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Godavari Biorefineries opens new R&D centre in Navi Mumbai

Godavari Biorefineries Ltd. (GBL), a Somaiya group company, inaugurated its new research & development laboratory, Genesis Labs, at Navi Mumbai, on February 1, 2017.

The new centre will house innovation projects primarily in the areas of bio-based chemicals and materials, including novel processes for several well-known industrial chemicals that GBL is currently developing.

Comprehensive architecture of value addition from agricultural feedstock

Speaking at the inauguration of the laboratory, Mr. Samir Somaiya, Chairman & Managing Director, GBL, reiterated the company's vision to stay in the business of renewable chemicals, despite the several challenges. "We want knowledge to be the differentiator in our business, at a time when sugar, alcohol etc. have become commoditised and politicised. We have drawn a comprehensive architecture of value addition from agricultural feedstock and this research laboratory is a key component of this strategy," he told a small gathering assembled at the laboratory to mark the inauguration.

Mr. Somaiya also highlighted the challenges posed by uncertainty in the sugarcane business, which have at times seen cane yields plunge from 40-tonnes/ha to 20-tonnes/ha, with additional drop in the sugar content of cane juice. "The product portfolio that we are currently planning is an incredible response to the challenges of farming, environmental challenges and commoditisation. Within three to four years we will demonstrate this with concrete projects on the ground," he promised.

Ethanol: misplaced emphasis on usage as fuel

Prof. M.M. Sharma, former Director, Institute of Chemical Technology, who inaugurated the laboratory, highlighted the role of technology as a driver of growth and a challenger of the status quo. He referred to the long history of innovation in the chemical industry, and the shifting of the feedstock base – from coal, to petroleum fractions and biomass.

According to Prof. Sharma, India had a long-standing policy of using ethanol for chemical manufacture, but a misplaced emphasis on using it as a fuel, by blending in gasoline, has led to the demise of several ethanol-based chemical units. "A valuable molecule is being burnt today, and that too not efficiently. It is far better to convert the ethanol to an oxygenate such as ETBE (ethyl *tert*-butyl ether), rather than use it directly as a blend in gasoline."

Sugar factories, he added, should look to exploit bagasse far more effectively, and value-add by making several chemicals, rather than just use it as a fuel in boilers. He also called for gainful utilisation of lignin – available in abundance whenever any biomass is processed.

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