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CDMOs gear up for peptide gold in weightloss race

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Mumbai, 24 July

As global demand spikes for next-generation weightloss and diabetes drugs, India's contract development and manufacturing organisations (CDMOs) are swiftly positioning themselves to capture a larger slice of the peptide pie, buoyed by looming patent expiries, most notably that of semaglutide, the blockbuster GLP-1 receptor agonist.

India is well placed for a central role in manufacturing GLP-1-based therapies such as semaglutide and tirzepatide, with the global market for these drugs expected to surpass $150 billion by 2030. The country's peptide CDMO segment, currently worth $80 million and accounting for just 3 per cent of the $190 billion global market, is projected to grow at a compound annual rate of 14 per cent over the next five years. The growth momentum is unmistakable, said Nilaya Varma, co-founder and group CEO of consultancy Primus Partners.

Leading Indian players in this space are Glenmark, Cipla, Divi's Laboratories, Themis Medicare, Peptomer Therapeutics, Syngene International, and Sai Life Sciences.

Semaglutide, the active compound in Ozempic and Wegovy, is owned and produced by Novo Nordisk; it will go off-patent in India in March 2026. Local pharmaceutical heavyweights including Dr Reddy's Laboratories, Sun Pharma, Cipla, Mankind Pharma, Natco Pharma, Lupin, and Biocon are preparing to enter the field. Investment is pouring into research and development, manufacturing infrastructure, and collaborations.

Vying for larger slice of peptide pie

- The GLP-1 market is expected to cross $150 billion by 2030
- India's peptide CDMO market is currently valued at $80 million
- Indian players now hold only 3% of the global peptide CDMO market
- Semaglutide will go off-patent in India in March 2026
- Major pharma companies preparing for GLP-1 launches

Anthem Biosciences is witnessing a surge in inquiries for peptide active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs), particularly for weightloss applications. "Semaglutide can be produced through total synthesis or biosynthetic routes. Very few companies in India can manage biosynthetic production, and we are one of them," said Ganesh Sambasivam, promoter and chief scientific officer. While declining to confirm whether semaglutide is in active production, he hinted that it may be among the peptides currently under development.

Syngene International is targeting more than just manufacturing. "We've already supported preclinical studies on semaglutide and recently helped a global pharma company with a bioequivalence study using pre-filled pens," said Jayashree Aiyar, the firm's chief scientific officer. The project involved developing and validating sensitive LC-MS/MS methods to measure semaglutide levels in plasma — technically demanding work in the peptide space.

Syngene's case study highlighted stringent planning required for clinical bioequivalence trials. The team had to address gastrointestinal side-effects in participants, implement continuous support mechanisms, and solve analytical challenges like autosampler carryover and extremely low detection thresholds. Custom chromatography and mass spectrometry protocols were implemented.

"While we are not currently manufacturing GLP-1 APIs, we are well-equipped with peptide scale-up and fill-finish capabilities. We continue to invest in technologies to meet future market needs," Aiyar added.

Peptide manufacturing, however, remains a complex and costly endeavour. "There are production hurdles involving the availability of protected amino acids, coupling reagents, and advanced purification protocols, particularly for bulk APIs," said Varma of Primus Partners. High energy costs and tight environmental regulations add further pressure. Government support through the 2024 production-linked incentive (PLI) scheme and greenfield bulk drug parks may help ease these bottlenecks.

Some CDMOs remain on the sidelines. Kashmik Formulations, for example, is yet to begin work on semaglutide or receive any field-related client requests. Still, the company is watching closely. "We're open to collaborations with larger players who can provide validated processes," it said in a statement.