

This NRI woman started own biotech biz

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For Suchitra Ella hopping on to the biotech bandwagon was like an idea whose time had come. And much like Victor Hugo, there was no stopping this dynamic lady as she moved continents to realise her dream of founding Bharat Biotech, along with her better-half Krishna Ella.

Suchitra Ella started her career in the US in mid-1980s, working in customer operations in Waikiki Corporation and Woodman's. However, this Economics graduate from University of Madras, was not content at being just a professional.

Bitten by the entrepreneur bug and the drive to "create new and affordable healthcare solutions for India's teeming millions", the Ellas took a difficult decision of giving it up all and turning bio-entrepreneurs.

"It was a difficult decision. However, once made, there was no turning back. We sold personal assets in the US, and moved back to India and founded Bharat Biotech International Limited in 1996," Ella says, recalling her flight of fancy.

Success does not come easy...

Set up with the aim of providing affordable, world-class quality vaccines and bio-therapeutics for maladies like typhoid, malaria and diarrhoea, Ella has come a long way. From being a biotech start-up in the mid-1990s, the Ellas have pumped in a total of Rs 126 crore as investment, with its contract manufacturing and filling facility in Genome Valley being the largest in the Asia-Pacific region.

However, success does carry its own baggage. And Ella is no stranger to the fact that entrepreneurship is not child's play and "is wrought with risks".

"Hurdles started from Ground Zero. For the first two years, we struggled for finance and wrestled against all odds. Financial institutions looked askance as BT required many years of intense R&D;, which is very capital-intensive with a product cycle with an average of seven years," Ella, 41, says.

But that did not deter this NRI bizwoman from toiling away and ensuring that her dreams did not run dry. And being young, with oodles of enthusiasm and hope, "with no godfathers in the industry", did not help much.

"There were no guidelines as biotechnology was entirely an emerging field with little or no awareness regarding its requirements at various bureaucratic and policy-making levels. Lack of understanding and awareness did not help much," Ella, who also had to face the "onus of being an NRI (we were NRIs – not the classical definition...it felt more like 'non required Indians!') and facing greater bottlenecks.

However, all that is history now for this post-graduate diploma holder in Patents Law from Nalsar in Hyderabad. "The post-globalisation era has swept in a wave of opportunity. There is a tangible augmentation of industrial scenario. But when it comes to BT start-ups, there is a low, moderate growth, due to relatively poor funding," the mother of two says.

So what does this biotech entrepreneur like to do when she is not engrossed in devising solutions?

"Reading light stuff, listening to classical music, promoting arts, crafts and culture. I also love to travel to historical and natural locations," Ella, says.

And looking at the future with great optimism as she sets new sights on unconquered frontiers, and sees herself at the pinnacle of success, by going global.