

Who's afraid of MNCs

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By the time we step into 2010, there will be only 40 pharmaceutical companies in this world. That's a prediction for the industry. Obviously, since mergers and acquisitions are going to set the trend. The question is how many of them would be based in India, one of the biggest markets of the world. Dr. Krishna M Ella is confident that Bharat Biotech International Limited, the company he presides over, will be one of them. The growth chart of his four-year old pharma company stands testimony to his optimism.

Look at his record:

- . His was the first Indian company to produce recombinant hepatitis-B vaccine (Revac-B). With a capacity of 100 million doses, it is the largest facility for the production of Hepatitis-B vaccine in Asia.
- . They won the National R&D; Award from the Department of Biotechnology, Government of India, 1999.
- . Bagged the best biotech company award in 1999 by the All India Biotech Association.
- . Won the K C Chatterjee Award '99 by the Indian Pharmaceutical Congress for popularising biotechnology.
- . They have technical and research collaboration with Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, Centre for Biochemical Technology, Delhi, Defence Ministry (on malaria vaccine), University of Wisconsin Madison, National Institute for Health, Washington DC, Centers for Disease Control, Atlanta.

From the intellectually satisfying, cosy job of an assistant professor (research) at Medical University of South Carolina, US he did in 1996, to that of the chairman and managing director of Bharat Biotech in Banjara Hills. It was certainly not been a cake walk for Dr Krishna M Ella. Yet, he says he enjoyed every bit of the movement. Excerpts:

Tell us about your life before Bharat Biotech.

I come from a family of agriculturists near Madras.

After an MSc (Agriculture) from the University of Agricultural Sciences, Bangalore, I joined Bayer India Ltd. and moved to Mysore.

How did you land up in the US?

While working with Bayer, (1986) I was selected for the Rotary Foundation Scholarship and joined the Master's programme at the University of Hawaii-Honolulu.

Later, I moved to the University of Wisconsin Madison, for research. Then I joined the MUSC, Charletton, as assistant professor, Pharmacology.

Why and when did you leave the US?

I left US in 1996. In fact, I was not so comfortable about the idea but my wife insisted that we do something back home where my knowledge of science will be useful to the common man.

How did you hit upon the idea of working on hepatitis-B vaccine?

There are quite a few reasons. I have been a molecular biologist, working on the plant, animal and yeast systems.

My specialisation was on yeast molecular biology where I had worked extensively in the field of gene expression, gene knock out and cellular signalling.

I felt that we import all the vaccines, and wanted to make it affordable to our own people. There is an emotional reason too. My eldest brother died at 50, because of hepatitis-B infection.

So, was moving back simple?

No. We packed our bags and left the US after our project was by the ICICI Venture Capital for financing.

But once we landed here and started working on it, they dragged feet.

We cannot compete with giants like Smithkline Beecham who were already marketing the vaccine.

What was the first snag?

People had earlier warned me of the problems. Non-Required Indians (NRIs) would face, back in their motherland. Fortunately, for me, I had an appraisal from a British venture capital fund which found our project viable. The IDBI then came to our rescue. Now, they own 33 per cent of our equity.

Were they also apprehensive?

Initially, yes. But once they were convinced, the DDs came without any reminders.

We finished the civil work for the plant in a record time.

There were no contractors. I personally monitored the placing of every brick on the other. Trial production started in October 1998 and the product was out in January 1999.

Are you confident of withstanding the financial and marketing muscle of the multinationals?

Indian market has a place for a Nirma, a Surf Excel and an Ariel. So, I am not afraid of their entry. But we have to keep this in mind - our's is not just a business. We use science to benefit common man and this cannot be done in isolation. We have to collaborate with each other to help our customer.

Any of these multi-nationals or Indian companies is not my enemy. My only enemy is hepatitis-B.

What kind of future do you foresee for the company?

At present, we are working on developing the next generation vaccines and drugs for heart attack, diabetes, ailments of liver, kidney and nervous system and transplant rejection.

They are in their various stages of progress.

You were born in Madras, educated in Bangalore, worked in the US and have now settled in Hyderabad.**Tell us about your assessment of this city.**

I fail to understand the laid-back attitude of this city and its people. As a scientist and an entrepreneur, I have to deal with a lot of people and institutions, both private and public.

I am sorry to say, this city is still to get an idea of professionalism.

How do you spend your evenings?

I reach office by 9 am and leave around 8 pm. This is the routine for all the six days of the week. Sundays are devoted to my daughter Jala (16) and Reches (9) who are studying in the Abhyasa Residential School, Toopran.

I don't have too much of a social life. However, I do enjoy my beer and an occasional Scotch.

What else is of your interest?

I travel a lot - both within India and abroad. I am a member of two national task forces one of the Department of Biotechnology and of the Defence Ministry for malaria vaccine.

What does it take to be successful?

I'd say identify your core competence and then work hard. It's as simple as that.