

'Indian VCs super-inclined towards IT'

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With an unquenchable vision in the field of biological sciences, Dharwad-based Dr Swamy's Lab was set-up in 2012 in Karnataka, with an investment of Rs 1 crore, focusing primarily on molecular biology reagents and kits, biopharma, biofuels, molecular diagnostics, and instrumentation.

Initially the company was incubated at Institute of Agri-Biotechnology (IABT), University of Agricultural Sciences in Dharwad.

"Practically, small cities are very good for start-up biotech companies because they need a lot of incubation time. The minimum incubation period for a biotech start-up is anywhere between 5-6 years in small cities. This incubation time is very critical for its survival. Therefore, we chose Dharwad to be our starting place," justified Dr Thippeswamy.

After obtaining his PhD in Biochemistry from Gulbarga University in 2002, Dr S Thippeswamy, who is now the founder,

chairman and MD of Dr Swamy's Lab, was selected as the candidate for DBT sponsored post-doctoral fellowship at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc).

Dr Thippeswamy says that while planting his company, he faced enormous challenges in convincing his family, relatives and friends, who were the only primary channel of funding during the company's inception.

"The industry as a whole faces a major challenge in finding rightly qualified and skilled manpower who are motivated. Sadly, investors are not ready to invest in the field of biotechnology," he laments.

After establishment, the company also encountered challenges in managing employees, cold chain transportation systems and raising capital, as no funds were borrowed from banks.

In 2005, after completing his post-doctoral research at IISc, Dr Thippeswamy moved to Weizmann Institute of Science in Israel. It was then that he conceived the idea of establishing his own company in India. Dr Thippeswamy feels that biotech in India is still at a nascent stage.

Speaking on the company's collaborations, Dr Thippeswamy added, "We are now in communication with the Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology at the Ohio State University in the US. Also we are looking forward to work with the Institute of Agri-Biotechnology (IABT), University of Agricultural Sciences in Dharwad, and also with the Department of Electronics, Kottureshwara College, Kottur in Bellary. We are interested in public-private partnerships as well."

Currently Dr Swamy's Lab is involved in the development of highly sensitive (one copy) real time PCR based diagnostic kits, and isothermal PCR methods for diagnostics.

Also, its R&D involves developing biohydrogen from genetically modified algae, and pre-clinical studies of gels to check transmission of HIV.

To all the aspiring entrepreneurs in the industry, he advised, "In the present context, India is not a suitable country for biotech start-ups. If you still want to forge ahead, then you should have a clear, short-term income plans, and assured backup funds for the first five years. In the biotech industry, self-motivation is of prime importance."

The company is now eyeing molecular diagnostics, and molecules that are useful for diabetic patients.

As the founder of a biotech start-up, Dr Thippeswamy enlists various expectations from the new government.

Commenting on the biotech agenda for the new government, he expressed, "Developing the right infrastructure and providing uninterrupted power supply and water is crucial."

"There needs to be a single window system for obtaining all government licenses, certificates, loans, and projects especially related to GMOs, environment and biodiversity. Also, the government should strive to protect intellectual properties, and develop excellent human resources by polishing the quality of higher education in the country," elucidated Dr Thippeswamy.

In the future, as a part of its expansion strategy, Dr Swamy's Lab will venture in to areas including biogas, biohydrogen and biopharmaceuticals.

"We will be releasing our molecular diagnostics with isothermal PCR techniques. We will also be setting up one of the greatest R&D center in the near future," opined Dr Thippeswamy optimistically.

According to him, venture capitalists in India show more affinity towards IT, real estate, trade and retail marketing.

"The major drawback is that there is very little development seen in the manufacturing sector. The government should simplify industry laws and regulations, along with offering low-interest loans to start-ups," he concluded.