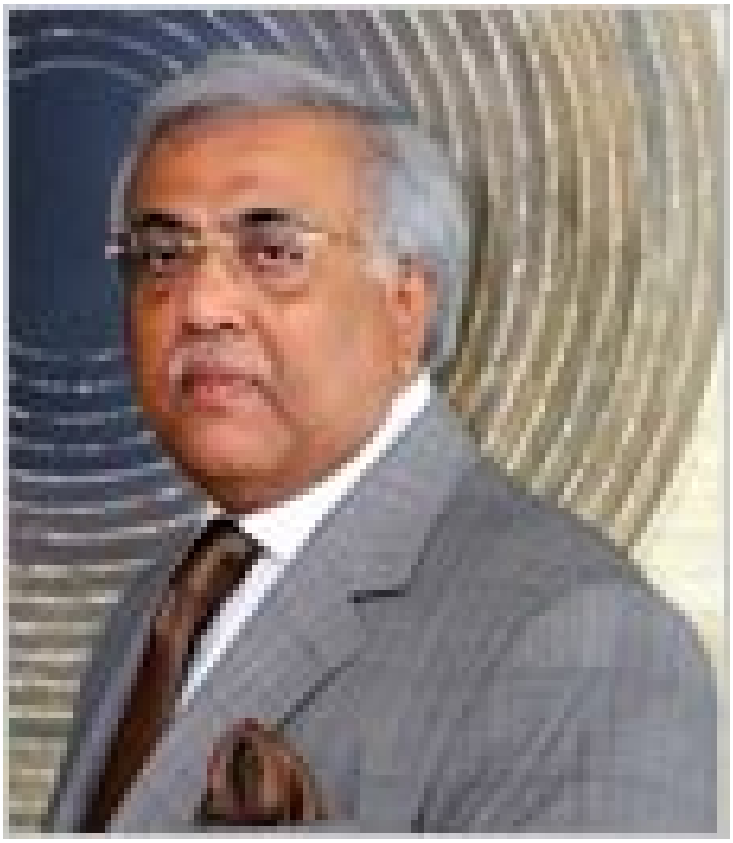
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Ã¢â?¬Å?We envision NCR as hub of bioscience activitiesÃ¢â?¬?

19 December 2013 | Interviews | By Rahul Koul Koul

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Keystone Knowledge Park is being developed by the Mayar Infrastructure Development Authority, a part of Mayar Group which has successfully diversified into hospitality, wellness and infrastructure sector with presence in Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, New Zealand, Myanmar, Indonesia and India. In a recent interaction with the BioSpectrum, Mr A K Sud, chairman, KKP, spoke about the development of park, company operations and various aspects of the industry:

Q: What is your opinion on the current Indian biotech scenario? What went wrong with the sector, which you feel has lost its way?

If we look back, the years 2005-08 were prime time for India. There were a lot many CROs and increased private equity in the sector, making it highly promising. It was considered to be the industry of future and even experts were bullish about it. Then came the biggest myth that biotech is another information technology like industry, which actually was never the case. Eying big bucks, lot many parents pushed their children to get education in biotech. At that time, I always used to mention that this bubble will burst.

During the early 2000 in United States, there were huge growth predictions about biotech by market research companies such as E&Y. But over the period of time (last five years), it has been realized that even the definition of biotech is not clear. Most often, the case is that it is a biotech company without revenue. With revenue, it becomes a pharma company. Though the route of technology discovery may be different or come from a biotech source, the process of marketing, clinical trials etc remains same as pharma. The reason why we have not been successful on word 'biotech' and the R&D activities is because of lacking balanced approach. The R&D is important and we may create separate parks for it but we cannot limit it only by that.

If we are looking at this industry to grow, we must look at broad banding the spectrum of research into virtual platform. We need to create an ecosystem where all the components can be brought together. That has happened at Genome Valley, Hyderabad and Electronics City, Bangalore. The 70% of the companies in Knowledge Park, Hyderabad are non biotech. The fact is that we require companies such as Mylan and Novartis too, who may not do purely biotech activities most of the time. I am of the view that the technology used in innovation is not so important than the ecosystem that enables the further development.

Q Where do the opportunities lie then? Are regulations a hurdle?

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We are doing very little on the actual biotech beyond Biopharma. We keep talking about steep rise in fuel prices but never give a thought on our efforts to promote renewable green fuels. If we compare our activities to US, our investments in green fuel are miniscule. We have not been able to achieve our blending targets. We have erred and ignoring the facts that we cannot only keep focused on the activities with no clear output. What we require is single point R&D clearance, promotion of clusters with substantial support from government in terms of finances and institutional cooperation. Facilitation of knowledge transfer is important and when academia and industry don't talk to each other, then we don't see enough ideas developing into products. There should be nodal points for PPP between them where entrepreneur must be able to go and discuss. We are lacking in that as compared to others. I don't have a single book that I can carry and say this comprises all the information on Research & Innovation in India. For example if a US entrepreneur comes to India, the question is who showcases India to them? The Association of Biotechnology Led Enterprises (ABLE) might do it but being an industry organization with their own promotion agenda and needs, it become difficult for them too. We need a systematic way of promoting our country as the destination for collaboration in various areas of R&D.

Regulations are an important component but I don't think we are over-regulated. Norms are important for ensuring clarity and one cannot run away from the responsibility. However, I do agree that we have our own set of challenges and inability of regulators on streamlining activities. But then that is a different area altogether and has nothing to do with industry not progressing.

Q: What are your current activities in National Capital Region (NCR)? How do you see the region as far as bioscience industry activity is concerned?

We want to create a centre of excellence for companies that are willing to set up their R&D facilities in NCR. While people were talking about Hyderabad and Bangalore being available for industry, we thought that NCR must create a platform for them to do something on traditional knowledge. I was always of the firm belief that technologies must be developed indigenously in India rather than be dependent only on imported ones. That is when we decided to create an infrastructure on the pattern of US and Europe. I wanted to make a set up different from typical R&D park, aimed at attracting the scientists from overseas with ideas and money but are unable to find world class ambience in India. When back in 2008, we started developing the building, the idea was of having a Research SEZ to provide space for R&D companies to come over here and innovate. The creation of this concept and conversion to a building took around five year time. Not only bigger companies, but the incubation facility for smaller companies too was on the mind. While some might raise the location issue, I think the idea was to have a proper ecosystem. Besides having incubation space for the SMEs and startups, we shall also cater to top line Rs 100 crore plus companies looking at doing innovation, cutting across sectors.

We have created San Francisco of east in Hyderabad but the city can't claim to be both IT capital as well as that of Research . It has to vacate one and I think as a city, NCR can do much more. We require people who say NCR is ready for innovation and accept it as a Boston of the East. It is very well possible if right linkages are created between existing academic institutes and private universities, who can come together to share a lot. There is the upcoming Faridabad biocluster and the industrial area in Manesar which can provide boost to such activities. Our mission is to help in promoting NCR as a hub of innovative activities for biosciences as well as other sectors.

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Q: Are the countries such as China emerging as our competition? What do you think is required to promote Indian interests?

China is no benchmark for competition. The people who visited China for business, have realized that there are many barriers including language, communication as well as quality of products. I am of the belief, that we as the country of billion people can utilize science to do wonders. I am sure that we are on the right path and will harness our indigenous knowledge and technologies to secure the future.

We must not indulge in compulsory licensing and should not target companies to provide free and cheap medicines. If it really wants to maintain a balance, the government as an alternative, can procure medicines and then distribute it. Though it has taken few regressive decisions in past, the government is also responsible for few positive steps too. The economy was also soft for last few years but things will change for good. There will be opportunities in outsourcing and we must build a pan India brand. Policymakers have to just send the right feelers to industry.