

Innovators term expanding innovation system a priority

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During the last three years, Biotechnology Industry Research Assistance Council (BIRAC) has organized the annual innovators meet in September each year and these has been very well received by all the stake holders. This time around too, the event witnessed bigwigs of biotech industry and academia coming together on a government sponsored platform.

Held for the fourth time on September 15-16, 2015, at Manesar in National Capital Region, the BIRAC's annual innovators meeting was themed 'Invigorating the Biotech Innovation Ecosystem'. The event's focus was on innovators, who interacted, networked and discussed successful case studies, challenges and opportunities for strengthening the biotech enterprise. The event saw the participation of BIRAC funded innovators, key partners and of course, all connected stakeholders.

While welcoming the delegates, Dr Renu Swarup, managing director, BIRAC mentioned, "This platform has repeatedly proven to be of great help in exchange of ideas between entrepreneurs." When we started, there were no funds available to individuals. After Dr M K Bhan suggested to us, we took specific steps to address it." Dr Swarup listed out the action taken report on in 2014. She explained, ""It is very interesting to know that how we made our pan India presence felt. In last 3 years, we have 155 innovators." She thanked innovators who responded to recent survey conducted by BIRAC.

Adding further, Dr Swarup said, "We are now focusing on the areas that require out more attention. It is very heartening to find out that 45 of the BIG funded innovators later founded their own firms. Well qualified 500 skilled professionals (MSc and PhD) have availed benefits. Scaling up our operations is high on agenda." BIRAC chief also talked about challenges. She admitted that the communication has not been enough and more needs to be done on that front. "BIRAC equity fund has not been operationalized so far due to fewer funds. We know that there will be lot of applicants and don't want to deny it to right ones. We are working on it and hopefully will have full support from the government as the Prime Minister's announcement on start up mission is encouraging," she mentioned.

The innovators meet has proved to be an excellent platform for knowledge exchange and networking among the young entrepreneurs, startups, SMEs and companies and also to discuss important issues which are critical for the scale up of the

biotech innovation ecosystem.

In his keynote address, Dr M K Bhan, former secretary, department of biotechnology (DBT) mentioned that biotech is maturing globally and we should have patience to reap its benefits. He elaborated, "While starting today, impact cannot happen tomorrow. Keep believing and supporting the research till maturity. Science can find solutions as soon as possible given the support and patience. Recently how Ebola vaccine was developed in such a short duration is an interesting example. The way regulations fell in place due to social obligations too was a good precedent."

Talking about the future, he listed out the focus areas. "Science and technology at the university level has to be given maximum attention. Generally, it is seen that the leaders of institutions are ill prepared. Leadership building programme plays a very important role. Best that biotech has to offer will happen in next 15 years. Let us not slow down due to few issues. Great nations foresee opportunities and our nation apart from manufacturing should also pay attention to innovation."

"No ecosystem grows in a systematic way. Few components grow faster and few are slower. Besides needing the connect between them, there is requirement of being tough and enduring in this long journey of entrepreneurship," added Dr Bhan.

Speaking on this occasion, Prof K VijayRaghavan, chairman, BIRAC and secretary, DBT, talked about challenges and working towards solutions to fix them. "Expansion of BIRAC only would not solve all issues as it cant be the alone torchbearer. There have to be more BIRAC like organizations. There are too many challenges and what BIRAC which has got overburdened can do, is to scale up its resources," he said. Secretary also opined that SME's can be truly transformative and brainstorming is required between these and the NGOs within the sector. He called for efforts to seek funds from various sources apart from fixed budget."

Dr G Padmanabhan, NASI-Chairman and former director, Indian Institute of Science in his address mentioned, "Industry must be brought into mentoring committees. It should not only be the government officials as making it multi-faceted shall ensure its credibility and build confidence."

The first day of the event witnessed presentations from BIRAC awardees and intense deliberations on their ideas. The BIG Innovator awardees presented their ideas before the audience and were much appreciated.

The first panel discussion on building and scaling biotech innovation in India was moderated by Dr Renu Swarup and the distinguished panel comprised of Prof Anil Gupta, IIM Ahmedabad; Mr David Gill, managing director, St John's Innovation Centre, Cambridge; Prof C B Sanjeevi, Karolinska Institutet, Sweden; Ms Deepanwita Chattopadhyay, chairman and CEO, IK Knowledge Park and Mr Sharad Sharma, IKP Knowledge Park.

During the discussions, Prof Anil Gupta highlighted the fact that areas having inadequacies need to be identified and we must fine tune our own system to match the aspirations of middle class youth. "The background and struggles of an entrepreneur coming from middle or lower strata of society, cannot be looked away," he pointed out rightly. Prof Gupta also emphasized on the need to identify the gaps in laboratory equipments and development of indigenous technologies by putting the needs before designing teams. "That can trigger innovation and thus create new avenues for entrepreneurs," he added.

The deliberation was followed later by the parallel sessions on healthcare, agriculture economics and clean energy. The healthcare session had two topics that were deliberated upon separately. While one was on strategies for addressing antimicrobial resistance (AMR) issues in India, the other was on integrating big data analytics in personalized medicine for standard care. Under agriculture, the economics of it was discussed with focus on revolutionizing productivity and quality. The session on energy was dedicated to biotech solutions for 'Swachh Bharat' to ensure clean energy.

Anchored by Dr Satya Dash, COO, BIRAC, the event went on smoothly with interactions happening between the private investors, accelerators and other key players of the ecosystem. In the evening, a candid talk and interaction session of the participants was held with Dr K VijayRaghavan.

On September 16th, the second day of the event, Dr R A Mashelkar, chancellor, AcSIR and national research professor, NCL, Pune gave his plenary lecture on building India as an innovation hub. "In India, we must move from publish or perish to patent, publish and prosper," he said. It was followed by the interaction between mentors and innovators where there were presentations and a panel discussion.

BIRAC, in the last few years has been making a concerted effort to stimulate and nurture a vibrant biotech innovation ecosystem. It has created a network of over 350 Startups, SMEs and nearly 150 young entrepreneurs engaged in innovation research for affordable product development. BIRAC has helped catalyze an ecosystem ranging from seed funding to early

and late stage product development support, access to research resources and required infrastructure and most importantly mentorship and networks.