

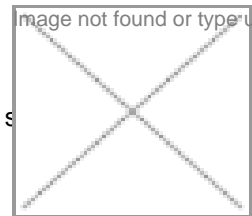
Joining the mainstream

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Something extraordinary happened in biotechnology in 2002. At least in India. The government approved the use of genetically modified crop Bt cotton in March 2002. This was a major step in the biotechnological march of the nation as the decision had been hanging fire for many years. With that and a select club of nations using one of the fruits of modern biotechnology.

And that was not the only major thing that happened in 2002 in biotechnology. After the successful publication of the entire human genome, biotechnology has been a center of attention worldwide. The claims about the birth of Baby Eve, claimed to be the first cloned human being in December 2002 have only reinforced global attention on biotechnology. Genetic engineering is indeed the popular face of biotechnology.

More importantly, biotechnology joined the mainstream in 2002. It is no longer a specialized segment of science confined to high tech laboratories. Some of the nation's leaders have started talking about biotechnology in the same breath they talk about our information technology prowess. Prime Minister AB Vajpayee talked about biotechnology while releasing the Science Policy in early January at the Indian Science Congress session in Bangalore. Finance Minister Jaswant Singh has stated that biotechnology is one of the key areas which require massive investments to fuel the country's economy on accelerated growth path. Several state chief ministers too have started mentioning biotechnology as a sector to attract investments.

Remember, this is how IT became a rage in the country. From the sanitized rooms of research institutions and companies, IT

became the new growth mantra when the nation's top leaders turned their attention to it. And many leaders have not still stopped talking in glowing words about our IT superpower status.

Can biotechnology attain the same status as IT?

Yes, it can. Globally too, biotechnology is slowly entering the hallowed portals of the 'knowledge economy.' Biotechnology companies, especially in the areas of pharma, agriculture, bioinformatics and genomics are grabbing public attention. In India too, the same trend is seen. Companies like Biocon, Shantha Biotechnics, Strand Genomics, Monsanto, Proagro, Ranbaxy, Dr Reddy's etc., are vying for public attention for their pioneering works.

And many of them feel that they could become the equivalent of Infosys in IT in the coming years.

There is unanimity among the key players of biotechnology that it is time nation put its weight behind the sector. What better way to do this than formulating a National Biotechnology Policy which articulates the national vision on this promising sector. They all feel that such a policy will put the stamp of national authority and help the sector grow to take its rightful place in the world.

The cover story of the inaugural issue of the new look BioSpectrum takes a look at this topic in detail. There are other columns too where some of India's top minds in biotechnology share their vision and concerns. With your support and attention, I hope BioSpectrum will become the natural forum for exchange of all views and informed debate about the needs and deeds of the biotech industry for decades to come.

N Suresh