

The BT Agenda

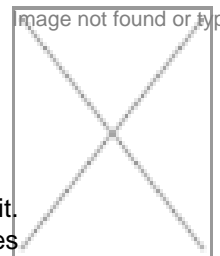
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Fact one: The potential of the Indian BT Industry has not yet been translated into reality. Fact two: There are no stupendous success stories as yet. Are we being impatient with the BT industry? Ask the VCs and they will say that they can't afford patience. They want success, they want heroes and they want exits. One can argue that the great opportunity for BT is in the future. But is the future far away or is it tomorrow? The Indian BT industry needs to get its act together sooner rather than later.

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Last month in BioComment, we talked about the need for India to drive the Biotech bus and not just catch it. The great Indian BT opportunity will become a reality only if we are in the driver's seat and not let ourselves be driven. The Indian BT industry needs to work out an agenda for itself, then convert the agenda into measurable milestones and lastly find the driver for driving the agenda.

Agenda setting can be a minefield with the objectives of various players coming in the way of each other. The case of the BT industry is further complicated by the presence of divergent segments like agriculture, pharmaceuticals and informatics. A common agenda set could include industry mapping, policy matters, confidence building amongst investors, strengthening the education and research aspects, creating the India BT brand abroad and user awareness within the country.

For a relatively new industry, the need for industry mapping is important. One may not even know the total number of players let alone what their activities are. Mapping helps in sizing the industry as various pieces of the industry fall into the BT puzzle. Another advantage of industry mapping is that it builds the BT fraternity and leads to the formation of industry forums.

Is the government helping the industry or playing spoil sport? Set up in 1986, the DBT has undertaken several measures to foster the growth of the BT industry in India. But does the industry want more from the department? The BT industry in India needs a policy group to interact with the government. Governments all over the world work with industry groups to determine policies that would aid the growth of the industry. A common policy document needs to be drawn up by the BT industry that would help create the policy framework.

Funding is a major consideration for the BT industry. The volume of venture capital funding in the BT sector has not been on the upward curve for the last two years. India does not have a single biotech only fund compared to close to 100 biotech funds in the US. So the Indian BT company goes to the multi-sector funds most of whom do not have biotech as an investment priority. Considering the fact that the BT industry is in a nascent stage, seed funding is the order of the day as it would facilitate the entry of new players. Unfortunately most multi sector VCs do not want to do seed funding. They demand demonstrated capabilities. Tackling expectation mismatches like these has to be on the agenda of the BT industry. If the VCs are not willing to fund, the finance group of the industry has to pave the way for alternate funding sources. The availability of human capital is significant in BT due to the great deal of research that is involved. It would not be out of place to state that success for the BT industry is largely based on the strengthening of research and education facilities all over the country. When asked about the areas of BT that India needs to invest in, "Gene Mapper" Craig Venter was categorical when he replied that the best investment is to improve the quality of education and research work.

World class skills will automatically open up the global market for the Indian BT industry. India will evolve as a brand to be reckoned with for services like contract research and clinical trials and for manufacturing products for the global market. The industry has to chalk out a very clear agenda for marketing the India brand. Projecting India as a cheaper destination to get work done can become counter productive. The fruits of BT research and work gets consumed by humans and not by machines. Vested interests in other countries will be quick to point out the importance of GMP, GCP and GLP and question India's adherence to such good practices.

User awareness about BT applications has to increase within the country also. Bt Cotton has had its share of bouquets and brickbats and the debate isn't quite over. What it is certainly leading to is a delay in the introduction of more Bt crops and a perception about Bt based on incorrect assumptions. The industry needs to involve NGOs and user groups in informing farmers and the public at large the benefits of BT. The industry has to realize that the domestic market for BT applications is large, in fact very large.

The agenda can be sequenced and modified. But what is mandatory is that the Indian BT industry must have an agenda and identify the various priorities before it. The industry must seek to set a pace for itself and move ahead from a pilot project stage into a full fledged industry. There is a need for the industry and government to work together for covering the agenda items in quick time. Who will enABLe that?

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