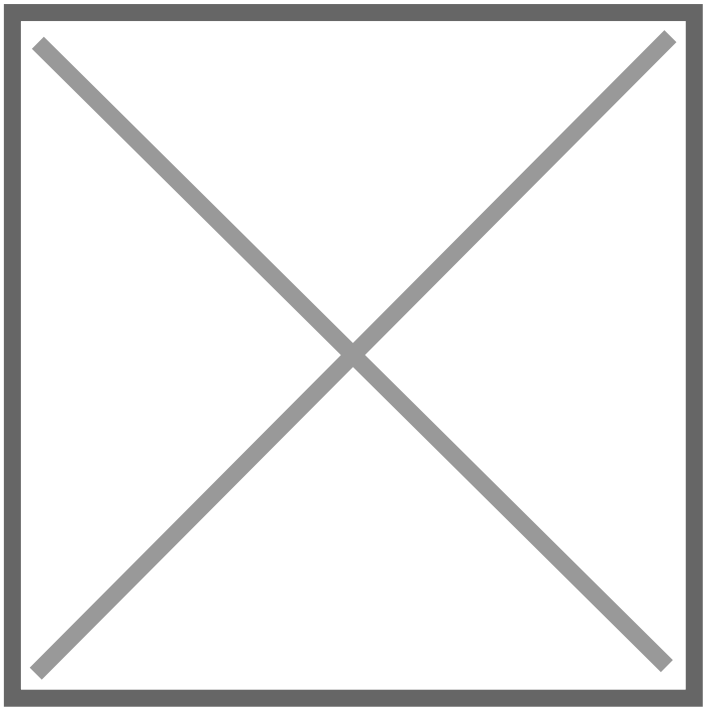
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Its time for yatras

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Its time for yatras

The political yatras for the ensuing elections in India commenced with Deputy Prime Minister L K Advani's 'Bharat Uday yatra'. Besides we have other yatras making waves in different parts of India. But there are some yatras, which will have some significance to the biotechnology industry.

The mercury is rising. The fever is on. With elections barely after a month every political party is doing its bit to woo the voters. The political leaders are campaigning the length and breadth of the country. But there are a few leaders who are related to biotechnology/life sciences one or the other way and are making inroads through their 'yatras' to get the attention of the voters and return back to power. Narendra Modi, the chief minister of Gujarat, Ram Naik, union minister for petroleum and natural gas in the west and SM Krishna, the chief minister of Karnataka in south are to name a few.

Yatras with ambition

In the western part of India, Narendra Modi, the chief minister of Gujarat who is inviting the industry people to invest in Gujarat but is yet to announce the biotechnology policy for the state made a brief 'Narmada Poojan yatra' after the state government received the green signal from the Narmada Control Authority (NCA) to raise the Sardar Sarovar dam height to 110m. Subsequently he faced the wrath of the Election Commission, his yatra got stuck and got cancelled midway. To make a biotechnology related yatra the state has to first announce a biotech policy to entice the decision makers of the biotech and biopharma industry.

Ram Naik, union minister for petroleum and natural gas, who took the lead in implementing the ethanol-blended petrol (biofuel) in the country and made waves about 'krishna kranti' (black revolution) by introducing a pilot project on biodiesel in Mumbai is running the 'Ram rath yatra' in his north Mumbai constituency (Lok Sabha).

In the south, we have SM Krishna, the chief minister of Karnataka who initiated a biotechnology movement in the country by announcing the biotech policy for the first time in 2001, is spearheading the 'Vijay Dundhubhi yatra' in Karnataka to regain power for the second term (facing the assembly election). If he is able to win the hearts of the people through his yatra and regains power in the state, the biotechnology industry will have the chance to boom as his dream projects like biotechnology park and fund for biotech industry, still in the infancy stage, will be realized.

Yatra for the industry

Amidst the election campaigning but far from the political yatras we have one more yatra called the "Maha BioYatra". This yatra is not like the above-mentioned yatras. It has been making inroads into the Maharashtra biotechnology industry since

August 2002.

The latest program of the "Maha BioYatra" was a Cafe Scientifique, an interactive session with the renowned scientist and the former CEO of Human Genome Sciences, Dr William Haseltine. During the session he interacted with the industry and expressed his views on the opportunities for Indian biotech industry and the bottlenecks.

Maharashtra's Maha BioYatra is a positive move as far as biotechnology industry is concerned in the state. The state government along with Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) has launched the BioWednesday network forum. The forum provides a platform for the industry people to discuss issues ranging from funding to marketing in the fields of life sciences, genomics, medicine, bioinformatics, agribiotech and marine biotechnology.

Person behind the yatra

The person spearheading this yatra is none other than Dr Swati Piramal, director, Nicholas Piramal India Ltd and also the member of the task force and mission on biotechnology set up by the government of Maharashtra. The objective of this yatra is to establish a strong network among the biotechnology industry, the academia and the policy makers.

After its launch in August 2002, with CII presenting a road map for Maharashtra's growth through modern biotechnology to Dr Patangrao Kadam, the Industry Minister of Maharashtra, so far it has conducted four programs in the last one and half years. The last program on "New scientific policy" was held at Tata Institute of Fundamental Research in September 2003.

If this program becomes a regular feature of the biotech industry in the state, which is moving at a snails pace with no support from the government, it will flourish and come up with many new biotech entrepreneurs. Besides the Maha BioYatra, the success of the yatras of the political leaders, who have some interests in biotechnology and are facing the voters in the coming assembly/lok sabha polls, will come as a big boost to the industry.

Narayan Kulkarni