

# NEW HORIZONS



*Odisha plays home to some of the greatest innovative minds in the country. It should come as no surprise then that researchers across the state are busy at work, breaking new ground, inventing new things and forever pushing the boundaries of what we think is possible. Ashok Pradhan meets a team of scientists on the brink of a breakthrough that could make malnutrition deaths a thing of the past.*

**T**hree researchers at IIT Bhubaneswar are working towards bringing a probiotic to life which will help check malnutrition deaths within the next two to three years.

But what exactly is a probiotic? These are food with gut-friendly bacteria and yeasts that promote good health. Probiotics are expected to reduce diarrhoea, a major cause of deaths in children in the country. They also boost immunity, reduce suffering from other infectious diseases and help children attain growth milestones.

According to the National Family Health Survey 4, infant mortality rate (number of

children dying before one year per 1,000 live births) in Odisha is 40 (the national average is 41). The under-five mortality in the state is 49 (50 in India). Children between six months and two years who receive adequate diet in the state are a meagre 8.5 per cent.

With a Rs five crore grant from US-based Odia entrepreneur Sita Kantha Dash, who is credited with introducing acid-resistant, non-dairy probiotics in the US, scientists have begun research on developing technology and products suitable to the dietary needs of India's kids.

In 2014, the IIT had signed a MoU with Dash's Dr Dash Foundation (DDF),

Minneapolis, to carry out research and development in the field of probiotics and pharmaceutical products. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is also collaborating on the project.

"The research which was conceptualized three years ago has entered an advanced stage. The outcomes are encouraging and we are optimistic," says the institute's director R V Rajakumar.

Rajakumar added that the probiotic will be developed from indigenous fruits. Though yoghurt is a known probiotic, there are a few non-dairy probiotics which the researchers are looking to capitalize on.