

Happening October

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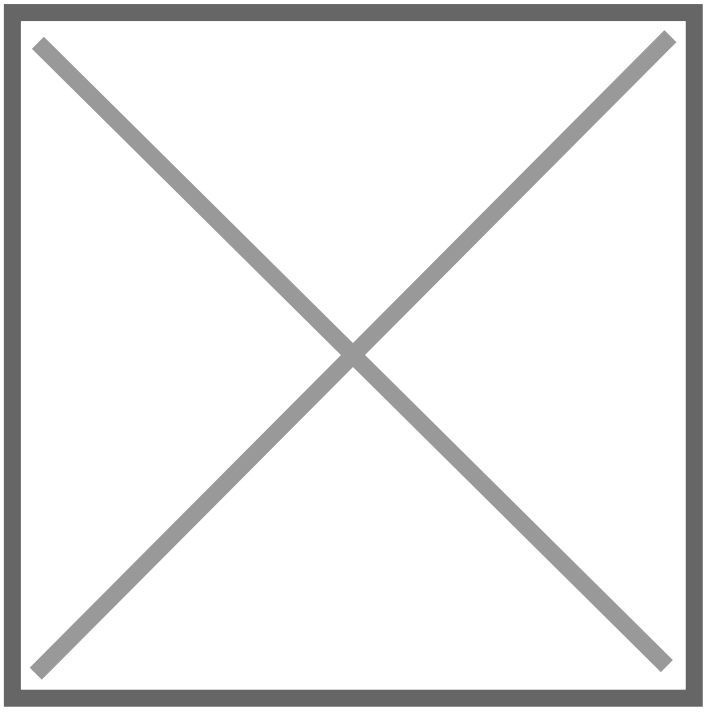

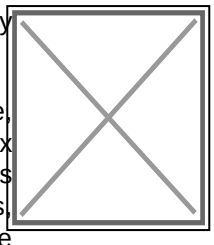

India's biotechnology sector is beginning to take some small, determined steps forward. Things are definitely falling into places. The actions of four respected biotech companies in the last four weeks provide a clue.

First the country's largest biotech company, Biocon India, a privately held company based in Bangalore, decided to make a bold step forward and announce the results of its financial performance in the first six months of the current fiscal. The results would gladden anyone's heart. Its turnover in the first half of this fiscal was a fraction lower than its revenues in the whole of last year. Buoyed by the exports of statins, Biocon posted Rs 259 crore in sales revenues during the April-September period. Boldened by the performance, it has also announced its intention to advance its public offering of equity to early 2004. The company hopes to make few more product releases in the next few months and also announce some major investments.

The Hyderabad-based biotech majors Bharat Biotech and Shantha Biotechnics are the next set of newsmakers. Both these companies have launched their recombinant Streptokinase within days of each other's announcement. The blood-clot removing drugs are manufactured using the biotech route and are expected to stimulate this sector. Just as they shook up the hepatitis B vaccine market in the late Nineties as their entries led to the crash of these vaccines imported till then. Today hepatitis B vaccines are sold like commodities. The prices have crashed from a high of Rs 1,200 per dose to an average of Rs 20 now.

Another newsmaker is the Bangalore-based bioinformatics pioneer, Strand Genomics. Its latest product, Avadis 2.0, a data analysis and visualization tool, has sold few licenses in the foreign markets and the Technology Development Board of the Department of Science and Technology (DST) is learnt to have given it a Rs 4.6 crore grant to develop and refine the software product. In the investment-starved sector, this is an encouraging development.

The icing on the biotech cake is the development of the country's own version of the highly popular Bacillus thuringiensis (Bt) gene by a research team headed by Rakesh Tuli at the National Botanical Research Institute (NBRI), Lucknow. More heartening is the fact that this CSIR lab has catalyzed the formation of a seven-member consortium of seed companies to quickly take the product to the farmer's fields. While it may not compete immediately with the leader Monsanto's Bt gene which has been inserted into cotton crop, the availability of an Indian version of the gene may help to expand the market and also pave the way for a smoother introduction of transgenic technologies. The use of a gene, extracted abroad, into the agricultural products within the country has been a major factor working against this promising technology. Hopefully, the national debate on transgenic products may become less shrill hereafter.

It has indeed been a happening October for the fledgling biotech industry in the country.

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