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'We attribute our growth to our unique products'

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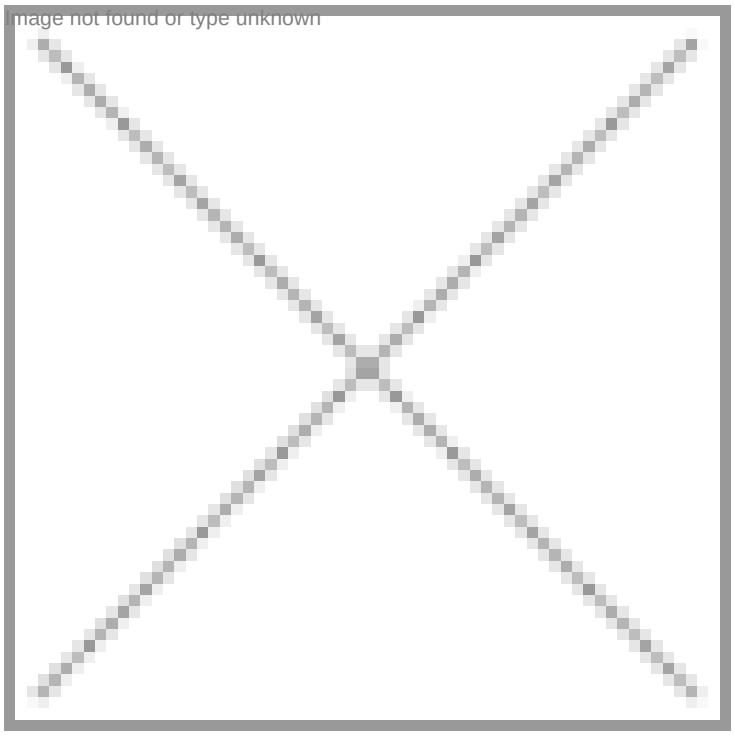

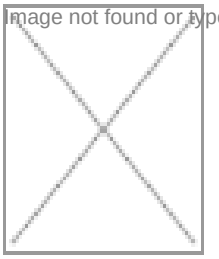

Mr Dhirendra Kumar,
founder & CMD, Camson Biotechnology

Camson Biotechnology is a leading agricultural biotechnology company based in Bangalore, since 1993. Camson is being termed as one of the fastest growing companies in the life sciences field with a growth rate of more than 90 percent over the last one year. Camson combines traditional knowledge in agriculture with latest advances in safety and protection, to market a wide range of products. These include hybrid seeds, bio-fertilizers and biocides that are non-poisonous, eco-friendly and residue-free.

With more than 400 employees and 32 scientists working at labs located in Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, Camson Biotechnology is geared up to move ahead with its philosophy of providing a supply of safe food, primarily through environment-friendly products, such as biocides, biofertilizers and hybrid seeds. From discovery to development, Camson has the defining science and multi-product manufacturing capabilities to bring innovative biotechnologies to farmers. Currently, it has more than 27 products with more than 45 biocides in the pipeline. Camson is also developing its own strains for biofertilizers which include nitrogen fixing and phosphorous or iron mobilizing bacteria.

Mr Dhirendra Kumar, founder and CMD, Camson Biotechnology, speaks to BioSpectrum on expanding Camson's portfolio into genetically modified seeds using a unique intragenic technology as well as on foraying into other neighboring countries as well.

Q Can you explain the intragenic technology and the products lined up using this technology?

Mr Kumar: Currently, all the leading bioagri companies are working on genetically modified organisms (GMOs) using genes from other unrelated organisms, as there is tremendous opportunity in that. However, we decided to go in a different direction and started working on the technology that involves the transfer of genes between related species using genetic techniques. We take pride in the fact that our research is based on lateral thinking. This technology, we hope, will face lesser problems from the regulatory aspect because of the principle of transferring genes between related species only, and we are thus projecting it as safe GMO. There are very few companies elsewhere in the world that are working on this technology. Currently, using this technology, we are working on the development of a virus tolerant species as well as the enhancement of antioxidants, such as lycopene and anthocyanin, in certain fruit and vegetable crops.

Normally, the lycopene content in the species that we are studying is six percent. Through recombinant technology, we have already achieved a lycopene content of 15 percent, which has also been done in some labs in the US. We will hopefully launch the product next year when we reach 21 percent lycopene content. We are doing similar work with anthocyanin which is known to slow the aging process.

Q Can you tell us about Camson's other research areas, besides intragenic technology?

Mr Kumar: Only one percent of microbes in nature can be cultured, hence we started a project related to metagenomics in which we transferred the genetic material of some of those microbes, which cannot be cultured into those that can be. We have got four products out of these studies, and we are in the process of obtaining patents for them.

Q Where do you see yourself in the biotech industry in India?

Mr Kumar: Camson has already created a niche for itself because of various unique products that we have brought into the market with our own technology. We are a true Indian company as all the products are produced in India and all the research is carried out here as well.

Q Tell us about Camson's range of hybrid seeds?

Mr Kumar: We were the first company in India to launch hybrid seeds for freezer watermelons, that, as the name suggests, fit into a freezer and are also higher yielding and non-leaky. We are the largest player in seeds for chillies as well as melons in India with unique hybrids such as yellow watermelons.

We use innovative marketing practices for these products to increase their popularity. Looking ahead, we are conducting further research in other vegetables such as jalapeno peppers and cherry tomatoes, which are generally imported. These hybrids are being produced using marker assisted technologies.

Q What do you attribute the tremendous growth of the last three years to?

Mr Kumar: We attribute our growth rate to our unique products. Today, people are getting an opportunity to buy something different and they are making use of the spending power.

However, the fact that our products are allowing farmers to obtain adequate remuneration for their efforts is what drives us forward.

Q Camson is a publicly listed company. What prompted you to go in for an IPO and how has that experience been?

Mr Kumar: In 1993, we were in need of funds, and at that time it seemed like the best option. But initially we got a listing only on the regional exchanges of Delhi, Bangalore and Hyderabad. And in a few years, those stock exchanges collapsed leading to a lot of difficulties. In 2008, we got listed at BSE and since the last four years, the experience has been good.

Q What are your future plans?

Mr Kumar: We intend to export our products to other countries such as Turkey, Africa, Malaysia, Indonesia and have recently opened an office in Singapore to take care of the exports for the Asia Pacific market. We are also developing a range of biomanure. The country is undergoing a severe shortage of chemical fertilizers, so there is a lot of potential and we will launch it the next three to four months. These products have to be complimented with good agricultural practices for them to be truly effective.

Camson is also about to launch the concentrated powder form of biocides, that will reduce the packaging costs and make it more convenient for the farmers. Liquid biocides are very heavy, which make transportation difficult. We are also looking to export these products. So, next year will be a different story altogether and we are very excited about that.

We are very bullish about the future and it seems very bright. India is an important market for us, but we are planning to grow in other countries as well.

Manasi Vaidya in Bangalore