

India's S&T Minister on the regulatory bill: EXCLUSIVE

September 12, 2014 | Influencers | By Rahul Koul Koul

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The completion of 100 days of Modi government has been marked by few major initiatives in healthcare research by the science and technology and health ministries. However, the frequent media interactions which were common earlier seem to be no longer on the priority list. Therefore, in a first since the new government took over, BioSpectrum's Rahul Koul spoke to Dr Jitendra Singh, minister of state for science and technology on the sidelines of a press meet in New Delhi. As per the minister, the promotion of biotechnology remains high on priority of his ministry. His top priorities in the next few years are to strengthen the biotech infrastructure, indigenous research, and promote scientific talent.

Q: The issue of genetically modified crops is yet to be sorted. What is your ministry going to do about it?

Dr Jitendra Singh: Science is too serious to be left to scientists alone as there are issues that have social implications. This issue of GM crops is not essentially only our area of concern as there are other ministries that are involved. The policy and implementation rests with the agriculture and environment ministries. Mr Prakash Javadekar's environment ministry is the final authority to give a go ahead. I will try to synergise it with his ministry.

Q: But your ministry is an important stakeholder?

Yes, that is true but it is a collective decision and the final go ahead rests with the ministry of environment and forests ministry.

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Q: Will the government push Biotechnology Regulatory Authority of India bill in the winter session of Parliament?

We are working on it and coordination with other ministries is on. Since, it is an inter-ministerial issue, I can not say at the moment whether it will be tabled or not.

Q: What is your vision for the biotechnology sector in India?

Biotech is being given a lot of emphasis across the world and so cannot be ignored in the 21st century. India too has to take advantage of its benefits. Our policy is to boost infrastructure by establishing a wide network of biotech parks in India. As a part of the national initiative, a foundation stone laying ceremony is happening shortly at Kathua in Jammu and Kashmir.

Allocation to science has been meagre and we will address it by increasing it in consultation with the Prime Minister. I would like to convey through your medium that biotech institutes in India are highly equipped and well ahead in research than even the private industry. We will encourage them to give results.

Q: The drug discovery efforts in India have to be encouraged in India. What is the government doing on that especially when clinical trials being done here are going down?

We stand at number seven in the world in the area of scientific publications. We have made major headways in drug discovery and vaccine research. Scientists from abroad are ready to collaborate on non-communicable diseases. India has huge a spectrum of resources to tackle issues.

The clinical trial ethic rules have become stronger due to enforcement of regulations. The human rights and animal rights have to be respected equally and it was essential to stop the misuse. I don't think these have gone down drastically as the slowdown is temporary.

Q: How will you encourage the biotech industry?

We are involving the industry at two levels. They can fund the research projects initiated by the public sector and have a stake to benefit from outcomes. Also, their R&D units can partner with public institutes on various important projects. Earlier, at the foundation day of Indian Institute of Chemical Technology, Hyderabad, I have already issued an appeal to the industry to come forward and collaborate with government institutes.

Q: What is the government doing to bring back the talent from abroad?

There are lot many scientists who left the country due to whatsoever reasons. I would not like to dwell into the reasons behind that and what the previous regimes did to mitigate it. After I took over, I have been touch with a lot of scientists from overseas who have shown interest to come back. There are dozens of them who called me and expressed desire to come back and serve here. But they are having their apprehensions about the way things function here and are sceptical.

We have promised them a conducive environment. There is no malafide and no favouritism with scientists anymore. We don't want to appear to antagonise them. There are many contemporaries of our top Indian scientists who have shown interest. We will welcome them all.

About the minister: It is worthwhile to note that Dr Jitendra Singh is a renowned doctor, author and social activist. He is a diabetologist of international repute and had served as chairman of the National Scientific Committee of Diabetes (RSSDI 2013). Besides, he has so far contributed over five thousand published articles in the press including a popular column "Tales of Travesty", published in newspapers on a regular basis. He has so far authored eight books and Elsevier published his monographs and over a dozen chapters in various text books of diabetes and medicine for MD students.

Aged 57, Dr Singh's quick rise in politics has been phenomenal. Having joined active politics only few years back, he soon became a national executive member of Bharatiya Janta Party and chief spokesperson for its state unit of Jammu and Kashmir. A giant slayer, he began his electoral stint by defeating the former health minister and Congress veteran, Mr Ghulam Nabi Azad from Udhampur constituency of J&K.

Besides handling the independent charge of S&T ministry, Dr Singh's position is significant as he is also the minister of state for prime minister office (PMO) with direct access to PM. He also heads the personnel-public grievances and pensions, atomic energy and space portfolios as well.