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INTERVIEWS

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Foundation

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India underinvests in science

Unless we build more than simply two or three global centres of scientific excellence and training, and unless we reward our scientists to work in those institutions, it will be hard for us to compete with countries like China, informs **Dr Swami Subramaniam**, CEO, Ignite Life Science Foundation to **Akanki Sharma** in an exclusive interview

Give us a brief about Ignite Life Science Foundation - the story of its origin, its goal and target audience, etc.

Ignite was launched formally at an event in January 2020 but its story had begun prior to that. It is the brainchild of Professor Ramaswamy Subramaniam, who was at that time heading C-CAMP in Bengaluru - a part of the Bangalore biocluster. During his working years in India, he recognised many problems Indian scientists were facing and it was not simply a matter of quantum of funding; there were multiple factors.

Research productivity thrives in a complex ecosystem. Very few countries in the world have succeeded in building such self-sustaining ecosystems consisting of multiple factors -government funding, academic institutions (that are often private) that consider research an important purpose for their existence, ability to attract the best students from the global pool, private philanthropists willing to support science through large endowments and the co-existence of research universities with communities of investors, start-ups and large company R&D facilities - The Boston-Cambridge (Harvard) area and the San Francisco Bay Area (Stanford), Cambridge University (Cambridge, UK) and the Stockholm area (Stockholm University) are some examples.

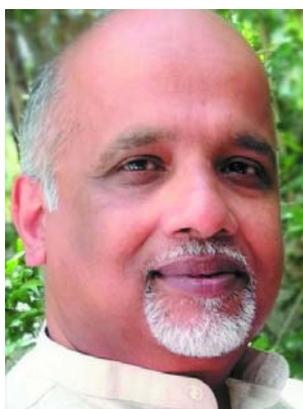
Building out such ecosystems takes time, but Rams and his scientific peers got together with leading business persons and

academics in India to find Ignite as an organisation that would nurture good science using philanthropic money. Connecting uHNIs to science in Indian universities is the first step towards getting widespread acknowledgement of the challenges facing Indian science and pooling resources and capabilities to solve some of these challenges - funding is only one among those.

So, Ignite is an organisation with the purpose of building - not just good science in the country, but also building research capacity because there are critical areas of research where a capacity in the country is missing because of historical reasons. For example, we don't have good fundamental vaccinology research going on in India as we noticed during this last pandemic. The only vaccine launched used an older technology. There was nobody in India, ready with messenger RNA technology for developing vaccines, and this is important because the fastest route to launch a vaccine is using messenger RNA technology, which is why the Pfizer vaccine got launched way before the Bharat Biotech one.

So, if we see, this is a gap that we identified; but, like this, there are many other missing pieces in the overall puzzle of Indian science. Unless those pieces are filled, Indian science will always find it hard to deliver to the expectations and requirements of India.

There are other healthcare needs in India, which are unique to the country. The second one could be anti-microbial resistance, and the



third would be nutrition. So, in some of these areas where India faces unique challenges and problems, Indian capacity needs to be built. Hence, Ignite was found with these two purposes in mind.

Biocon has invested Rs 5 crores in Ignite Life Science Foundation for life sciences research. Share details about the project for which this fund has been received.

Our first set of projects is related to pandemic preparedness and anti-microbial resistance. The specific project for which Dr Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw's funding will be used is to be determined in the coming weeks because all our proposals go through a rigorous external review. So, we will, within the next two to three weeks, decide which project specifically gets funded from the initial set of proposals received.

Then, as we grow our donor pool, we will expand the portfolio of projects. We will also be bringing forward projects in the area of anti-microbial resistance. So, as and

when we receive good proposals that get good external reviews, we will be ready to fund those, and, hopefully, additional funding will then come in to Ignite from new donors. Therefore, we can increase the number of projects we fund. The more we do, the better the outcomes will be, and the more effective we can be in terms of creating changes or new developments that are favourable in Indian science. So, we do hope that we will get support from more donors.

How active is ISFL in life sciences research? What all has it done to date and what does it intend to do in the upcoming days?

Ignite is a startup. We are only getting going with the funding that has just come in. We really had not started any project work until this initial round of funding from Dr Shaw. Now, what we plan to do with this funding, I have briefly alluded to. We have identified other areas for research, including the ones mentioned earlier. I just mentioned some of them could be based on donor interest. I mean, while we recognise that there are key programme areas that we'll identify, there could also be areas that donors identify as being important. Moreover, if we can find high-quality projects and investigators in those areas, we will take them up as well.

This is a long journey in which we have made a modest start. Our aim is to raise at least Rs 25 crores in the first round of funding, and then increase the corpus to about Rs 100 crores in a few years' time

from now. Of course, the size of the corpus of funding we raise has to be proportionate to the kind of high-quality investigators and project ideas that we find to fund.

So, I don't want to get ahead of the story by saying that we would raise so much money for sure, but I think we would raise enough money to fund all the good projects that we can find. While some of these will make a huge difference, some will make a smaller one; but all will be executed in a manner that ensures that excellence in research output is maintained.

As things change in the environment, we will also make adjustments in what we do. One of the things we do want to do in addition to funding projects is to consciously bring scientists together, not just as collaborators on projects, but as communities of practice. For example, if we take pandemic-preparedness, we would like all the scientists who are, in some way or the other; doing work on pandemic preparedness to come together on a common communication platform that Ignite will build for them. We believe that the exchange of ideas between, and maybe some collaborations among scientists across institutions, can strengthen Indian science in a manner that simply funding science cannot achieve. So, apart from funding science, we want to be an active promoter of collaborations and we also see opportunities for Indian scientists to collaborate with counterparts overseas.

We would like to facilitate that so that the best practices, the best knowledge, the best ideas, the best technologies,

the best reagents and the best research tools are available to, and in some instances, generated by Indian scientists. So, I think research and science is ultimately a global activity and we want to make sure that Indian scientists are a key part of the international research community in science in at least a few chosen areas, if not in every area.

Do you think India lags behind when it comes to investing in science and innovation? If yes, what losses has it brought to the country? If not, how strong has the sector been and what achievements has the country witnessed? Explain in detail.

India underinvests in science. More importantly, India underinvests in its scientists. Unless we build more than simply two or three global centres of scientific excellence

and training, and unless we reward our scientists to work in those institutions, it will be hard for us to compete with countries like China. We also cannot take the China route of super funding science since our resources are comparatively limited. Nevertheless, we have impressive human resources and we need to invest in its development. Unlike China, we are a free society where research and inquiry of the highest level can flourish. However, many players - private donors and the government must each do their part to make this happen. Hopefully, Ignite can play a role in enabling this on behalf of the major stakeholders, including the scientists.

How do you intend to create and sustain a robust environment that promotes world-class scientific

research and productivity in India?

Ignite is in the business of creating the facilitating mechanisms and processes that allow scientists to do their best work, and when appropriate, rapidly convert their ideas into products for the benefit of the community. We see ourselves as seeding these efforts. At some points, the seeds will develop and grow self-sustainably. Today, for a good scientist who can compete globally, there is no shortage of funds. For good and great scientists to emerge, we need to create an enabling environment. That is what we will do.

What steps are you taking to upgrade your R&D space?

We do not run our own laboratories. The investigators we fund and the host institutions provide this. We will support specialised

equipment to reagents that they need.

What kind of aid do you seek from industry stakeholders - philanthropists, scientists, policymakers, etc. for the growth of ILSF?

First, we need them to believe in what we do and support us with their words of encouragement. As a next step, for those who are able, we ask them to reach out to us to understand how they can support our mission - through funds, partnership, whatever. We will do the same by reaching out proactively to our stakeholders and when there is an opportunity, we will collaborate with like-minded institutions. The task is huge and no one player can do this. We hope other Ignites will also arise and we can all do together what none of us can accomplish individually.

Are you in talks with any organisation or government authority with regards to further investment in your foundation? If yes, kindly share details about the same.

We are in the very early stages of discussions with several potential donors. None of these is at a stage where it would be meaningful to disclose. We will keep you posted about any developments, as they happen.

What is your business plan for the next five years?

As I said earlier, it is good to have plans, but it is much better to execute on a small plan and then reveal the big plan. Our ambition is to raise over Rs 100 crores and become a partner of choice for both donors and scientists. Time will tell if we live up to this commitment.

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