

The Biotech Bus

11 April 2003 | News



It is seen as the next big thing for mankind. It has been brewing for many years. It has an influence span that extends across all races and countries. Its applications are spread over all facets of human life. It gets talked about. It gets read about. It has many supporters. It is biotechnology.

Many people see huge opportunities for India in this area. It has the potential to be another information technology like success story. Yet it is not quite there. The hype, the presence, visibility - call it what you want - is not muted. And the potency is strangely subdued. So what is missing?

Is the concept fuzzy? Maybe the very vastness of the subject makes it difficult to get hold of. Like a huge round ball covered with oil rolling on a smooth surface. It is very difficult to get hold of it and give it a sense of direction. Biotechnology - the set of techniques used for developing biological systems and processes - covers many areas. Human and animal health care, agriculture, industry, drugs and perhaps some time in the future even computing. The products that result from these areas include vaccines, transgenic crops, protein drugs, seeds and much more. For technology to spread and for larger absorption in society it is required that its many facets are disseminated over a larger community. It is estimated that there are less than 1,000 companies working in the area of biotechnology with an employment of 20,000 people. In the modern biotech sector there are hardly 70 to 80 companies. If this number has to increase the awareness and potential need to be increased.

The vastness also hampers the defining of measures. The Chinese say that what cannot be measured cannot be improved. So if India wants to be one of the countries driving the biotech bus then it would be a good idea to get some definitions in place and measures found to see progress. These could be selected from many options - investments, employment, revenues, patents - but some measures are required. The government agencies need to get this done as soon as possible. Or maybe there is need for an association to step in and work on these aspects. Probably the first step that is required is a mapping of the industry. So that future roadmaps can be established.

Having done that the next imperative would be to make the sector grow. In a noise infested, clamor crazy world the next thing that is required is a drum and a drum-beater. Today there is no single champion and no common beat for the entire community. That comes in the way of growth. A movement works if it has champions. Biotech has few. And they are also not extremely visible.

And once the drummer is in place what are the tunes that should be played? Tunes that people love to hear and which fuel the growth of the industry.

Venture capital is one. Talk about the investments that have been made and it attracts others. After all there are many who believe that venture capital is vulture capital. Not quite true. But once some of the capital is in place talking about that gets some more. There is nothing amazingly new about this. Money has always attracted more of the same. So how much money has been invested in the Indian biotech sector? It maybe not be huge today but the fact that it is happening is enough to get others interested. Someone needs to collect this data and talk about it - loudly.

Market capitalization is another drum beat that is liked by everyone. So who are the big names here? What are their valuations? It is early days for this sector to throw up glamor leaders but no harm in checking out the potential winners and projecting them as such. There are many pharma companies doing very well in the capital markets who also have biotech initiatives. Can these be highlighted? They have to be projected as the role models. After all aspiration building is the single greatest momentum creator.

What about the discoveries and the research ? What does biotech do for the individual? Or in information technology terms - which is the killer application? Which are the developments in the last five years that have made the world a better place to live in? And which are the ones in the pipeline? Talking about these in a simple manner is a huge unfulfilled need.

Can biotech contribute to solving India's problems ? Can it help create a prosperous, productive and pleasant place ? Consider that we have a billion plus people. Consider that we have a huge percentage of them involved with agriculture. Consider that biotech's major application areas span health and agriculture. The answer is obvious. It would help if that message got spread around a bit.

Another excitement point is the global role for India? It is a big drum. It helps the country find its place in the global community. And success there acquires a different dimension and a new meaning. So which are the success stories sitting there? We need to share them across many communities.

Biotechnology is ready to come out of the closet. It is time for it. And this is one bus India does not have to miss. In fact it should not catch it also. India should be one of the drivers. It has all that it needs. It should be driving the Biotech Bus.

What we have tried to do above is spell out the agenda for BioSpectrum. We believe it is also the agenda for this industry and this country. We will seek to raise issues and propagate solutions. With the help of the policy makers, the industry, the researchers and others.

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