

Will biotech get its due in West Bengal?

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The promise of change swept over West Bengal, a state in the eastern part of India with its capital in Kolkata, in 2011 when Ms Mamata Banerjee of Trinamool Congress pulled off a victory over the Left in the state elections. Now, with Mr Pranab Mukherjee taking on the mantle of the President of India, focus is back on the state from which he hails and has served as an elected member of Parliament for many decades.

Industrial growth, which has been almost negligible in West Bengal for many years, will take some time to match the pace of other industrially forward states of the country. The state was burdened with debt of \$ 40 billion (Rs 2,08,382.58 crore) as on March 31, 2012, according to the state's Finance Minister Mr Amit Mitra.

The life sciences industry, which has been the growth driver in many states such as Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat and Haryana because of initiatives taken by their governments since 2000, will need greater push to make its mark in West Bengal. The state has over 700 small and medium pharmaceutical companies but they have failed to make their presence felt till now.

The Department of Science and Technology, Government of West Bengal, came up with the first draft of a biotechnology policy in December 2001 to promote the niche industry. Later, in 2006-7, the government set up a separate department for biotechnology in the lines of the department of biotechnology at the central level. The department of biotechnology relaunched the draft biotechnology policy in 2008 to give new impetus to developments in the field of traditional as well as modern biotechnology in West Bengal.

In the last few years, the biotechnology space in West Bengal has seen some growth. The department is promoting biotechnology in the state through several R&D projects, demonstrations and creation of infrastructural facilities. There have

been some achievements in growth and application of biotechnology in broad areas of agriculture, healthcare, animal sciences, environment and industry.

Mr Pranab Mukherjee, sworn in as the 13th president of India on July 25, 2012, announced various provisions for the biotechnology industry as the country's finance minister earlier this year. This year's budget extended a 200 percentage weighted tax deduction to companies for research and development (R&D) expenses till March 31, 2017, apart from allocating around \$1 billion (Rs 5,000 crore) to Small Industries Development Bank of India (SIDBI) to help small biotech companies looking to raise capital from the new stock exchange for small and medium enterprises.

Other initiatives announced included allocation of \$40 million (Rs 200 crore) for the development of new technologies for seeds and plants and a grant of \$70 million (Rs 350 crore) to agriculture universities across the country, which will ensure that the benefits of technology in agriculture reach the citizens of the country. Some of these measures received mixed response from the Indian biotechnology industry but are not entirely without promise, said experts.

The West Bengal government has set up the Kolkata Biotech Park, which is in operation since March 2011. Besides, other biotech parks have also come up to encourage the industry. Bose Institute has developed the Jagadish Chandra Bose Biotechnology Park at Madhyamgram with focus on plant and agricultural biotechnology. Similarly, West Bengal University of Technology has developed the EKTA Incubation Centre in Kolkata, which has been recognized by the Department of Science & Technology, Government of India. Nine companies are presently operating from the incubation center in areas such as biotechnology, bioinformatics, IT-embedded systems, software development and materials science and other engineering.

The state has many companies operating in the pharmaceutical space, but has very few in the biotechnology space. TCG Life Sciences, formerly Chembiotek Research International, is a leading company in the biotech space with revenue of \$100 million (Rs 500 crore). Some of the other biotech companies operating in the state are Emami Biotech, Chembiotek, DSR Genome Technologies, Amit Biotech, Krish Biotech Research and Subhasree Biotech. DSR Genome Technologies, a biotechnology company set up by Prof S K Dey, director of Biotechnology Department, West Bengal University of Technology, has been involved in development and marketing of diagnostic kits for post-natal and prenatal diagnosis of common chromosomal disorder.

The department of biotechnology is also developing a biotechnology park under public-private partnership model at Kharagpur in association with the Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur, a premier institution of engineering and technology in India. The project has been allotted 100 acres of land. In addition to support for infrastructure development, the department has given financial assistance to more than 15 projects in bioinformatics, biofuels, tissue culture and other societal development programs.

The state government has been making efforts to facilitate the growth of biotechnology industry and development of clean biotech technologies. But only time will tell whether the biotechnology industry will emerge as a growth engine for the state under the leadership of Ms Banerjee and Mr Mitra, who has previously held the post of secretary-general of Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry and took the federation from \$540,000 (Rs 3 crore) to \$20 million (Rs 110 crore) during his tenure.