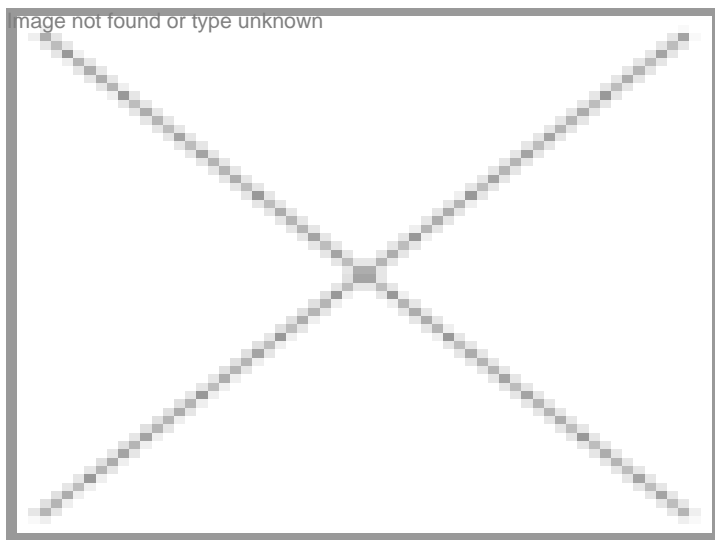


Biotech Gets Priority in Pakistan

10 March 2005 | News



Biotechnology is now engulfing several countries in the South Asian region. While China and India are leading the race, other countries too want to make progress with biotechnology development. India's immediate neighbor Pakistan too has launched itself into biotechnology development in a small way. Though at the moment there is no cultivation of genetically modified crop in Pakistan, it sees biotech in agriculture, healthcare and industrial sectors as a priority area. And it expects to have modern biotech companies in the next year. Dr Anwar Nasim, chairman, National Commission on Biotechnology in Pakistan, reasoned, "Pakistan is predominantly an agriculture-based economy. Agriculture accounts for the 24 percent of Pakistan's GDP. It covers a total area of 19,671 million acres of which 5,411 million acres are cultivated. It is a country of over 150 million people. And biotechnology can help us a lot."

The modern biotech industry in Pakistan is extremely small. "Using traditional means, our ancestors were breeding animals and growing crops of different varieties and these common practices have damaged the cultivated land through water and wind erosion, compaction, salination and water logging. To overcome the impending shortage in this field, conventional methodologies have to undergo a paradigm shift. Thus the government is primarily focusing on various aspects of agricultural

biotechnology," explained Dr Nasim.

But Pakistan has seen a lot of work using traditional biotechnology methods. It has created many new plant varieties. The government is understood to have laid strong foundations for biotechnology in a coordinated way. "The Ministry of Science and Technology has in fact invested over Rs 100 crore in various projects," informed Dr Nasim. There are 27 government institutes and universities working in the field of biotechnology. "The main thrust of most of these institutes has been development of genetically modified crops that are best suited to our environment and can increase the productivity of the crops with minimal environmental hazards," he added.

Pakistan has a National Commission on Biotechnology. The Commission is an advisory body to the Ministry of Science and Technology to help monitor new developments in the field of biotechnology at national and international levels and it recommends appropriate measures. The Commission comprises 14 members, which includes expert agriculturists, environmentalists, industrialists and scientists. There is no national biotech policy and the National Commission is studying various regulations, especially the developments happening in India so that it can formulate one on similar lines in Pakistan. Pakistan will soon be coming up with its own biosafety norms.

According to Dr Nasim, the National Commission for Science and Technology chaired by the President of Pakistan has declared biotechnology as one of the highest priority areas among the selected research fields. A project has been launched to improve research in agriculture, livestock, and medical sectors at universities and R&D organizations. Under the project liberal grants are being made available for active research scientists working in this field. Further, the private sector is also being encouraged.

Dr Nasim informed that Pakistan is keen on initiating an Andhra Pradesh model for Faisalabad. At the moment biotech development is happening in Faisalabad, Islamabad, Rawalpindi, Jamshoro, Karachi, Lahore, Multan, Peshawar, and Quetta. The biotech research in Pakistan is carried out in the National Institute for Biotechnology and Genetic Engineering (NIBGE), Faisalabad, the Centre of Excellence in Marine Biology (CEMB), NFC Institute of Engineering and Fertilizer Research, National Institute of Leather Technology, and Pakistan Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (PCSIR) Laboratories.

The next step forward for Pakistan is to build business relationships and kick-start the biotech activity, said Dr Nasim. During BioAsia 2005, few companies from Pakistan signed agreements with some of the leading biotech companies from India- Bharat Biotech, Natco Pharma, Otira Pharma.

Ch. Srinivas Rao with Sunitha Natti, CyberMedia News in Hyderabad

"We are here to explore Biotech trade"

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Dr Anwar Nasim, chairman, Pakistan National Commission on Biotechnology

With developing countries joining the joint venture bandwagon in biotech, India's immediate neighbor is no different. To increase the domestic production of biotech products, a six-member delegation from Pakistan was in Hyderabad to try out the technology transfer pacts with Indian companies. This delegation was headed by Dr Anwar Nasim, chairman, the Pakistan National Commission on Biotechnology. He is also the president of the Federation of Asian Biotech Association (FABA) and science advisor for OIC Standing Committee on Scientific and Technological Cooperation (COMSTECH). Dr Nasim is trained in genetics and has edited over 45 books. In this exclusive interview, he shares his vision and developments in Pakistan.

Could you give an overview of the biotech scene in Pakistan?

Pakistan is still in the nascent stages as far as the biotech industry is concerned. We have only 10-12 pharma firms worth the names in this business. Precisely, we are entirely dependent on the Western firms and health bodies like the World Health Organization (WHO) for our domestic needs. And the key to growth is by establishing strategic tie-ups with Indian firms to develop the country's biotech sector.

What are your present trade links?

The Pakistan government has recently listed nearly 150 finished products that can be imported from India. Three companies in Pakistan have already started trading with Indian firms thereby shipping products into our country in the space of vaccines, snake venom and intermediaries. It could also be said that more five to six such collaborations are in the pipeline. And the six-member delegation was at the BioAsia 2005 conference to explore trade possibilities with Indian counterparts.

What is the status of your biotech R&D activity?

It is a well-known fact that research in the biotech industry needs enormous amount of money and time. Though the activity on this front is quite negligible so far, the government is really extending support in all possible ways and this is quite encouraging for companies. One way to do this is to promote research with joint collaborations and the other ways to improve the biotech industry is establishing deals with biotech and pharmaceutical companies.

Equally, there needs to be a strong connection between the industry and research institutes and academies, which is a little bit weak at present but is improving at a faster rate. Prospects of the industry are still a challenge but all-out efforts are being made to spell out success.

What are the main objectives of your Commission on Biotechnology?

The mandate of the Commission is to focus on human resource development, strengthening research facilities, funding young researchers for projects of high priority, strengthening government-private sector collaboration, creating awareness and encouraging research, which increases export.

It has been decided that initially special attention should be paid to human resource development and in view of the limited resources. Agriculture and health will be the top priority areas.

You have been instrumental in setting up the FABA. What do you wish to achieve?

The FABA has been set up to promote and safeguard the overall interests of biotechnology as a science, profession, industry and trade in Asian countries. We will coordinate and cooperate with other federations and associations in the world, collect information and sponsor study and business teams traveling to other countries. We already have eight members and plan to increase the same during the year.