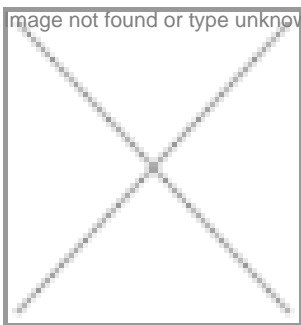


India's biotech needs an Anna Hazare

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Science and Technology Minister Vilasrao Deshmukh has won all round kudos for his role as the interlocutor between the government and Team Anna Hazare and the deft last minute negotiations that led to an amicable end to the Gandhian leader's 13-day hunger strike. Deshmukh's name will be associated when the four-decade-old Lokpal Bill (government ombudsman) becomes a reality in

Ironically, while the nation will soon get a strong ombudsman thanks to Anna Hazare, the disturbances in Parliament over the issue led to yet another delay in the introduction of the long awaited legislation to set up a regulator for the biotechnology sector. The improved Biotechnology Regulatory Authority of India Bill 2011 was slated for introduction in the Lok Sabha on August 17.

But now, it will have to await another date with the legislature.

Interestingly the BRAI Bill was cleared by the Union Cabinet exactly a year ago, and was slated for introduction in Parliament immediately. Several Parliament sessions later, it still remains a legislation in the making, as it has been for nearly a decade now. As the Science and Technology minister, it is Deshmukh's direct responsibility to pilot the BRAI Bill through Parliament. Will the biotech industry need to create an "Anna Hazare" movement to get Deshmukh's attention and use his deft political skills to fulfill the long cherished dream of an independent biotech regulator?

With each month's delay in the tabling of the BRAI Bill in Parliament, the pitch against the legislation is getting shriller. Voices are coming not just from the known anti-GM (genetically modified products) groups but also from many other sections of the society. The opponents see the BRAI not as an impartial regulatory but a key biotech promotion agency. Their reasoning: the BRAI will be administered by the Department of Biotechnology, which has the mandate to promote biotechnology in the country.

The government and biotech industry have not done a good job so far of explaining the importance of the independent regulator for biotechnology and the long term beneficial effects of the technology. The anti-biotech groups are yet again winning the battle for public attention.

Will the Anna Hazare campaign make the government look at regulatory agencies in a new light is a moot question. The instincts of the government so far have been to pack all regulatory agencies with bureaucrats and technocrats. The proposed BRAI set up will be no different. The five-member authority will have a chairman, who has to be an eminent scientist, two full time expert members and two part time members. In principle, this is good.

But it is the selection process that just like the Lokpal Bill that raises the hackles of its opponents. Members of the BRAI will be chosen by a seven-member selection committee, headed by the cabinet secretary, four secretaries (health research, agriculture, biotechnology and environment) and two eminent biotechnologists. Typically, the two outsiders chosen for such a committee would have had long stints in the government. So, the selection process will usually be skewed towards the political (government) nominee.

The Authority will be assisted by a 15-member advisory committee that can have some experts from outside but here too the majority will be drawn from within the government.

This is the crux of the matter.

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