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Hubballi to host India's biggest startup incubation

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Hubballi: Indian-American entrepreneur, philanthropist and venture capitalist Gururaj Deshpande is setting up India's biggest startup incubator in Hubballi, about 400km from Bengaluru.

The 82,000-sqft facility is expected to open in September. It will have the capacity to seat over 1,200 people, which means it can accommodate at least 200 startups. The startups will be mainly from Dharwad district, said Deshpande at a startup event at Infosys's new campus in Hubballi.

India's current biggest incubator is T-Hub in Telangana, housed in a 70,000-sqft building.

The Hubballi programme is a significant expansion of an idea that the Deshpande Foundation - founded by Deshpande and his wife Jaishree - seeded in 2008 and which has grown to be successful in the region. Called the Sandbox, the objective was to encourage problem-solvers from the local community and allow them to come with solutions with help from the foundation in terms of management, a financial model and connections to global innovators.

Several innovative solutions have emerged through this programme, including a software-enabled machine that helps automate the process of sorting cashew nuts according to their quality, and a technique to improve the productivity of cotton farmers. Some 50 startups are part of the Sandbox. All of them will move to the new facility once it is ready.

"The new facility will have a makers' lab, 3D printing lab, IoT (internet-of-things) lab. It will focus on all sectors - from manufacturing and agriculture to IoT," said Deshpande Foundation CEO Naveen Jha.

Deshpande was born in Hubballi, graduated from IIT-Madras and moved to the US. In 1998, he launched Sycamore Networks. The company went public in October 1999, and by March 2000, it was worth nearly \$45 billion. With his 21% shareholding, Deshpande became one of the wealthiest self-made businessmen in the world.

But when the internet bubble burst, Sycamore's shares too crashed, and it never quite recovered from it. In 2010, US President Barack Obama appointed Deshpande as co-chair of the National Advisory Council on Innovation and Entrepreneurship.

On Friday, Deshpande also announced the foundation will launch its biggest skill development centre in April. This centre, he said, will be able to graduate 5,000 people every year. This, too, is a major expansion of an existing training programme that the foundation has been conducting for the past over eight years. In the past three quarters, the foundation has trained around 2,000 people under this programme. "We realized many graduates are unable to get jobs. This (training programme) can be a big livelihood generator," Jha said.

The five-month residential programme will offer 11 courses, like mid-layer manager training, teacher's training, and social entrepreneurship.

"India needs these big institutes. Initially we had a minimal-thought process - we thought we'll build only what we need. But now we feel we have to open up our horizon and do heavy-duty work with large-scale impact. The tier-1 cities will take care of themselves. The government and bureaucracy focus on these cities. So we thought let's focus on tier-2 ones," Jha said.

The foundation is working towards launching a second incubation centre in Nizamabad, Telangana, in association with the Telangana government. Called T-Hub Rural, it will focus on the districts of Nizamabad, Karimnagar and Medak.