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Expert Opinion - P M Murali

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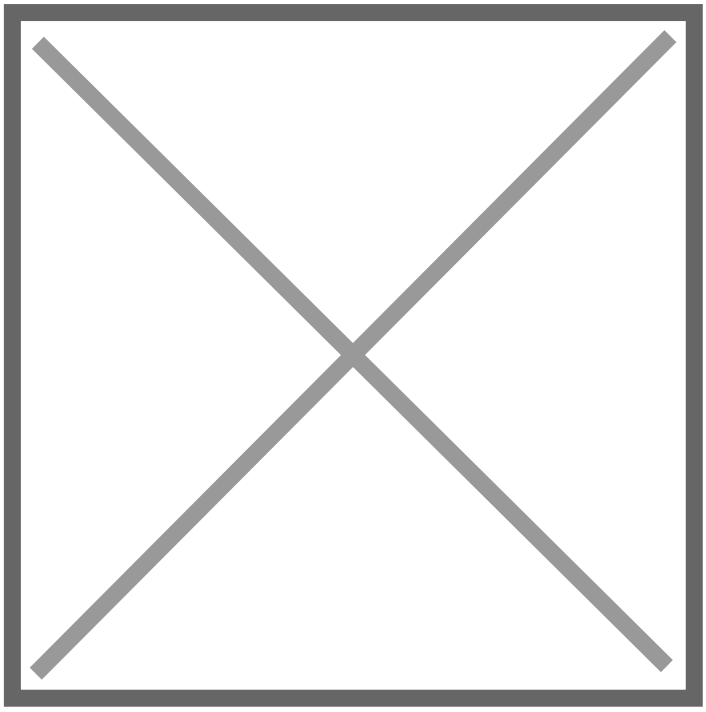

INDUSTRY

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Infusers changing biotech landscape

India today is the global hub for affordable healthcare and emerging economies view India as their saviors for low-cost needs.

India, the country that gave the oldest and established medicine system Ayurveda to the world, is too often criticized for lack of innovative contribution to the modern life sciences and biotechnology and being snubbed as a country known for making Ã¢â?¬Å?copy catsÃ¢â?¬? (generics and biogenerics) and excelling only in services. The negative sentiment is also reinforced by recent announcements from multinational drug companies opting to invest in China over India for their R&D efforts. It is very natural for critics to forget the real contribution based on our socio-political and economic environment.

In the post-independence era, Indian life sciences industry discovered an untapped avenue of delivering affordable healthcare to millions. This segment has grown leaps and bounds in the country today and spread to most verticals including the biotech industry. India is the world's leading player and contributor in the cost-effective healthcare space and is also an exporter of low cost therapies to not only emerging economies but also to the developed world and all this without compromising on quality. Many of these could be classified as process innovation or improvement that enabled multinational pharma companies to improve their bottom lines. Indian CRAMS sector helped their cross-border partners to take multiple shots at their targets at a fraction of cost. Since each shot at the target requires different methods and not just repetition of existing methods, it involves innovation. Indian companies that did not participate in the entire value chain of new inventions (from molecules to market) due to lack of an eco-system, have now commenced their journey from a different stage. We now have world-class testing facilities and aspiring research centres. A view through the innovation kaleidoscope could expose a spectacular landscape wherein the local companies contributed to their partners in improving process, lowering cost of goods, affordable pricing, shrinking timelines, effective data management, increasing compliance levels, and thought provoking consultancy.

Innovation at Grass roots

An innovative continuum needs to have strong roots which India has and to strengthen this, several avenues are now available besides more are emerging on the horizon. Currently, there are a series of initiatives. One of the early innovation inducer and the one that works at the educational institution level is ABLE's BEST program which encourages young minds at schools and colleges to think solutions for our country's problems and rewards these young minds with seed money to incubate their company. It also nurtures them with their

panel of professional experts.

Another such program working at promoting innovation is Stanford India biodesign and the objective is to identify, promote and nurture next generation technology innovators with potential to develop custom solutions to Indian conditions. The fellows selected under the scheme are mentored by domain experts, legal and venture capitalists from US and India, and they are expected to spend time at Stanford University and return to India to customize the solutions according to the country's needs.

At the institutional level, there are diverse opportunities that scout and promote innovation. Most popular among them is Gates Foundation and its program on grand challenges. Due to tough competition globally, it is not easy for Indian institutions to adapt their conceptualization for success. ICICI Knowledge Park (IKP) has taken a key initiative in co-ordinating all potential participants, rendering them with required support, scout and identify best proposals within the country and then act as conduit to help them win the grant. This is expected to give a major thrust to country's innovation landscape in foreseeable future, given the fact that objective of this program is to address local needs with disruptive technologies.

Similar program worth highlighting is the Framework Program (FP) of the European Union that fosters a collaborative environment and helps build clusters of diverse expertise from across the world. Many of these projects also support innovative and affordable solutions to country's major issues in this space. Few other programs that support such initiatives include Wellcome Trust, Global TB alliance, and Forum for neglected diseases (DNDi). Department of Biotechnology (DBT) too helps in promoting innovation through its novel funding mechanism under BIRAC Ã¢â?¬â?? Biotechnology Industry Research Assistance Council via two key routes: BIPP Ã¢â?¬â?? Biotechnology Industry Partnership Program (an advanced technology scheme) to encourage public-private partnership scheme and CRS Ã¢â?¬â?? Contract Research Services to facilitate academia and industry interaction that supports exploratory validation of technology or prototype and its commercialization. All these are primarily targeted at supporting business ideas that are relevant to this geography and those which are amenable to faster commercialization keeping affordability of country's local population. In terms of non-profit initiatives, Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) initiated the world's first Open Source Drug Discovery (OSDD) model that attracts talent from around the world.

India's Innovation landscape is changing. Keen observers will be able to recognize that the micro climate for fostering innovation is now in place. From now on whatever the time it takes for new products and processes to appear on the global scene is the time it will take for the world to sit up and take notice. The mute question as always, can India do more in this space? The answer, like in so many areas including infrastructure development, is yes.

- Dr P M Murali, managing director and CEO, Evolva Biotech and president, Association of Biotechnology Led Enterprises (ABLE)