

Mr Prasad: Setting up of biotech parks is our top priority

16 January 2013 | Interviews | By Narayan Kulkarni

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Karnataka, which is India's biotech hub, has emerged as the first stop for global and domestic biotech investments in the country. The state has the advantages of having strong research capabilities, resource base, skilled manpower and government support creating an enabling environment for growth.

Bangalore, Asia's fastest growing technopolis and world's fourth largest technology cluster, is an ideal destination for biotechnology firms looking for specialized research facilities, medical and engineering graduates, IT support structure and modern infrastructure. The state has many biotech projects and provides 8,000 jobs in this sector. On February 4-6, 2013, Bangalore will be hosting the 13th edition of Bangalore INDIA Bio - India's biggest and most sought after biotech forum that has evolved over the last 12 years.

BioSpectrum spoke to Mr ISN Prasad, principal secretary to Government, Department of Information Technology, Biotechnology and Science and Technology, Government of Karnataka to get a first-hand account of the status of many programs initiated by the government. Excerpts from the interview.

In the last couple of years, many students are taking up courses related to bioscience. Are there any programs that the state government has in place to promote bioscience education?

Biotechnology is not a labour intensive sector. However, the sector does not find the right talent. The biotech courses offered by the educational institutions and universities are purely academic. The students seeking placement in the biotech sector after completion of the course find themselves unemployable as they lack some of the basic industry skills. The government of Karnataka has therefore introduced the concept of Biotech Finishing Schools (BTFS). The first batch of the BTFS has been successfully completed and the academic course for the second batch have been started in September 2012. The one-year BTFS course consists of six months of education or training in the lab within the academic institution and the other six months on the job training or internship in the industry.

The Institute of Bioinformatics and Applied Biotechnology (IBAB), set up by the state government over 10 years ago, is also a great success story in capacity building. Those who successfully complete the courses offered by IBAB are assured of placement. IBAB has also been successful in incubating start-ups and offering high-end research and development.

Following the launch of finishing school program, is the government looking at extending this benefit to other colleges or institutes?

The current program of BTFS, which is now in its second year, would be reviewed after three years by an independent agency. Their suggestions will be considered for further extension of the program to other colleges in the state. This will also depend on the demand for talent and skills by the biotech institutions and industry.

In Millennium Biotech Policy II, the government has announced plans of setting up parks in tier II cities. What is the status on this front?

The state government plans to establish nutraceutical and phyto-pharmaceutical park (N2P2) in Mysore, a agri-biotech park in Dharwad, a marine biotech park in the coastal city of Mangalore and a vivarium in Bidar. Feasibility discussions with the respective stake holders and project management and control systems (PMCs) are on.

Bangalore, though known to be the biotech hub of the country, still fails to attract investors when it comes to investing in setting up of manufacturing plants. What are the SOPs that you want to offer to the companies who would like to make big investments in bioscience space?

As outlined in the Millennium Biotech Policy II, government is working towards enhancing infrastructure and logistics for smooth functioning of companies interested in making large investments. The focus is on setting up of biotech parks (agriculture, marine and animal husbandry), providing fiscal incentives and concessions and most significantly strengthening the quality of human resources through Institute of Bioinformatics and Applied Biotechnology (IBAB), Institute of Agribiotechnology (IABT), Centre for Human Genetics (CHG) and Biotechnology Finishing Schools (BTFS).

What is the progress on the proposed dedicated fund for biotechnology to attract entrepreneurs to set up ventures in the state?

The Millennium Biotech Policy (Version 2.0) provides for setting-up of bioventure fund of `50 crore to be set up in partnership with professional venture capital (VC) firms. Through this biotech focused fund certain hitech areas with strong social relevance such as transgenics, stemcell biology, and bio manufacturing would be eligible for funding. The government will have 26 percent stake in the proposed fund and balance 74 percent will come from financial institutions and or VC firms. A fund raising agency has been selected through a bidding process for raising the funds to the extent of 74 percent of the fund.

What are the new projects the government is keen on launching in the state for the benefit of the bioscience industry?

The department works in close association with the Vision Group on Biotechnology headed by Dr Kiran Mazumdar Shaw and the industry body, Association for Biotechnology Led Enterprises (ABLE). There is frequent interaction between the officers of the government and the biotech industry representatives. This being a specialized sector, the views of Vision Group are generally taken while instituting new programs.

The biotech park projects for tier-II/III cities and setting-up of the bio venture fund are the priorities on which the department is

working. A biotechnology facilitation centre is already operational in KBITS, which will facilitate and co-ordinate in implementation of various projects or schemes of the department in respect to the biotech sector.

What is the current status of the MoU signed between Government of Karnataka and biotech or pharma companies during the Global Investors Meet?

During the Global Investors Meet 2012, five MoUs were signed for establishing biotech and pharma industrial projects, with a potential investment of `1,140 crore. Three out of the above said five are at different stages of implementation and with respect to one in particular, commercial operations have already been started.