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Gujarat biotech initiatives

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Gujarat, a state that witnessed a devastated quake, is now involved in the rehabilitation process. Many organizations are involved in rebuilding the economy of the state. To embark on the speedy growth, the state has been using the biotechnology as a tool of social development. Besides the government wants to create an environment for the growth of biotechnology in the state.

Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi has already invited the industry people to make the state a base for their biotech divisions. He also invited the biotech entrepreneurs to invest in Gujarat. Observing that the state was best placed to capture a large part of the growing bioinformatics and contract research markets, he promised that the state government would take all steps to facilitate their investment.

Not satisfied with the assurances of the Chief Minister, the industry group has suggested the government to draft a biotechnology policy to leverage the knowledge economy. The industry group said the lack of a clear-cut policy would deter foreign players from investing in the state. The industry says that without a proper framework, operating in Gujarat will be difficult. The state needs policy pronouncements on the lines of Millennium Biotech Policy of Karnataka. The industry feels that the biotech sector should get the concessional sales tax treatment and subsidies as given to other technology intensive fields of IT products and services.

The industry is eagerly looking at the opportunities in biotech sector in the state. Arvind Kushwah, research executive, Indus Biotherapeutics says, "the state has resources. The state meets over 40 percent of the national need for medicines and is growing at an annual rate of 20 percent much higher than the national and global growth. Even in agri sector, Gujarat is contributing a major chunk to the national economy. It is major edible oil seed producing state in the country. Looking at the opportunity and available resources in the state we see growth for biotechnology. Although biotechnology is still in nascent stage, it will pick up in the state as universities are offering biotech courses. The government is considering setting up Biotech Park. But it will take time as the state is still working on draft biotech policy."

Bhavin Palkhiwala, director, Maps (India) Ltd, Ahmedabad, has similar views about the scope of biotechnology in the state. He says, " Biotechnology is a booming sector. Every one is keen to know more about it. Government is making efforts to organize seminars, workshops to create awareness among the general public in Gujarat. Organizations like All India Biotech Association and Ahmedabad Management Association are conducting short term training programs for students and professionals. In July the state government is planning to organize an exhibition on biotechnology to promote the sector in a big way in the state. Definitely the state has better opportunities ahead in biotechnology after missing the Information Technology train."

Marching ahead

The state has identified thrust areas in biotech and is preparing an effective state biotech policy for its successful implementation. The areas include healthcare and pharmaceuticals, agricultural biotechnology, industrial enzymes, bioinformatics, contract research, marine and environmental biotechnology. The biotech mission will soon start functioning with several incentives and schemes to achieve its well-defined goals.

Bridging the network pool

The government is also considering promotion of large network of laboratories and related infrastructure and institutions. The government will provide funds for preparation of feasibility studies and detailed project reviews for setting up institutions. The presence of major pharma companies in Gujarat can provide scope for research institutions and universities to take up contract research. The establishment of institutional R&D will push the biotech sector in the state. It can also help in generating and converting biotechnical knowledge into industrial applications and commercial products.

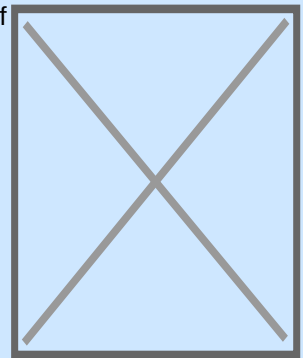
The government has announced that it will set up a biotech venture capital fund for promoting biotech units in the state. Apart from promoting establishment of institutional R&D, the government intends to set up an Institute of Bioinformatics to offer academic programs to carry out research and development activities in collaboration with the corporate sector and other related institutions as well as to undertake short term training programs. The government has already earmarked funds for this purpose.

The state government has decided to support the individual skilled technical experts and manpower with expertise in biotechnology to take up individual research projects/studies. To promote and develop the biotech sector in the state, the government of Gujarat has made some provisions in the current financial year. The state will help the process of encouraging collaborations with organizations and investment in various biotechnology areas and to provide support through participation of fairs exhibitions etc., through the department of science and technology.

Narayan Kulkarni

"We are coming out with a clear and friendly biotechnology policy in Gujarat"

Gujarat is attempting to make a strong entry into the fast developing biotech industry with a host of initiatives, which include emphasis on developing the human resource base. Narayan Kulkarni of BioSpectrum spoke to Rajesh Kishore, secretary, Department of science & technology, Government of Gujarat, about the state govt. initiatives to promote the biotech sector. Excerpts:



What are the biotech opportunities in Gujarat?

The state is the home to many big companies like Cadila Pharmaceuticals, Cipla, Zydus Cadila, Sun Pharmaceuticals, Torrent Biotech, Sarabhai -Piramal, Maps India, Gujarat Life Sciences, Gujarat State Fertilizers Cooperation, Sun Agri and Gujarat Narmada Fertilizer Corporation. Most of them have significant biotech activities. Apart from these the state has many small and medium scale industries engaged in different sectors of biotechnology. The state hosts one of the largest agriculture universities in the country, the Gujarat Agriculture University. Gujarat also has a number of institutions involved in biotech research and development such as the MS University, Sardar Patel University, Saurashtra University, Central Salt and Marine Chemicals Research Institute, BV Patel Pharmaceuticals Education and Research Center. These are providing basic and strong scientific back up to the state's biotech initiative. The National Dairy Development Board and the Indian Council for Agriculture Research centers add to the state's institutional resources in biotechnology areas.

Which are the areas Gujarat plans to concentrate in biotechnology?

The thrust areas include healthcare and pharmaceuticals, agricultural biotechnology, industrial enzymes, bioinformatics, contract research, marine and environmental biotechnology.

In generic pharma, we are the leaders in India by meeting 40 percent of the national needs for medicines. We are now looking at R&D in pharma. Big pharma companies like Cipla, Zydus Cadila, Sun Pharmaceuticals are investing heavily in R&D and biotech research. Hence it is not difficult for us to move from a simple and plain pharma to biotech based pharma state.

The pharma companies have a long-term vision. That is why companies like Torrent Biotech, Indus Biotherapeutics and Intas are venturing into the biotech field. The pharma companies have core generic products. They know that the future lies in biotechnology. If you want to be in the market you have to be ready with a new generation of products. The competition is pushing the companies in Gujarat to invest heavily into the biotech sector. Five years down the line they will see big business opportunities in this sector. The companies are also looking at the diagnostic sector as a lucrative one.

The next thrust area is the agri sector. The firms in the state are investing in tissue culture, bio fertilizer and bio pesticides. Gujarat State Fertilizers Cooperation, Sun Agri and Gujarat Narmada Fertilizer Corporation and agriculture universities are doing research in bio agriculture.

The third major sector is industrial enzymes. The corporates are modernizing, updating and expanding their production and also exporting the same. So the scope for the development of industrial enzyme sector is encouraging. Maps India is doing good work in this sector.

Contract research services is the other emerging trend in the state. In addition to these key areas the state is very keen to develop marine biotechnology. We have a 1600 km long coastline with an amazing variety of marine lives. The state is the home of the two Marine National Parks of the country. The Central Salt and Marine Chemicals Research Institute at Bhavnagar has already initiated research and development work in marine biotechnology. We are discussing with the director of the Central Salt and Marine Chemicals

Research Institute for setting up a center of excellence in marine biotechnology at the institute. The state government is ready to provide the matching funds for setting up the center.

Is the state government preparing a biotech policy that can help industry to grow vertically?

Gujarat is a front runner with its industrial promotion policy. We have policies on road, information technology, power, port and industries that opt for special economic zones. Similarly we are coming out with a biotechnology policy in a couple of months which will focus on developing human resources. It will help the industry to develop in a better way. Lack of educational institutions pulled down our IT initiatives. This time we don't want to make the same errors in the biotech sector. Even though we know it is a long journey, our aim is to first build a strong human resource base in biotechnology.

Which will be your focus areas in the state biotech policy?

Our focus should be on universities that are offering bioscience courses. The government has decided to develop strong human resource base by funding the universities and other research organizations to set up labs, libraries and train the teachers in biotechnology.