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May bioscience be part of election manifestos!

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The past few years have not seen much importance given to biotech by the main political parties in the country. In fact, the impetus that biotech got during the national elections in 2004 is missing now. India approved Bt cotton in 2002 and the cotton yield started to soar soon thereafter. The farmers were not bothered by the controversies surrounding the introduction of the product in India then and read- ily adopted Genetically Modified (GM) cotton. This forced most of the political parties to openly canvas for GM technology. The 2003 elections saw nearly all the leading and regional parties in the country laying claim to the contribution of Bt cotton growth in their respective regions. They splurged on advertisements brandishing the success of the state in the agriculture: courtesy-Bt cotton.

From a fervor when Bt cotton was considered as a factor that could win votes, today the in- dustry is in a mess. The constant complaint during pre-reforms or the liberalization era that kick started in the early 1990s was that the decisions were mired in bureaucratic processes. However, things have changed during the past decade. While the industry, the biotech sec- tor in particular, received favorable response from the bureaucratic fraternity and admin- istrators, the political will to address the nation's problems in the areas of national health, agriculture and fuel through introduction of new technology is lagging behind severely.

The administrators have worked favorably to aid the industry. It is now the turn of the political community to move forward and commit to better healthcare, nutrition, food and energy security. There has been near paralysis of the entire bioscience industry-be it in the BioPharma, BioAgri, or the CRO sectors. The Biotechnology Regulatory Authority of India (BRAI) Bill has not yet been passed, though it has been introduced in the budget session of the Parliament in 2013. Furthermore, there's complete stalemate on the intro- duction of GM foods. Similarly, there are concerns over clinical trials in the country.

With 2014 elections on the horizon, it is time that the national parties talk about the bio- tech agenda in their manifestos. Political parties should take a clear stand on some of the key challenges effecting the country like introduction of GM food crops in the country. Or promoting clinical trials in a transparent and scientific way. Or promoting use and devel- opment of better biofuels and renewable energy. This is an opportunity for the political parties to go to the public to not only seek feedback on key issues related to health, energy, and food security from both the consumers and producers but also assuage the miscon- ceptions if any and direct the course of action.

Political parties should not shy away from expressing their commitment to science and technology for the overall growth of the economy and country. And industry should help the political parties and their leaders to assume a visionary role to help India to leapfrog with new-age responsible science and technology development and affordable and acces- sible service delivery. It is time for us to usher a new India and not put biotech in the back burner. Only then can India become a global power. I strike a chord with Dr Krishna Ella, the 2013 BioSpectrum Person of the Year and MD, Bharat Biotech, when he says, "today's neglected diseases are tomorrow's global problems" and India can play a significant role in solving the global problems.

This year presents a good opportunity for all of us to push for a new and memorable chapter in the history of biotech. Wish you all the best and happy and prosperous New Year.