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"We Will See More Innovation in the Biopharma Sector"

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Suneela Thatte, Vice President & Head â?? Healthcare, R&D India, Merck, in an exclusive interaction with BioSpectrum India at Manthan 2026, spoke about the evolving R&D ecosystem in India, how innovation will strengthen the biopharma sector, and the need for greater participation of women in the life sciences workforce.



How is innovation enabling India's life sciences R&D ecosystem of talent, infrastructure, and collaboration?

Discussing innovation and India's healthcare and life sciences R&D ecosystem, I believe we have done a commendable job. I would not say that R&D and innovation are non-existent; otherwise, we would not be known as the Pharmacy of the World.

We are also making our presence felt in medical tourism. Innovation has always been there; it is not absent altogether. I would like to call it incremental or operational innovation.

We have focused on creating formulations that can be used by both Indian and global patients. We have also worked towards making our healthcare system incrementally better. However, looking at the global scenario, we have now reached a point where innovation needs to accelerate.

Everybody talks about the quantum of innovation, but nobody talks about the speed of innovation—and I think that time has now come. Things are evolving rapidly, and India is uniquely positioned.

We have very strong talent in the STEM areas. When we look at medical IT talent, that itself presents a very unique and formidable combination. On the science side as well, we have excellent biologists, medical professionals, biochemists, and others. Because of our evolution in the IT sector, we are seeing significant technological advances in India.

Today, innovation needs to bring science and technology together. However, technology itself needs to be modern.

Firstly, there is a need for academia and industry to collaborate more closely. This will help create not just scientific experts, but also people who can act as problem solvers, which will further boost innovation.

What is your outlook for the biopharma sector by 2047?

The idea that we will have 100 novel therapeutic agents by 2047, marking 100 years of India's independence, fills me with excitement. That vision truly sets the tone for the future.

I see no reason why we cannot achieve it. In the biopharma sector, we will continue to grow our manufacturing and formulation expertise and lead on the global stage.

We will also see increasing innovation. Developing drugs not just for India but for global markets began over the last decade and is becoming more prominent in the biopharma space.

Ten years ago, there was limited focus on global capability centres. Today, however, the talent landscape has pushed the world to think differently. Cost-saving was the first lever, if I may say so. But companies and organisations quickly realised that this is not just a volume game—it is a value game. The focus has now shifted towards moving up the value chain and deriving maximum value from India's talent ecosystem.

India has made significant progress, particularly in small-molecule chemistry. There will be three major arms powering the biopharma sector.

The first is manufacturing and reinforcing India's role as the Pharmacy of the World. The second is the innovation trajectory, where the Indian biopharma industry will bring new molecules and biologics to the world. The third is the talent ecosystem, where India will emerge as a global innovation and R&D powerhouse.

What kind of policy reforms are needed to boost talent in the life sciences sector?

From a policy perspective, there is already considerable focus on talent. However, rather than specific policy reforms, I would like to see policymakers, academia, and industry come together. A common forum to assess and address talent needs would be extremely valuable.

We need to become idea creators; only then can we truly drive innovation. This will require all three stakeholders to collaborate, ideate, and plan together.

In the coming years, the word “talent” will encompass not just technical expertise, but also how effectively that expertise is applied. That is an area where we still have work to do.

How would you like to see the women workforce in the life sciences sector evolve?

The life sciences sector is naturally attractive to women. It demands a high level of attention to detail, and women are often naturally inclined towards this strength. The number of women graduates in STEM fields in India clearly reflects this. Looking ahead, I would like to see more women in leadership roles.

As women progress in their careers, there is often a natural conflict between professional demands and biological responsibilities. At a stage when women are gaining their first experiences as managers or junior executives, many are also raising children or caring for elderly family members.

Today, we see a large number of women at entry-level positions. However, as they move up the ranks, attrition becomes visible. This is where organisations must make concerted efforts to design policies that prevent mid-career attrition among women.

I dream of seeing more women in leadership roles in the future.

What role does the Healthcare R&D India Hub play in Merck’s global R&D work today? How has this role changed since the centre was set up in 2021?

Since its inception in 2021, our Healthcare R&D India Hub has transformed from a focused Centre of Excellence into a multi-functional organisation within Merck’s global network. What began with three core functions- Regulatory Affairs, Pharmacovigilance & Drug Safety, and Clinical Operations, has rapidly expanded to multiple functions and sub-functions, including specialised Centres of Excellence.

Working in close collaboration with global teams, the hub delivers critical responsibilities in Merck’s drug development journey and supports the seamless execution of global programmes. Through its focus on quality, agility, and operational excellence, the India hub consistently delivers high-impact outcomes while efficiently scaling capabilities across regions. With sustained investment in talent and a state-of-the-art facility, India has emerged as a strategic pillar for Merck R&D - delivering impact with agility, quality, and collaboration.

Merck R&D India Hub has developed Centres of Excellence in areas such as medical writing, biostatistics, and scientific communications. How do these centres influence the quality and speed of global R&D programmes?

Our Centres of Excellence in medical writing, biostatistics, project management and scientific communications effectively contribute to Merck’s global R&D operations. By consolidating deep expertise and embedding it seamlessly into the drug development framework, these centres work across time zones and ensure speed, accuracy, and uncompromising quality across geographies. Centralised expert teams streamline documentation, data analysis, safety monitoring, and scientific exchange- reducing duplication, accelerating study timelines, and supporting timely regulatory deliverables. The result is stronger compliance and more efficient execution of complex programmes. In short, Healthcare R&D India Hub steadily supports global programmes with consistency, efficiency, and quality.

What specific skills does Merck look for as it builds advanced healthcare R&D capabilities in India?

At Merck Healthcare R&D India Hub, we look for talent that blends deep scientific expertise with future-ready skills. Domain excellence is critical, but equally important is fluency in data, digital tools, and evolving technologies like AI-enabled processes. We value professionals who bring analytical rigor, agility, and the ability to navigate complex regulatory landscapes with confidence. Collaboration and stakeholder management are essential to thrive in a global, matrixed environment. Above all, we seek individuals who pair scientific excellence with integrity and a patient-first mindset- because the true measure of R&D impact is not just innovation, but better outcomes for patients and their caregivers worldwide.

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