

India gets a biotech policy finally

13 December 2007 | News



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After grappling with the unprecedented growth of biotechnology for over three decades, India has finally got a national policy on this segment in place. The National Biotechnology Policy, officially called the National Biotechnology Development Strategy, was unveiled by Union Minister for Science and Technology Kapil Sibal in November. Sibal and the DBT Secretary Dr MK Bhan deserve full kudos for piloting the comprehensive policy through the choppy waters of India's complex government policy-making process after extensive consultations with all the stakeholders.

Even while the policy was awaiting the final approval from the Union Cabinet, DBT had implemented most of the important decisions and paved the way for the growth of the sector in recent years. Now these measures have got the official approval. Of course, the final policy has added a few more path-breaking initiatives to encourage public-private partnership, fund advanced technology research and build up human resources.

One of the boldest initiatives is the commitment to spend 30 percent of DBT's annual funds on private-public projects. Few government ministries have made such a public commitment so far. The SBIRI scheme will encourage entrepreneurship and meet some of the demands for early stage funding to handle risky parts of biotech product developments.

However, the much awaited single window clearance facility, which should have come through the proposed setting up of the National Biotechnology Regulatory Authority (NBRA), has yet to become a reality. It may see the light of the day only if Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh intervenes to settle the turf war between the ministries of health, agriculture, science and

technology and environment over gaining administrative control of the proposed regulatory agency. Not many nations have succeeded in ensuring this, except Australia, which has an omnibus regulatory legislation and authority to handle all biotech related matters.

Policy makers have more or less delivered on their promises made to the biotech industry in the last three years. It is now upto the industry to unleash the entrepreneurial spirit to take this forward, ignoring the few continuing procedural issues in dealing with government agencies.

December is the time for the annual BioSpectrum Awards. The 5th edition of BioSpectrum Awards is another tribute to the pioneers of the biotech segment. Each and every awardee this year is a true representative of the pioneering spirit in this sector.

The BioSpectrum Life Time Achievement Award goes to Dr PM Bhargava who has a long list of pioneering acts in the biotech sector. He visualized the beneficial effects of biotechnology, used this word for the first time in the country and also coined the term "genetic engineering" for the first time in the 1970s. He championed the growth of the biotech industry, set up India's best research lab, CCMB and developed the highly useful DNA fingerprinting technology. Dr Bhargava is a true scientist who speaks eloquently and fearlessly about issues that concern him. He richly deserves the honor.

Varaprasad Reddy, the BioSpectrum Person of the year, is the industry pioneer who set up Shantha Biotechnics to develop the country's first recombinant product--Hepatitis B vaccine. He has followed it up with a cervical cancer vaccine in 2007. The Entrepreneur of the year, Dr Vijay Chandru, is one of the first leaders in this industry to successfully cross the bridge between academics and industry. His Strand Life Sciences is a model for all budding entrepreneurs. BIOMAb EGFR, the BioProduct of the year from Biocon, is a pioneering monoclonal antibody-based product.

Various states have been trying to attract biotech investors and Gujarat, under Chief Minister Narendra Modi has been highly successful in the last two years in this area. No wonder the jury has chosen Gujarat as the BioState of the year 2007. The awards will be presented in Bangalore on December 21, 2007. See you all there.

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