

Thriving biotech entrepreneurs

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Exactly a year ago, BioSpectrum highlighted the second wave of biotech entrepreneurship taking place in the country by profiling 20 of the most prominent new companies in two parts. A year later, it is time to do a reality check. That is what the BioSpectrum editorial team did in the last few weeks. The news is heartening. Most of the companies profiled in 2006 have made significant progress since then, some even charting out new pathways in their quest to find a place among the country's new crop of wealth creators.

Each of them have tried to create their own niche. Some have focused on global opportunities, others have formed alliances, many have stuck to their targets and went after it with single-minded obsession. Some companies are scouting for acquisitions. Just a few examples. Navya Biologicals has moved to Dharwad from expensive Bangalore. RFCL has done a massive reorganization exercise to become a nimble institution. Biovel has set up an office in Atlanta and inked a licensing agreement with US-based Dowpharma to produce Human Growth Hormone (HGH) using Pfenex Expression Technology. Advinus Therapeutics is forging alliances with Veeda, Merck, Samaritan Pharma. Premas has achieved its revenue targets.

Even more heartening is the trend that more entrepreneurship is taking place in the Indian biotech sector now. A few top global companies have set up operations in recent months. Few examples: R&D centers of DuPont, AMRI. One of the world's top biotech company, Biogen Idec has moved in quietly and is testing its waters out of an office based in Gurgaon, a New Delhi suburb. Over 15 new biotech start-ups which will make significant contributions to the industry in the next 4-5 years have been profiled in the September issue.

Another issue that has been hanging fire for some time is the final version of the National Biotech Policy. More than 90 percent of the objectives set out in the draft policy have been implemented, according to Dr M K Bhan, who piloted the policy. Only the contours of the new regulatory mechanisms have to be charted out and the proposal is going through micro-evaluation at the Union cabinet level. An update on the major decisions implemented from the policy is available in this issue.

An example of the policy haze lifting of the biotech sector is the regulatory approval given to the first-ever field trial of a genetically modified (GM) food crop, in this case a Bt brinjal from Monsanto Mahyco, in August. This will open the floodgates for the approval of trials of many more GM food products in the next few months. Policy makers have finally overcome the fear psychosis induced by a large group of vocal NGOs over the food safety issue. Over a dozen GM food crops developed in various publicly funded laboratories in the country are ready to seek regulatory approval. However, the major hurdle in their path is lack of resources to comply with the elaborate processes required by the regulator, the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC) in the Ministry of Environment. It will cost approximately Rs 2 crore to complete the trials required for each product. As part of its mandate to promote biotechnology, the Department of Biotechnology (DBT) could consider financially assisting these research institutions to seek regulatory approvals. It would certainly enhance overall customer choice in GM products.

August was a happening month for Indian biotech. The country's No.1 publicly funded biotech institution, the Rajiv Gandhi Center for Biotechnology (RGCB) in Thiruvananthapuram, has crossed a major hurdle in claiming its National Institution status. The Kerala government handed it over to the Union government in early August. RGCB director, Dr Radhakrishna Pillai has chalked out a major plan to make it one of the country's top biotech institution using the enhanced resources which will be available due to the new status.

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