Kerala start-up ecosystem

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We are always leading the way. In 2019, we launched one of the largest startups in the country with 1.80 lakh sq. feet area. In 2016, the policy came on, and the objective was to create organizations that create jobs and wealth. Kerala unfortunately, have a huge brain drain that comes in terms of qualified people moving for job as well as good startups moving out of the state looking for larger market. We have been trying to solve this; how do we attract the talent back? How do we create more talent that are really aligned with the new knowledge economy? How do we inspire people to take newer technologies? To address these questions, the first is to kind of evangelize about technology and startup. Second, is to create programs that make use of new technology and this includes digital fabrication, block chain, augmented reality and virtual reality etc.

Then how do we make sure that there is a good talent pool being developed? So we work a lot with KTU and other universities to make this happen. How can we encourage youngsters and professionals to start building solutions? We do a bunch of challenges; we create innovation zone and may try to make sure that there is always something new happening in the ecosystem. One week of the supporting experiment, then grow into startup and that is the way we have launched. We help them get into incubator give away the early stage funding so that they have a launch pad.

Finally, we look at how we help them to work with the government. How do we make sure that there is a large capital available for the startups to grow? In terms of the evangelization part, we have four flagship conferences around the year; one focuses on student summit. Then we ensure that more women take up entrepreneurship. We have also formulated the women freelancer development program, where we are trying to find women who have left

jobs due to various family circumstances and would like to get back. How can they have the flexibility to work from home and thus contribute to economic growth?

The second part is the educated; primarily what we have done here is that set up a network of 200 plus innovation cells in various academic institutions. This kind of helped buying those small breakthrough ideas from these colleges. Maybe, a student who is really good in technology and we tried to get them into other programs like FAB Academy summer school for the various universities across the world. The FAB academy programs are very important. The reason is, we are considered one of the top two centers across the world to run this program and so far had about 60 graduates and all of them placed in good companies and many of them working with hardware startups to build their own product. This program is possible because we have a large network of fabrication lab across the state. We have two main labs in Kochi and Thiruvananthapuram. We have 20 smaller labs across the state. This essentially gives students and youngsters access to the new technologies like 3D printing, laser cutting etc. We can really allow students to build and that is an essential part of both learning as well as creating newer company. What we have recently done is to work with MIT to set up a super fab lab. So this is MIT fabrication lab duplicated here. The journey of fab lab is the kind of a long journey. What we have also realized is that there are other newer technologies that we need to look at.

Unfortunately, Covid came in and we had a step back and see how we can offer online. Here, we give access to the advanced machines, gadgets and learning capabilities. This also gives access to high powered GPU and the provider is that of mentoring and training program or started working on these future technologies. Going forward, this is where we really need to be, because if you look at the state you have a favorite of software coming up. We are starting to be known as the startup hub but that is not enough from our perspective. We need to be known as the hub for one of those technologies so that we can attract talent interested in those technologies and startups based on it.

What we also do with the various government departments is to create innovation zone. For example we work with Water Authority; found out some of solutions for their problems. We do this through running various idea challenges, throwing out problem statement and finding good ideas that can be developed. For the products and ideas that come up, we have specialist incubators that take them in and help them finish engineering prototypes and go to the market. We have one for hardware, and bio-technology. We also have one that will take

mobile based technologies which basically give launch Space Technology incubator in Thiruvananthapuram. This is in collaboration with ISRO so that we get access to technology and products of ISRO. In addition to this, we have our own incubators across five cities in the state, all of them provide mentorship and various networking opportunities for startups. What we have started doing additionally is to link them with industries so that they get good, early adopters and   good business.

We also provide early stage grant through innovation grants, seed loans, patent support and R&D grant for companies. In addition to this, we provide marketing support. We used to take them outside India for various conferences and that have been a really good platform for many startups to learn global business.

We have also created venture fund, with the support of the government. So far about Rs. 74 cores of funding, that our startup can have access to and for that we work with a variety of leading partners across the world. It is very easy for departments to procure from various startups at the tender process. Through this, up to Rs. 1 core of product can be purchased by departments from the state. Some of those key projects are also being handled by K-DISC. Today,   we have about 2.6 lakh sq. feet incubation space spread across the state.

We are probably the only state that has incubation space available throughout the state. Other states have a concentration in one city like Bengaluru or Hyderabad. Kerala is making sure that startups across the state had access to information space and mentoring. We have about 1463 startups and for them the support of Rs. 50 core of funding is available. Last year, we launched the integrated startup complex, which is a 1.8 lakh sq. feet building. The key question for us now, how do we get startup in, how do we create newer technologies. How do we get them enough skill and talent? If we can find some of those key opportunities and build around, this would attract larger companies to the state.