

Pharma Phase

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In 1996, when many Indians were going west looking for better opportunities, Suchitra Ella and her husband Krishna Ella, both professionals in their own right, decided to move back to India. Today, after 10 years of hard work, Suchitra is the founder director of Bharat Biotech International Limited, the largest biotech facility in Asia-Pacific and India's most prominent biotechnology company based in Hyderabad, that's behind some of the most recent vaccines for Hepatitis B, A, typhoid etc.

Suchitra's leadership and organizational capabilities have been the key drivers for Bharat Biotech's success as a leader in developing new generation vaccines, pharmaceuticals and biotherapeutics. With a vision to offer health care products at affordable prices, the company is committed to the goal of empowering intercontinental efforts to combat infectious diseases across the globe.

Suchitra's company now boasts of an annual turnover of over Rs 40 crore. Says she, "Handling the operations and administrative part of a huge company is not very easy, but I find women more adaptable to difficult situations. They have it in them to juggle things, find solutions and face disasters without breaking up."

This energetic first generation entrepreneur with a 14-year-old son and a 20-year-old daughter says, "When something goes wrong, I always look at it as a learning experience. And that always makes it easier for me to deal with glitches at work."

For one who puts in 10-12 hours of work daily and helms a company with more than 400 professionals, Suchitra Ella sure seems to have perfected her balancing act.

The city caught the biotech bus fairly early. Its inherent roots as a bulk drugs major and contemporary R&D; institutions helped a great deal in leveraging its traditional strengths to consolidate its biotech business.

But then, in the mid 90s, as in other parts of the country, biotechnology was based more in the safe waters of the lab rather than an industrial scale. There was little, or no knowledge about manufacturing processes, scaling-up and production techniques that could bring biotechnology products into the market place. In this scenario, two biotech companies from Hyderabad entered the space and the first vaccine for Hepatitis-B was rolled out. This set the trend for the future.

Bharat Biotech, with its in-house HIMAX Technology, manufactured the world's first Cesium-Chloride Free Hepatitis vaccine which was introduced in the market in 1998. This was a significant achievement because it proved that we, in Hyderabad, are capable of cutting-edge R&D.;

The government of Andhra Pradesh was quick to identify the biotech sector as one of the "Engines of Growth" in the Vision 2020 document. The establishment of Genome Valley highlights the state's thrust on biotechnology initiatives and fostering scientific intellectual enterprise.

There are nearly a 100 companies in Hyderabad either directly or indirectly involved in manufacturing biotech and bio-pharma products.

What truly characterizes the biotech industry in Hyderabad and set it apart from the rest of the country is its focus on high-end biotech R&D; products, constant innovation in scaling-up techniques and high quality standards of manufacturing processes.

In terms of qualitative research vaccine development for Third World diseases such as malaria, rabies and neglected diseases such as rotavirus is currently making good progress. Similarly, the biotherapeutics segment is making great strides introducing hitherto undiscovered molecules such as Recombinant Human Epidermal Growth Factor among others.

The market size in Hyderabad is currently growing at a very healthy rate especially in vaccines and therapeutics. Analysts predict that the Hyderabad market shows tremendous potential.

The Department of Biotechnology of AP is currently updating its biotech policy and is facilitating various infrastructure projects besides giving due attention to education and HR development.

An agribiotech incubator is coming up in ICRISAT exclusively for developing new technologies for sustainable agriculture. It will facilitate producing new crops and varieties for food security and for increasing the nutritional value.

An erudite think-tank on biotechnology is probably among the best-known assets of Hyderabad. The think-tank has played a vital role in shaping the launch of \$30-million Biotech Venture Fund as a joint venture between the APIDC Venture Capital and Dynam Venture East, USA, to fund start-up biotech companies, collaboration with the IFC, World Bank, to augment the fund, setting up of an International Life Science Institute in the Genome Valley as a centre of excellence in industry-driven life science research.

It is important to address issues like respect for IPRs, science-based regulatory framework and strategy for innovation. We also need to re-look at the framework of research relations between academia and industry and stress on the need for re-engineering of institutional framework. There is also an urgent need for setting up infrastructure for pre-clinical trials and also for branding and establishing trust.

Hyderabad is sure to rise to the challenge thanks its innovative policies, a supportive facilitator and proactive industry.

The writer is the CMD of Bharat Biotech International