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City

Biotech potential in city recognised by BIG grants

Out of the 18 Biotechnology Ignition Grant recipients, five are Puneites

Jahnvi Sreedhar ★★★★★

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Five Pune-based startups have done the city proud. Out of the 18 Biotechnology Ignition Grant (BIG) recipients this year, five innovators are from the city. BIG is a landmark scheme started by the Biotechnology Industry Research Assistance Council (BIRAC) to promote entrepreneurship among the research community in India.

A spokesperson of BIRAC told Mirror, "Pune has seen a steady growth in the number of applicants, and number of approvals too. Out of the 18 awardees, five innovators are from Pune. There has been a 20 per cent increase in the number of applicants from the city."

Venture Center, a Technology Business Incubator hosted by National Chemical Laboratory (NCL) that offers products and services to nurture technology, contributed to the steady growth in the number of applicants in the city. The Center so far has had six graduates out of which three are biotech startups.

Speaking to Mirror, Amin Almel, Founder and CEO, Sunrise Instruments Pvt Ltd, one of the five awardees, said the grant gives an opportunity for young scientists like him to become entrepreneurs.

Almel and Dr Ulhas Kharul, senior scientist at NCL, have partnered together to start the Hollow Fibre Oxygen Enriching Unit, a low-cost oxygen enrichment unit for the treatment of asthmatic patients. "We are employing the membrane technology, which is similar to the technology used in water purifiers," Almel said.

Another awardee, Vinay Agrawal, chairman of Biopore Surgicals Pvt Ltd said he was about to abandon his project of providing affordable orbital and craniofacial implants, but this grant gave him hope. "If we succeed it will be the first ever in the world; making implants suitable for a much larger type of patient base, including the malignancy reconstruction of patients," said Agrawal.

Agrawal has partnered with Dr B L V Prasad, a scientist at NCL, for this project.

Ashish Gawade, CEO and co-founder at Bottom of Pyramid Energy and Environmental Innovations, said Venture Center helps scientists like him from writing a proposal for grants to marketing the finished product. "The centre helps us to attract the right people, resources and investors. BIG acts as a huge support for novel ideas, which have a commercial potential."

Along with Dr Sreeram Dhurjaty, Gawade and his partner Aniruddha Atre, both renewable energy consultants working to develop affordable hand-cranked defibrillators for people in rural areas.

Explaining why Pune is favourable for such startups, Gopalkrishna Aradhyam, Associate Professor of IIT Chennai, said, "The rise in number of biotech-based industries and research centres has contributed largely to the cause. Also, University of Pune is one the first universities to provide an MSc in Biotech. Thus, the strong academic base works in its favour."

BIG purpose

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- *Gopalkrishna Aradhyam Assoc professor, IIT Chennai*

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