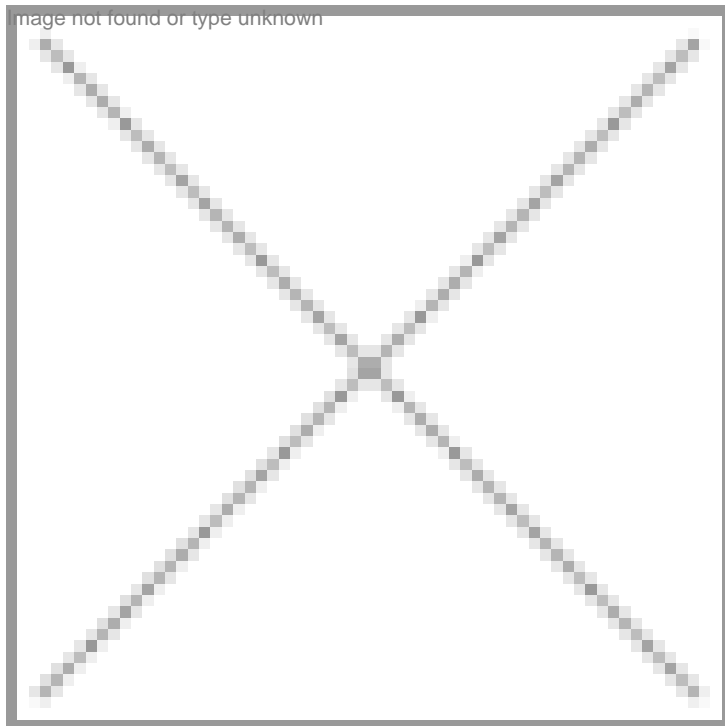


“There is a science and technology network to help the scientists and science collaborations,”

17 March 2004 | News



“There is a science and technology network to help the scientists and science collaborations,”

Sir Michael Arthur, British High Commissioner, New Delhi

image not found or type unknown

Which the UK and Indian companies can partner to mutually benefit? What are the steps taken to promote the UK-India relationships?

In the wider context, there has been a rapid growth in British Indian trade relations. The trade between the two countries would roughly be worth \$10 billion. That is partly in trade of goods and services. What we are also seeing is a significant growth in investments from Britain into India. India is now very big to Britain. And specifically in the biotech sector, we are seeing new interesting models of business partnerships. Quite often they are in the high value-added, hi-tech, and R&D sectors. There are genuine business partnerships, which means there is a bit of work, which is done in each of the countries. British companies are interested in contract work here and also in several other areas of biotech. They are also interested in chemical research and development of products. For example, there is inward investment in AstraZeneca in Bangalore to develop a new TB drug. This is the background of the 21st century cooperation in new economy areas, which is a complete change from what we had in the 20th century. Even in volume terms, this is higher than some of the conventional trade and investments. This is the way relations are going, as there is strong science in both the countries.

So what is the British government doing to help them? We have a major trade and investment promotion operation across the globe. It is the biggest across the world. And with India, we have an identified sector on trade and investment promotion. We have a team to track the sector. That is one area. Then there is a science and technology network, which has science officers in Bangalore and Delhi who work as a team. That again is a huge departure. Three years ago, we did not have that. That will be stepped up to link the scientists and science collaborations, particularly in the biosciences sector, quite often at the research level rather than for business development. There is a third link, which is through the British Council, who in turn have a science policy aimed particularly at bringing new and young scientists together from both countries across all the different sectors. And Biosciences is one of the top priorities because it is one of the built areas in Britain and we would dial ourselves as the leading biotech destination in Europe. Though Germany has more number of companies, in terms of quality of work, we have an edge. That is the overall picture. I would like to give another example of this cross partnership in biotech. When AstraZeneca was setting up its company here in India to do work on the TB drug, Dabur, an Indian company, was investing in Britain to do work on a cancer drug. So you got a new model of partnership.

I am a proponent of joint work where UK companies are investing into Britain and also doing contractual work with our universities and be equal part of the picture. It is a two-way street.

It is not yet the case in bioscience area, but in ICT area it is happening. We are seeing some Indian IT companies floating their stocks internationally. Last year, the single largest equity float on the London Stock Exchange was by an Indian company. And there are more Indian companies on London Exchange than in New York or NASDAQ combined. And as biotech companies get to that scale, London is an obvious destination.

Are there any specific segments that you are targeting?

We are open to proposals in any area. But I know we are looking into bioinformatics, drug research, clinical trials, and agribio. We have had a lot of work on GM crops, though there has been a lot of debate. But the government's position is that we need to get some common sense and science into this debate. So we have been trying to de-escalate the emotion and operate some sensible scientific debate. As a government, we are committed to GM products or work where they are safe.

Another important area is the students segment. We are doing quite a lot to promote student exchanges and we are very keen on getting more Indian students into Britain for two-three reasons. One, our universities are very good in many specialized areas and good Indian students can benefit from that. Also the quality of Indian students we get is high. Some of the faculty members say that it is good for their faculty because the interaction with Indians is very positive. In the bioscience area, we have several scholarship schemes to help the students. We do about 100-120 scholarships each year across the board, not just biosciences, for various programmes. We have just launched a science-specific group of doctoral (PhD) scholarship, which is applicable worldwide. But India and China are its core targets. You are the two favorites. We make matters as easy as possible for foreign students. We have just increased the amount of time a student is allowed to work up to 20 hours a week, which means if a student needs to finance his studies, he can do that by working. This is very helpful particularly in the science area. Today, we are in the same ballpark as the US.

Which are the other areas like IPR that needs to be lined out?

You have IPR, process and patents coming in 2005. That is a crucial mission because the big investors here need to be satisfied that IPR protection is adequate. And that has been, in the past, a reason why big FDI investors have not knocked. Now, the legislation is in place but again it is going to be very important that the implementation, in particular, with the courts and processes gives proper protection to those who file patents. And if you do not have that and gain that international confidence there will be serious implications on Indian new economy businesses. So a lot of people want to come here but they need the right rules and regulations.

What is the position on the visas?

We have a huge visa process system. We give around 270,000 visas a year in India. All of them are for multiple entries and for a vast majority of the applicants, it is a pain-free process. We have started a new outsourcing operation, basically from our High Commission. We make the delivery of visa very fast for the students or for some one who is going to work for on assignment in Britain. We work closely with British companies that have done work skill attachments. This is a good sign of the link between India and Britain. The quarter of a million visas is going up 30 percent a year. We give twice as many number of visas to India as to any country in the world.

What is the future of Indo-UK trade?

It is growing fast and it is increasingly happening in goods and services. And I think the new economy areas will be a big part of it. And particularly the life science sectors. What are my priorities to try and help them? We have the Indo-British partnership, which is a trade forum. Then are links between CII and Consederation of British Industry (CBI) and FICCI and London and so on. There is a whole wave of business partnerships. We want to give another big boost to this relationship. Business and Science is part of the change and there are joint committees to address the same.

â€”N Suresh