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“New bioincubators would be set up to cater to the growth of startup ecosystem including the tier 2, tier 3 regions”

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Dr Jitendra Kumar, the former Director of Bangalore Bioinnovation Centre (BBC), has taken charge as the new Managing Director (MD) of Biotechnology Industry Research Assistance Council (BIRAC), an institution set up by the Department of Biotechnology (DBT), Government of India, to nurture and promote biotechnology innovations and industry in India. In an exclusive tête-à-tête with BioSpectrum, Dr Jitendra Kumar, MD, BIRAC lays bare his new vision and strategies for the growth of the biotech sector.

What unique strategies are you planning to implement as the MD of BIRAC?

A major challenge faced by startups in India is the inability to scale up. We need to develop multiple centres for startups to be able to manufacture and initiate trials at large scale. So, my vision would be to facilitate scaling up of startups by setting up at least five such centres. There is also a need to establish a platform where big companies can interact with startups. BIRAC can provide such a platform to the startups where extensive interactions can take place. Industry can strategically tie up with startups to ensure the success of an idea. For instance, in the case of new drug discovery, a startup can conduct pre-clinical trials, and once successful, the technology can be translated to an industry partner to strategically bring the drug faster to the market after conducting the necessary clinical trials. Although startups might have apprehensions to undergo such strategic partnerships with big industry players, BIRAC can play a critical role in easing out the path for both startups and big companies.

Are there plans to open more bioincubators in the country to strengthen the ecosystem for biotech startups in India?

New bioincubators would be set up to cater to the growth of the ecosystem including the tier 2, tier 3 regions. BIRAC would also partner with some of the progressive states and run state level programmes for the startup. For instance, Bangalore Bioinnovation Centre is the only bioincubation centre jointly run by the central and state government. There is a need to create similar models in the country so that all the resources can be pooled together and the required funding can be accommodated for the growth of these startups. At present, many incubation centres are running on project modes. In addition, BIRAC also has plans to lay emphasis on developing new policy norms for the regulatory hurdles being encountered by startups across the country, particularly those working on new emerging technologies.

The government's vision is to increase the number of biotech startups from 5000 to 50,000 in the coming years. What is your opinion?

Currently, the scenario is that we are waiting for startups to come up to gradually increase in number. But this is not a sustainable way forward. A more robust way to gradually increase the number of biotech startups in our country would be to adopt institutional mechanisms where we can have dedicated programmes within the academic institutes to commercialise those technologies that are lying on the shelf, with support, funding and incubation from BIRAC. We can, thereby, create a whole database of such technologies that are available with the academic institutes to be picked up by the students who can become the future entrepreneurs. The institutional mechanisms could also create ventures and it can emerge as an evolutionary process for the growth of biotech startups. In addition, we need to showcase the success stories as more startups are able to scale up and commercialise their innovation.

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