FABA helps India, Pakistan shake hands in biotech

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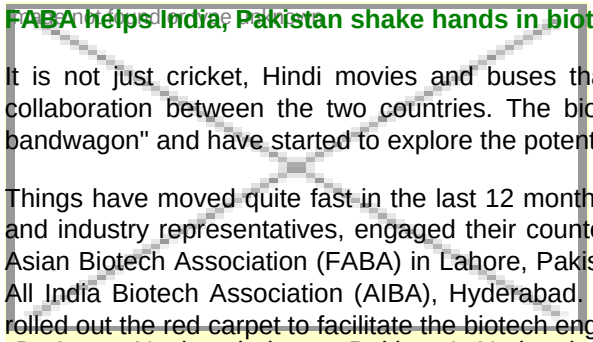


FABA helps India, Pakistan shake hands in biotech

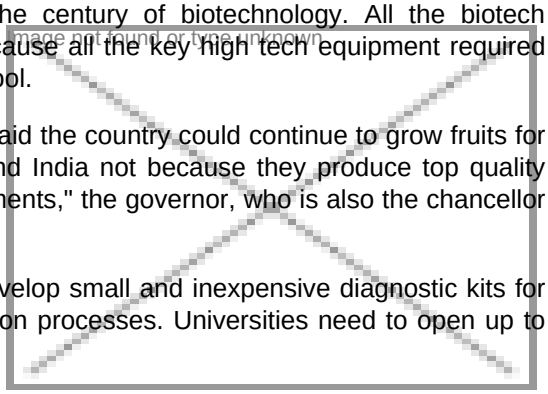
It is not just cricket, Hindi movies and buses that are bringing India and Pakistan together in these days of increasing collaboration between the two countries. The biotech industries of both the countries too have jumped onto the "peace bandwagon" and have started to explore the potential partnerships among themselves.

Things have moved quite fast in the last 12 months. A 10-member Indian biotech delegation, comprising CEOs, researchers and industry representatives, engaged their counterparts from Pakistan under the banner of the newly-floated Federation of Asian Biotech Association (FABA) in Lahore, Pakistan for three days. The Indian delegation was led by Dr BS Bajaj from the All India Biotech Association (AIBA), Hyderabad. The historic, 142-year-old Government College University (GCU), Lahore rolled out the red carpet to facilitate the biotech engagements between the two countries.

Dr Anwar Nasim, chairman, Pakistan's National Commission on Biotechnology, (extreme left), making a point at the FABA meeting in Lahore.

The importance attached to the three-day meeting on "Business Opportunities in Industrial Biotechnology" was evident with the high level of participation from the Pakistani side. The Governor of Punjab, Lt. Gen (Retd) Khalid Maqbool, the country's most powerful governor, took the lead to greet the Indian delegation. Dr Anwar Nasim, who is the biotech advisor to President General Musharraf and convenor (life sciences) of the Pakistan's Higher Education Commission, was the prime mover behind the event and left no stone unturned to ensure that the Indian delegation could travel to Lahore without any visa hassles.

Pakistan is keen to learn from India's biotech story. "It is going to be the century of biotechnology. All the biotech advancements, however, have been monopolized by the western nations because all the key high tech equipment required by biotechnologists have been developed by them," remarked Governor Maqbool.



Stressing on the need for Pakistan to develop expertise in biotechnology, he said the country could continue to grow fruits for export. But that will not take the country very far. "The world fears China and India not because they produce top quality shirts, shoes and leather goods. They are feared for their technology developments," the governor, who is also the chancellor of GCU emphasized.

"We have to produce a large talent pool of technologists in biotechnology, develop small and inexpensive diagnostic kits for diseases specific to the region, increase the efficiency of agricultural production processes. Universities need to open up to the industry," he said.

Responding to the call for co-operation, Dr Bajaj said "Science has no boundaries. That is why we know that we can work together, shoulder to shoulder. FABA will work together with scientists to make biotech a great success story in the region."

The Governor of Punjab, Lt. Gen (Retd) interacting with the egates.

Biotech in Pakistan

The government has declared biotechnology as a priority area for Pakistan in 2001 and a a National Commission on Biotechnology (NCB) was set up as an advisory body to the Ministry of Science and Technology to monitor the new developments in the field within the country and internationally. Pakistan has invested over Rs 100 crore in this sector so far.

Most of the research work is done in 29 national research institutions under various ministries such as agriculture, science and technology, and atomic energy. There are many top class institutions comparable and even better than their counterparts in India. The country is producing hundreds of PhDs and MPhils in the biotech sector from these institutions, which are affiliated to different universities. A large number of scientists working in the US and other developed countries have also returned to boost the talent within Pakistan. The Vice Chancellor of GCU, Dr Khalid Aftab said there were many attractive schemes to retain the talented scientists who have returned from abroad. Many of them are paid US $5,000 (Rs 2,30,000) or more per month to tap their talents. GCU itself has started an Industrial Institute on Biotechnology to take up pilot scale manufacturing of biopharmaceuticals and build expertise in this area.

The country's first brush with biotech started formally when the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission set up the Nuclear Institute of Agricultural Biology (NIAB) in Faisalabad, organized training courses in recombinant DNA technologies. The Pakistan Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (PCSIR) and the Pakistan Agricultural Research Council had also started setting up various specialized research centers since 1971.

The biotech industry is taking roots slowly. There are prominent companies like Qarshi Industries, Agri Biotech, MediPak, and institutions like the Pakistan Industrial Diagnostic Agricultural Network Agencies National Agencies, which are engaged in high quality biotech activities.

FABA was launched formally nearly a year ago, on February 10, 2005 during the BioAsia conference in Hyderabad. The idea was mooted during the BioAsia 2004 conference. FABA was set up by eight member countries including India, Pakistan, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, Philippines and Sri Lanka. Israel, Iran and Saudi Arabia have since joined the association. Dr Nasim indicated that four more countries-Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Bangladesh - were expected to join the industry group this year.

Indian Immunologicals CEO, KV Balasubramanian, gave an overview of the Indian industry's capabilities in the veterinary biotech products sector. The company has signed MoUs with agencies to distribute its range of animal vaccines in Pakistan. The regulatory approval is awaited.

Iran grows world's first transgenic rice crop

Scientists in Iran have made a global breakthrough by developing and commercializing the world's first transgenic rice crop.

" In 2005, nearly 1,000 farmers have started to grow this rice crop, which has the Bt gene inserted to provide resistance to the highly damaging stem borer insect," FABA's Iranian chapter convenor Mohammed H Sanati told the gathering. Dr Sanati is also a molecular geneticist at Iran's National Research Center for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology, Teheran.

When the crop is fully commercialized in 2006, it is expected to be grown in about 50,000 acres. The crop was developed by Iranian scientists with the assistance of the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), Manila, Philippines. IRRI is part of a global network of publicly funded agriculture research institution, called CGIAR. Chinese scientists are also close to developing a transgenic rice variety.

Dr Sanati said extensive trials to ensure safety of the transgenic rice variety was done in the country before it was approved for large scale commercial cultivation. Studies have indicated that the Bt rice showed 10 percent increase in yields to reap 2.2 tons per acre. He revealed that Iran was close to developing a transgenic sugar beet crop.

Iranian scientists have also developed Bioflash, a slow releasing floating form of Bt granules, which can be used extensively in the control of malaria.

The first formal contacts between the countries started in 2004 and in May 2005, a high level delegation of agricultural scientists had visited Lahore from India to break the ice. The January meeting has taken it to the next level with the involvement of industry leaders from both the sides. A lot more activities involving industry leaders from both countries are expected to take place in Hyderabad during BioAsia 2006 and the BioPartnering conference being organized by FABA in March in Pakistan. Biotech indeed is moving forward in the right direction in sharing and building expertise in the region.

Naryanan Suresh in Lahore, Pakistan