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“There is a huge gap in corporate engagement and government procurement of innovative products within Telangana”

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According to the world’s leading real estate consulting firm, CNRE’s latest report, ‘Global Life Sciences Atlas’, Hyderabad has emerged as a prominent global centre of life sciences manufacturing activity in India. This positions Telangana to play a defining role in shaping the next decade of biotech innovation and entrepreneurship. In alignment with this development, Hyderabad-based Atal Incubation Centre (AIC), hosted in one of the premier research institutes, CSIR-Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology (CCMB), seeks unique schemes and proposals from the government to strengthen biotech entrepreneurship in the state. Dr N. Madhusudhana Rao, Chief Executive Officer, AIC-CCMB, spoke with BioSpectrum India, highlighting the dynamic growth trajectory of the biotech innovation ecosystem in Telangana.

How is AIC-CCMB contributing towards strengthening Telangana's position as a life sciences innovation hub of India? What are the challenges that lie ahead in this direction, particularly for the startups?

AIC-CCMB in the past several years has been standing top of the list of life science incubators locally and nationally by joining hands with larger stakeholders in the domain. Since COVID times, AIC-CCMB has created various avenues for startups and innovators in product development as well as validation. In particular, AIC-CCMB partnered with Telangana Innovation Cell (TGIC) & tHUB to engage two programmes, REGIG and Mission 10X (SIG), where several startups in life sciences and medtech have been engaged for mini-acceleration and micro-funding. Other than local strong partnerships and collaboration with fellow incubators and stakeholders, AIC-CCMB, along with tHUB is engaging the NHS Manchester ecosystem, TANDEM programme with German Centres for Research and Innovation (DWIH Germany) and other global ecosystems to strengthen the life sciences ecosystem as a whole for the state.

The major challenge lies in accelerating these life science startups with enough quantum of funding from both the government side and the private investment side. A match-making between such players is a greater challenge at the moment. Secondly, unique platforms for market access and regulatory support from the local Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO) office would be greatly helpful to augment the technology development.

AIC-CCMB, in its seven years of existence, has focused primarily on establishing a good infrastructure for life science startups, an effective mentorship network and high-quality scientific counsel to the startups. In addition to supporting startups that come to us, we also feel it is important to generate startup ideas based on the discoveries in academic institutions. It is important to curate, package and showcase these discoveries so that commercial partners may take this into a product. In this focus, we generated a reasonable momentum in the area of the usage of animals in drug discovery and promoting non-animal methods. Secondly, we find engagements where technologies at CCMB are adapted for field applications. Incubators like ours, associated with an academic institute, should play a larger role in taking science to benefit society.

What are your views on the upcoming life sciences policy to be launched by the Telangana government?

Telangana's startup and innovation ecosystem is up to the mark, having rich educational, research institutes and also a number of incubators and co-working spaces. However, there should be unique schemes and incentives from the government catering to the needs of innovators, not only from Tier I cities like Hyderabad, but other Tier II and Tier III areas and rural sectors. Unless there is monetary commitment and other such incentives, infrastructure alone cannot meet the needs of nurturing creativity and innovation to solve local problems, contributing to a larger impact. Moreover, there is a huge gap in corporate engagement and government procurement of innovative products within the state. The policy should include such incentives, e-procurement policies, piloting platforms, Intellectual Property (IP) and regulatory incentives and platforms, and scale-up platforms for the innovators and startups emerging out of the state.

Are there any specific challenges in biotech products commercialisation that AIC-CCMB is actively addressing through mentorship or partnership programmes? How many new products/technologies were launched by your startups in 2024?

AIC-CCMB is under its limited capacity, building connections with potential partners locally and globally for commercialising biotech-based products. We mediate some of the global partnerships, like Montgomery County, Maryland, to help our startups set up their companies overseas. Similarly, welcoming global players who look for local partners for marketing similar products. Having immense engagement with various mentors and advisors, we engage our startups through specific programmes. However, more stringent startup mentorship programmes are in the plans for this year.

Our startups have soft-launched three innovative products: the Pheezee Device by Startoon Labs, indiMeat by Svastha Samriddhi, and Suraksha by Briota.

What lies ahead for the life sciences startups at AIC-CCMB in 2025?

This year, we are planning to expand our operations in other places like Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, and North Eastern states to promote skill development and entrepreneurship in life sciences and healthcare. We seem to place ourselves in incubators and accelerators like tHUB, Nadathur S Raghavan Centre for Entrepreneurial Learning (NSRCEL), FORGE, Andhra Pradesh MedTech Zone (AMTZ), Wadhwani Foundation to cross-learning and launching programmes together with those agencies suiting life sciences and biopharma domains.

We recently started engaging with the HDFC Parivartan programme and engaged theme-specific startups working in 3D bioprinting and microphysiological systems/organoids and smart and alternative proteins. In addition to this, we have started an international partnership with Blockchain for Impact (BFI) to support innovators and startups with fellowships and Kickstarter grants, respectively. We have also designed the fellowship programme for PhDs and postdocs to bridge the innovation funding for young innovators. Some of the fellowships are also to cater the MBBS and MDs who feel the taste of entrepreneurship through this programme.

Currently there are 26 physical startups and over 40 virtual startups incubated with AIC-CCMB. There are 7 physical startups and over 20 startups, virtually incubated since 2024, in particular, 4 physical and 12 virtual startups incubated in 2024.

Are you planning more collaborations with industry leaders or research institutions to accelerate the growth of biotech/ life sciences startups?

Yes. Thermo Fisher is a strong partner that we have planned several engagements with since their support of the Centre of Innovation at AIC-CCMB. Currently, there are several workshops and training sessions planned through this centre. We are planning to engage the Gopalakrishnan-Deshpande Centre for Innovation and Entrepreneurship (Indian Institute of Technology Madras) to accelerate life sciences startups, especially those founded by academics.

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