



# Dr. Harshvardhan inaugurates the 1st Grand Challenges India (GCI) Meeting

## GCI partnership ushers in a new wave of Innovative Solutions to issues inextricably linked to Social Impact

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Union Minister for Science & Technology and Earth Sciences, Dr. Harsh Vardhan presided over as Chief Guest and inaugurated the 1st Grand Challenges India (GCI) meeting here today. The meeting is being hosted by the Program Management Unit at BIRAC (PMU-BIRAC) from 21st to 24th March, 2017 and is jointly supported by Department of Biotechnology (DBT), Government of India, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) and Wellcome Trust.

The Grand Challenges India (GCI) is a mission-directed research initiative, collaboratively launched in 2012 under the umbrella of Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the DBT and BMGF. As India transitions from Millennium Development Goals to Sustainable Development Goals, the GCI partnership has ushered a new wave of innovative solutions to help address issues that are inextricably linked to social impact. This aims to achieve the said goals by reconnecting Science to People and available scientific data & evidences to the societal problems for finding tangible solutions.

Programs such as Grand Challenges India are providing global innovators and researchers a fantastic platform to collaborate and progress through the innovation ecosystem by developing their ideas and concepts. The PMU- BIRAC manages the complex portfolio of managing grants. The GCI provides financial support in the form of grants, cooperative agreements, and contracts to support the advancement of the GCI mission to enhance health, extend healthy lives, and reduce the burdens of poverty.

Addressing the distinguished gathering, Dr. Harsh Vardhan noted that the Department of Biotechnology and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation have set up a very important strategic partnership, which is working towards funding innovative solutions to societal problems not only within India but also has a reference to the developing nations. Such partnerships bring together the strength of organizations and it is important to note that through this partnership, this initiative has been able to address issues around healthcare, sanitation and human development including nutrition and maternal child health brining nearly 45 organizations working together with a joint commitment. Shri Goyal also expressed great amount of confidence that Government of India reposts in the young scientific community and the seniors.

The GCI covers all kinds of health and developmental priorities, ranging from maternal and child health, infectious diseases, vaccines, point-of-care diagnostics, agriculture, food and nutrition to other related arenas of developing nations as per individual requirements. Most importantly, this partnership signifies a convergence between Indian and global priorities and synergistic new initiatives of the Government such as Swachh Bharat, Start-up India and others, Shri Harsh Vardhan added.

On the occasion, the Minister also released the booklet 'Grand Challenges India – Our Journey so Far', which describes the various achievements and success stories under the initiative including the 17 innovations across India that the GCI funds.

In his keynote address, Prof. K. VijayRaghavan, Secretary DBT and Chairman BIRAC, informed that Grand Challenges India, through PMU-BIRAC, supports flagship initiatives like All Children Thriving, Agriculture & Nutrition, Reinventing Toilets and the Healthy Birth Growth & Development Knowledge Integration (HBGDki) focusing on addressing stunting and physical, immunological and cognitive development with a particular focus on South Asia. He said that Governments, research experts, innovators are a facilitator to show multiple proofs of principle for various societal problems, which then need to be scaled up by the collaboration of efforts of all stakeholders to widely apply the demonstrated solution to the problem affecting all stakeholder cohorts.

GCI promotes scientific and technological advances which aim to find solutions to key health and development challenges through research and innovation, by funding Indian researchers. Projects are selected based on national and societal need and transparent calls are made for proposals seeking the best ideas. Under this initiative, the DBT and the Gates Foundation have pledged an investment of up to US\$25 million each, over a period of 5 years.

Dr. Steven Buchsbaum, Deputy Director, Discovery & Translational Sciences, BMGF said that Grand Challenges not only seeks new ideas and new innovators to solve problems, but to be careful in defining the important problems worth solving. The GCI partnership with BIRAC provides India leadership for two goals - defining important problems to solve for India and India leadership in identifying ideas and innovators from the country to solve problems for both India and the world.

Dr. Renu Swarup, Senior Adviser, DBT and Managing Director, BIRAC said that through this meeting and future collaborations, the partners aim to build momentum for health and development initiatives via innovations and to foster scientific collaboration among national and international groups and researchers.

Other dignitaries present at the event were Dr. Soumya Swaminathan, Secretary, Department of Health Research and Director General, Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), Dr. Nachiket Mor, Country Director, India Office, BMGF, Dr. Shirshendu Mukherjee, Mission Director, PMU-BIRAC and other distinguished senior national and international personalities from the Ministry, BMGF, Wellcome Trust, USAID and Grand Challenges Innovators from Brazil, Canada, Bangladesh, Korea, South Africa, Kenya, Switzerland.

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