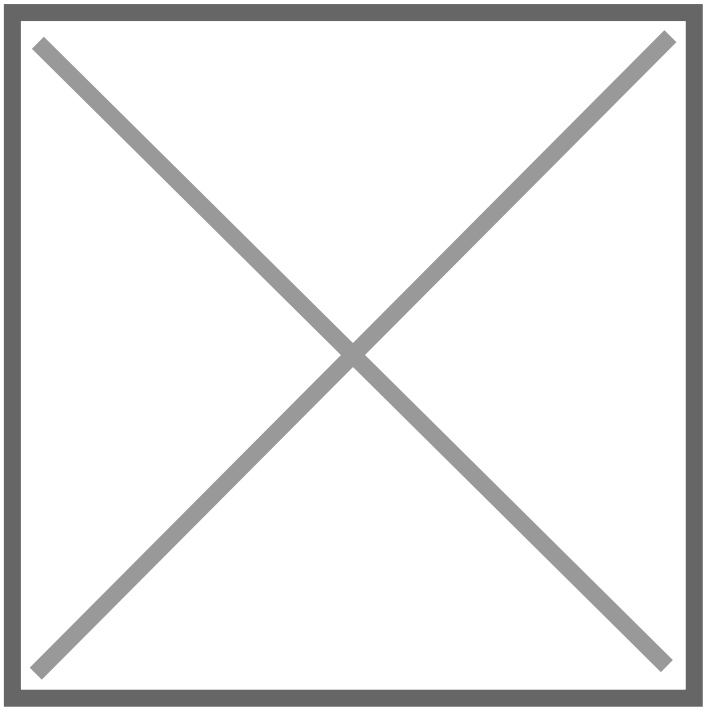
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The humble facilitator

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Lifetimeachievementadd

N1addition **Dr S Natesh**
former senior adviser, Department of Biotechnology, Ministry of Science and Technology, Government of India, New Delhi

Highly respected, Dr S Natesh has worked tirelessly towards bridging the gap between policy making and biotechnology industry in India. His sincere efforts have helped the biotech sector unleash several firsts and milestones

Soft spoken and down to earth are the two qualities that are very often attributed to the teachers. Dr S Natesh went on to carry these qualities with him as an administrator. Having served the department of biotechnology (DBT) as one of its oldest members over a period of two and half decades, Dr Natesh played a very crucial role in taking the biotechnology sector to a new level. As a key executioner of few important projects, right from the beginning he was involved in the key policy making decisions for promoting new ideas and collaborations. For his deep involvement in promoting good science, he has been kept in high regard equally by his colleagues, academicians and industry leaders. It was also during his time when the goals were set by the government to create talent pool (the launch of DBT supported masters course in biotechnology), infrastructure for animal models and indigenous chemicals for research. He played his role well in different capacities to spearhead the key initiatives in bioenergy, biomedical research, scientific communication and international collaborations.

Having taught at the Delhi University (DU) for a period of nine years, Dr Natesh moved to the government in 1984, while continuing simultaneously as a guest faculty for another nine years. Though his stint at DBT ended in August this year, Dr Natesh is still occupied with lots of committees as a head or member. He currently holds the post of a trustee at the Wellcome Trust-DBT India Alliance that awards seventy fellowships each year to attract the best Indian biomedical scientists working abroad. Feeling quite contented with the work he did all along, he cherishes the moments spent at DU and DBT during his thirty seven year long career. With exceptional experiences and expertise on his side, Dr Natesh believes that the industry and academia are moving closer at a faster pace. The multi-disciplinary research along with the mix of engineering and biosciences is what he thinks is important at the moment.

Born in a middle class family at Mysore, Dr Natesh spent his early childhood days with his parents and six brothers and sisters. Education was somewhat disjointed as he had to shuffle between Mysore to Bangalore. After completing his secondary school leaving certificate (SSLC) from Mysore in 1965, he moved to Pune on insistence of his elder brother who was working there at National Chemical Laboratory (NCL). At NCL he got

admission for pre degree plus three-year bachelors course in botany at Abasaheb Garware College, also better known as MES college back then. After graduating in 1969, he joined the masters course in botany at the department of botany, University of Pune. Taking a look back at those days, Dr Natesh told us that he loved to travel every week to Khandala for field trips. Ã¢â?¬Å?I really enjoyed the days when we used to take the Jhanta Express train from Pune to Khandala in the morning and used to return with polybags full of various plants by the evening. It seemed as if we knew all the big and small plants in Pune and surrounding areas. It was a wonderful experience of the lifetime,Ã¢â?¬? recalls Dr Natesh with a laugh.

He credits his teacher at the botany department, Ms Hema Sahni for being an inspiration both in education and life. He passed his MSc course in 1971 with flying colors by topping the class.

Â Lending a helping hand to industryÂ

Dr S Natesh made major intellectual contribution towards the concept and content development of several major programs of DBT such as the National Biotechnology Development Strategy, National Biotechnology Regulatory Authority, Agri-food Cluster in Mohali, Biotechnology Industry Research Assistance Council, Biotechnology Industry Partnership Program, Translational Health Science and Technology Institute in Faridabad, Regional Centre for Biotechnology in Faridabad, National Institute for Animal Biotechnology, Small Business Innovation Research Initiative, and Biotech cluster in the campus of UAS, Bangalore. All these initiatives have been aimed at making the industry more mature and expand its presence in the country.

The first and brief professional break came as a lectureship at Ahmednagar college. He also acted as a demonstrator there, though he didn't continue with the job for long, as another opportunity at Delhi University (DU) was awaiting him. He came to Delhi the same year and accepted the University Grants Commission (UGC) scholarship worth 300 at the Centre of Advanced Botany at DU. There, Professor PM Joshi guided him to apply for the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) fellowship to the tune of 350, an amount that Dr Natesh says was considered huge at that time. After a delay of 3-4 months, he joined the doctorate degree in botany at DU under Prof. Bhandari. After he completed his research education, around the year 1974, it was time for his first real job which was at Khalsa college, Delhi. For the next nine years, he taught botany and those according to him were the best days of his early professional life.

Ã¢â?¬Å?Then Khalsa wasn't counted among the best colleges compared to St. Stephans or Hindu college, despite the fact that our college had the best building, labs and library. Besides, the college was generous with the fundings as compared to others. Other than teaching, I initiated essay competitions, debates in the college and it was a great experience altogether,Ã¢â?¬? recollects Natesh, looking amused.

Dr Natesh, through his efforts, brought DBT and industry closer to each other. His collaborative and participative attitude helped many labs to bring out products. He definitely has left his mark that is going to stay a long time"

Dr Rajesh Jain

managing director, Panacea Biotec, New Delhi

Along with teaching, Dr Natesh also experimented with organizing skills, when he got a chance to organize the international genetic conference at Delhi. However, over a period of time, Dr Natesh, who always have an eye for doing new things and believed in creativity, seemed slightly restless with the monotonous work he carried out. He wonders if it could have been possible to change the curriculum after a certain period of time to keep the interest. But he knew at that time it wasn't possible as most of the teachers according to him always resist changes. Around the same time in 1984, he got an opportunity to serve at Department of Science and Technology as a senior scientific officer.

Â Promoting global exchangesÂ

Dr Natesh has provided a new direction, leadership and impetus to international collaboration in DBT.

Under his guidance, special attention has been given to forge enduring alliances with a few well-chosen countries that lead in innovation and discovery and complement India's strengths in biotechnology.

He helped to initiate the Â£80 million initiative on biomedical research, funded equally by the Wellcome Trust, UK and DBT, India.

Feeling nostalgic, Dr Natesh recalls his days at DBT. He says, Ã¢â?¬Å?From that era, there are only four people including myself left in DBT now. I still recall that Thursday in February 1986 when the big news of the creation of DBT was announced by Dr S Ramachandran. We were a small team of about 10-12 people, part of

the Department of Science and Technology Cell that served the National Biotechnology Board (NBTB), the multi-agency apex body in which Dr Ramachandran was member secretary. Everyone was excited and there were animated discussion about the immediate future. One of the decisions we took at the meeting was to settle on the acronym 'DBT' (after tossing out 'DoB and 'DoBT'). Soon, we were transferred with our posts to the new department. By August of that year the estate office allocated about 15,000 square feet to DBT in block two of CGO complex on Lodhi Road and we moved into the present premises in December. CGO complex those days was still bereft of tree cover and so, quite windy. The place was pretty isolated and after office hours it was very dark and desolate. The winter of 1986 was particularly severe and our rooms were very terribly cold. I remember having painful chill blains on my feet (despite wearing two socks on each foot!). But work was plentiful and exciting and we all had a sense of doing something for the country.Ã¢â?¬?

Dc0385

He tried his best to bring industry and academia closer and was successful in initiating many projects"

Dr Pradip Bhatnagar
president and head, Daiichi Sankyo Life Science Research Center, Gurgaon

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At DBT, Dr Natesh dabbled in various roles. He fondly remembers the time when the then prime minister, Mr Rajiv Gandhi chaired the meeting to discuss the five technology missions including telecommunications, drinking water, health, energy and information technology. As a result of high focus on science and technology at that time, Dr Natesh initially was assigned two major initiatives. One being the vaccine R&D, the other was on edible oil from palm and coconut. He headed several divisions including bioresources, medicinal and aromatic plants, environmental biotechnology, food biotechnology and biotechnology for societal development. He was also the first member secretary of the National Bioresource Development Board. Among several other responsibilities, Dr Natesh also headed the international collaboration division and also served as the editor-in-chief of DBT's official bimonthly newsletter, 'DBT News'.

Along with his colleagues, he traveled to various countries to study different models for palm tree cultivation and finally decided to choose the ones from Costa Rica and South America. The elite material was replicated in the states of Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. He was also instrumental in setting up of International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (ICGEB) at Delhi. His role in setting up of DBT-Wellcome Trust India Initiative is well appreciated by everyone in the industry.

Â The icon of simplicityÂ

Having played the multiple roles of teacher, organizer, administrator and editor during his unique career, Dr Natesh is a powerhouse of energy and more importantly humbleness. Dr Natesh's simple lifestyle was a pleasant surprise when BioSpectrum visited him at his home. Living in a modest apartment with wife Mrs Geetha, his belief in self service was visible from the fact that he chose to serve the guests all by himself. The couple is blessed with two daughters, one of whom is working as a journalist and other perusing her doctorate degree in wildlife. Fond of reading in his free time, he is also a big fan of classical music. Having groomed his journalistic skills as the editor of Ã¢â?¬Å?DBT NewsÃ¢â?¬?, now he is all set to don the hat of a writer

He was keenly involved in the development of policy for seri-biotechnology besides being an important part of the National Bioresource Development Board, set up under the aegis of the DBT, that initiated a national level program to develop a digitized inventory of the biological resources of the country culled from published information. Ã¢â?¬Å?The lack of readily accessible information on how much of what bio-resources occur where, has become a limiting factor in conservation planning and converting our bio wealth into economic bio wealth,Ã¢â?¬? opines Dr Natesh.

Dc0420

Apart from his administrative skills, it is interesting to note that he handled the 'Biotech News' magazine so well as an editor"

Dr Virander Chauhan
director, International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology, New Delhi

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Dr Natesh is full of praise for his colleagues at DBT and thanked them for the support offered to him. He feels blessed to have met great inspiring people during the course of his career. He expressed his high gratitude for all the DBT bosses - Dr S Ramachandran, Dr CR Bhatia, Dr Manju Sharma who he thinks were the right people at the right place. With the mention of the name Dr MK Bhan, the current secretary, brings a grin on his face. Ã¢â?¬Å?He always treated me as his friend first and then a colleague. I enjoyed a lot while working with such a dynamic personality,Ã¢â?¬? he says thoughtfully.

'We need to evolve as per need'

Nc66

Q Please elaborate about the successful international collaborations? What about bringing bright researchers back to India?

We have had an opportunity to facilitate fruitful collaborations with various partner nations such as the US, UK, Finland, Germany, Australia, Canada, and Israel, to name a few. The collaborations have now moved from being only the government-government to governmentphilanthropic and government-industry to industry-industry. This shift will surely help to broaden the number of exchanges and eventually the outcomes. As an example, Wellcome Trust-DBT joint initiative has been doing a fantastic job by supporting and nurturing the biomedical research in India by offering early career, intermediate and senior fellowships to researchers who are Indian nationals overseas citizens of India. Another initiative, the Ramalingaswamy fellowship, which having undergone five rounds, has so far been awarded to 130 deserving researchers from abroad. It will surely give them the confidence to return and do something for their motherland.

Q What is the role that bioclusters would play in future?

We have to understand that evolving with time is a necessity. The bioclusters are an important step towards ensuring the perfect model of collaborative research for future. One of them in form of Faridabad biocluster has the Regional Center for Biotechnology and Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi for education and imparting engineering skills receptively. It also has the National Institute of Plant Genome research center for plant biotechnology along with All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) establishing a center for medical biotechnology. All this has never happened before and this bench to bedside approach will surely open new possibilities for future. It is important to have a mix of both basic and translational research. Fortunately we are treading on a right path.

Rahul Koul