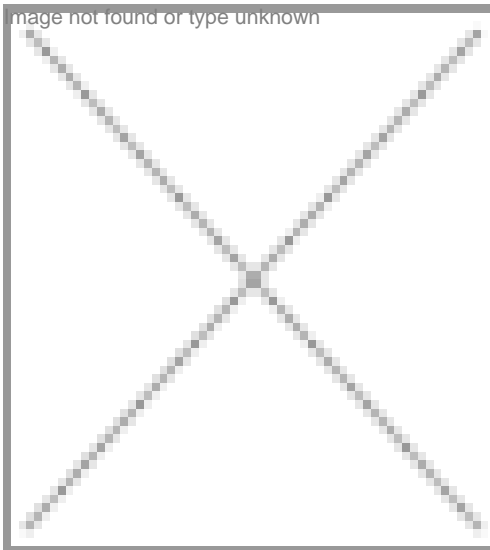


Mission: Tapping into traditional medicine

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SBIRI funding has boosted the joint venture of Goa-based MykoTech and Asthagiri Foundation. It aims to tap the potential of herbal medicine



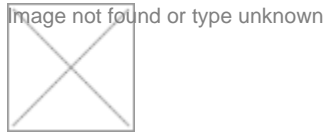
Traditional medicine has always been at the core of Indian medical system and the need to leverage natural products has always been there. While working in this direction, Goa-based MykoTech and Asthagiri Herbal Foundation (AHRF) teamed up with an aim to develop more effective bioactive compounds from through biotransformation.

The company initiated a project on synthesis of novel molecular drugs through biopolymerization of active principles from medicinal plants using the laccase enzyme. Though the concept was generated at MykoTech, AHRF standardized the use of the enzyme for biotransformation and also achieved similar results with

MykoTech, which became operational in 2005, was started by Dr Seshagiri Raghukumar, a former scientist at the National Institute of Oceanography (NIO), Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), Goa. The company was started with the aim of culturing rare and novel fungi from tropical forests of India and examining these for various biotechnological applications. Besides being the possessor of a culture collection of more than 1,000 fungi and several bacteria,

R&D was initially the sole focus of MykoTech and that has been supported by investors in the company, consultancy and

contract research. One major technology that the company has developed is that of extracellular melanin production by a fungus, for which a patent has been filed.



The company finds itself lucky to have received funds for its biotransformation idea from the Small Business Innovation Research Initiative (SBIRI). Dr Raghukumar, who worked at the NIO from 1982 to 2005, says, "We believe that SBIRI is a shining example of PPPs. This could be enlarged to include equity investment in start-up companies. An agency to provide market research for start-ups will be an additional advantage."

Talking about the objective behind the project, Dr Raghukumar says, "We see innovation as the most important aspect that will help new companies to overcome the intense competition that exists in biotechnology industries. We came up with the idea of developing more effective bioactive compounds from known active principles of traditional, medicinal plants through biotransformation. We believe that this is a novel approach and have filed a provisional patent for the process."

The Way Forward

MykoTech is confident that innovative technologies could be developed by studying novel and unique microbes. Currently, the work on the anti-cancer and anti-diabetic assays are in progress at MykoTech. The compound has tremendous potential for use in cosmetics, as a gamma-radiation protectant and also in research. Now the focus of the company is to carry out more research before the usefulness of these biotransformed compounds can be confirmed.

Rahul Koul in New Delhi