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8 November 2016 | Interviews | By BioSpectrum Bureau

## Make in India policy has given a special impetus to the growth of the biotech sector

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**Dr Harsh Vardhan, Minister, Science and Technology, shares with BioSpectrum the prospects and plans for the biotechnology and medical technology sectors**

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**Given the deadlock on BT crops in the country, what according to you are the steps required to create awareness and connect with the common man on the issue?**

There is no deadlock on biotech crops. There are many crops in the regulatory pipeline undergoing different stages of field trials and biosafety tests under the supervision of the regulatory framework. These crops are new insect resistant cotton, chickpea, pigeonpea and brinjal, drought tolerant sugarcane etc.

More than awareness to the common man, the challenge is to deal with some fringe groups of people who are giving misinformation to the public. Therefore, a new biosafety website is being launched for increased access to information and transparency. Workshops are also being conducted at state and university level from time to time for the purpose. Reading material on technology benefits and risk has been printed in several languages and distributed.

**On the GM crops issue, things are stuck due to regulation. Coordination between center and states is lacking too...**

India has been the pioneer in notifying rules under the Environmental Protection Act 1986, for regulation of research, manufacture, use/import/export and storage of hazardous micro organisms/ genetically engineered organisms or cells. These rules provided a clear regulatory approval process each at the level - Institution, State Governments, and at Central Government - to address scientific risk assessment in the Ministry of Science and Technology and accord final approval for environment release in the Ministry of Environment and Forestry. Interestingly, the rules also included the constitution of an independent rDNA Advisory Committee of multidisciplinary experts to advise on biosafety issues with emerging technologies. Several guidelines, SOPs for field trials, have been also published from time to time through a consultative process in harmony with international best practices.

In the last two years, there have been many reforms in regulations. Firstly, all the committees are meeting at regular intervals unlike in the past. A multidisciplinary risk assessment unit has been established for scrutiny and evaluation of biosafety data; it supports the statutory committees such as GEAC and RCGM functioning under Environmental Protection Act. Risk assessment, management and communication methodologies and protocols have been harmonized with best international practices.

Yes, some state governments are reluctant to provide permission for conduct of biosafety research field trials approved by central government. Dialogue and discussion with states are being taken up along with sharing of technological and biosafety information. The results of these efforts have been positive.

After allowing tests for GM mustard, which are the other crops considered for GM?

There are many crops in the regulatory pipeline undergoing different stages of field trials and biosafety tests under the supervision of the regulatory framework. These crops are new insect resistant cotton, chickpea, pigeonpea and brinjal, drought tolerant sugarcane and salt tolerant rice, herbicide resistant cotton and corn etc.

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**What about the arguments about choosing certain crops of interest for transgenics? Will it have a demoralizing effect for the industry in the long run and where does it lead us?**

Make in India campaign has pitched India as a potential investment destination for genetically modified (GM) crops. Hybrid seeds, including GM seeds, represent new business opportunities in India based on yield improvement. Indian laboratories have enormous capacity to generate indigenous GM crops needed for the country.

As a policy, there is no restriction in choosing the crops and traits. Since the development of GM crops takes a long time and there is sizable activism to delay commercial use, it is desirable that investment decisions in using this technology in a particular crop for a particular purpose are made appropriately considering other easier and affordable technological options.

**What about the Medtech industry? There was a proposal to set up a few Medtech parks in the country. What is the status?**

As mentioned above, Medical Technology is an important sector and the Department of Biotechnology (DBT) and Biotechnology Industry Research Assistance Council (BIRAC) have made special effort to promote it.

Biodesign programme is one of the examples of inclusive medical technology innovation. This is based on a novel approach of end-to-end process that begins with idea generation through clinical immersion up to commercialization by a multi-disciplinary team comprising of a physician, engineer, product designer, and an entrepreneur. The objective of this programme is to train the next generation of medical technology innovators who will in turn focus on invention and early stage development of low cost new medical technologies for the Indian population. The aim is to develop simple, rapid, indigenous, low cost medical devices and implants by applying four components - affordability, accessibility, availability and appropriateness.

Under this initiative, several indigenous technologies have been developed to address unmet medical needs of India. As an outcome, more than 100 innovators have been trained. Several national and international patents have been filed. Various prototypes have been developed. Some of the Fellows of this programme have established their start-up companies for further refining, testing, validating and converting the prototypes into the products. Thirteen technologies have been licensed and nine start-up companies launched.

The Department has also established the Healthcare Technology Innovation Centre (HTIC) at IIT-Madras. This Centre is delivering innovations and technologies that are reaching the field through government and industry partnerships, bringing benefits to lives and our society.

Nearly 100 young entrepreneurs have been supported for Medtech Innovation and more than 10 Medtech Products (devices and diagnostics) supported by BIRAC have been commercialized.

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