning the biotech sector, suggested by the Mashelkar Committee and the Prof M S Swaminathan Committee, would be introduced in the new policy. He said that innovative mindset should be promoted in the country and the drive to promote innovation has to come from the industry. "There is a need to create a clear framework for public-private partnership and public investment in that component should be increased, without making a distinction between public institution and private institution," he added.

Prof Malik Peiris, professor of Microbiology at the University of Hong Kong, who discovered the SARS virus, spoke on "Confronting emerging infections: lessons from SARS and Avian Flu". He stressed on the urgent need to develop a flu vaccine as avian flu has the potential to become a human pandemic creating havoc in the South East Asian region. He said: "In the present context, one should not forget the classical technology as the world embraced new technology. There was a need for closely integrating bedside clinical medicine/epidemiology and laboratory medicine, besides a need for indigenous biotech base to capitalize on research gains".

Dr Swati Piramal, co-chairperson, CII National Committee on Biotechnology and director-Strategic Alliances and Communications, Nicholas Piramal India, in her welcome address, said that there has been an inflection point in India and the point was January 1, 2005, when India became TRIPS compliant. According to Dr Piramal, post January 1, the color of the new landscape would be different from what it was in the past. She hoped that the new regime would pave the way for more alliances, which would add value across the pharmaceutical chain.

Prof Inder Verma, Laboratory of Genetics, The Salk Institute, La Jolla, USA, also addressed the inaugural session and made a presentation on "From an idea to an IPO: An academic's perspective" based on his rich experiences in the biotech industry.

One of the highlights of the event was an exclusive roundtable discussion on "National Biotechnology Policy - Leveraging Emerging Opportunities in Biotech". During the discussion Dr Vijay Chandru, chairman and CEO, Strand

Genomics, said that the three areas that need to be addressed on priority were the need for a good core facility for high-end biotech research for both the public and private sector; experimentation in academic entrepreneurship; and our potential in chemistry should be explored. Khalil Ahmed, executive director, Shantha Biotechnics opined that for the growth of the industry one has to let go slowly of the past. Hari S Bhartia, co-chairman and managing director of Jubilant Organosys said that risking money for research was the key challenge.

Aseem K Chauhan, trustee and board member, Amity institutions, stated that promoting entrepreneurship and India specific niche areas is important. Dr Swati Piramal stressed that better regulatory reforms were the need of the hour with special legal courts. Dr M Vidyasagar, EVP (Advanced Technology), TCS, was of the view that more clarity was needed on IPR and a proper road map was required. Ending the discussion, Dr Bhan said that the biotech policy would be promoting innovation, removing roadblocks, filling in gaps in niche areas and creating a dialogue across disciplines. "For the overall growth of the sector a flow of money from all sections is required so that we do not exhaust ourselves out", he stated.

The conference deliberations saw distinguished experts from leading companies and organizations like Merck, Guava Technologies, Dow Chemical Company, Sequenom, National Defense University of USA and BIO speak on the different aspects of the business and science of biotechnology viz: venture capital for biotech; emerging research tools and technologies; managing a biotech business; maximizing value through global partnerships, among others. The event had a strong participation from research institutions like ICGEB, CCMB, JNU, NII, Delhi University, etc.

Dr William Haseltine, chairman and chief executive, Haseltine Associates Limited (formerly CEO, Human Genome Sciences) gave the valedictory address on "A Central Role of for India in The Biopharmaceutical Industry-Today and Tomorrow". He said, "India has a well trained and educated workforce which is its biggest resource. It has the depth of knowledge of many fields, leading chemical manufacturers and access to adequate cohorts of human population for clinical trials. What it needs to develop is a robust, strong world class infrastructure for clinical development, which will enable it to become a world leader in pharma exports in the next 20 years".

The one-and-a-half day biotechnology conference primarily focused on forging global partnerships, frontier technologies, technology transfer between scientists and entrepreneurs, venture capital funding and how the emerging opportunities could be tapped to India's advantage. Speakers from five state governments - Delhi, Haryana, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh used this opportunity to showcase their state's potential in this area

Rolly Dureha