

BioNest support to Goan fledgling startups

BioNest, the startup incubator in BITS campus, Sancoale, is treading a different path in incubation with its focus on health and environment, discovers **Shoma Patnaik**

Incubators are an integral part of the startup ecosystem. Their primary task is to support young entrepreneurs and bring the business idea to fruition. In Goa with the government keen on positioning the state as a startup hub, incubators are being encouraged. About six-seven have come up in the state but Goan startup owners say that, more are needed as incubators provide invaluable support of mentorship as well as funding.

Started in Jan 2019, the BIRAC BioNest incubator at BITS campus in Zuarinagar, Sancoale, aims to attract startups in the bio tech or bio-informatics space with an emphasis on health and environment.

Mridula Goa, in-charge, BioNest says, "While we are flexible to incubate almost any good idea we prefer startups in bio technology or bio-informatics but the application of the idea must be connected with health and environment both of which are two biggest problems facing the world.

Goel reveals that the center with capacity of 20 seats has already incubated five startups so far, of which three were full-time and two incubated virtually.

"The incubator is open to all but be-



The buzzing BioNest incubator



Mridula Goa

cause we have hi-tech equipment and advanced wet lab, we want people to use the facilities. Some of the equipment is not easily available so we are interested in getting users otherwise there is no point in getting all the equipment," she says frankly.

Goel with her team is trying to popularize the incubator with the local startup community. Marketing for the team is a challenge because the center does not advertise. It is relying on word-of-mouth publicity from ex-users and from startup conferences most of which are attended by the team.

"We are targeting entrepreneurs in

the pharmaceutical sector, faculty, researchers and also students. Goa is the ideal place for pharma startups as there is plenty of mentoring support to be got from the local industry," says Goel.

She says that the incubator facilities are suitable for existing businesses too. "If companies have a need for product development which is not a part of their core activity, they can come to our center and test out the idea in the lab. Our rates are easy and affordable to all categories of startups.

Presently the charges are Rs 8,500 per month if using the lab. In case a startup uses just the office space, the rate is lower at Rs 5,000 per month. As a part of the larger network of incubators across India, the incubatees get access to investors and is eligible for seed funding. "We have a good network of investors within India and abroad. Some of them are our alumni," says Goel.

Biotechnology Industry Research Assistance Council (BIRAC), is a non-profit organization under the department of biotechnology (DBT), Delhi. The organization initially set up the incubation center in the Goa campus in 2013. In the early days the focus was on incubating Information Communication Technology (ICT) startups.

"Mostly we were incubating student startups. But in 2017 we shifted focus, got good funding support from BIRAC and re-launched the center. It took some time to set it up. We added a new building and the result is modern premises that are perfect for ideation. We bring entrepreneurs, mentors, researchers and academicians together to create a vibrant startup ecosystem," says Goel.

To keep up the buzz, the center regularly holds workshops, talks and conferences. Recently a workshop on basic molecular biology laboratory tools and techniques was conducted where participants included college faculty from across the state.

The incubator is also suitable to MPharm students in the state who need to present research papers but lack a well-equipped lab to conduct experiments, says Goel.



The workshop on molecular biotechnology