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Biotech Visionary

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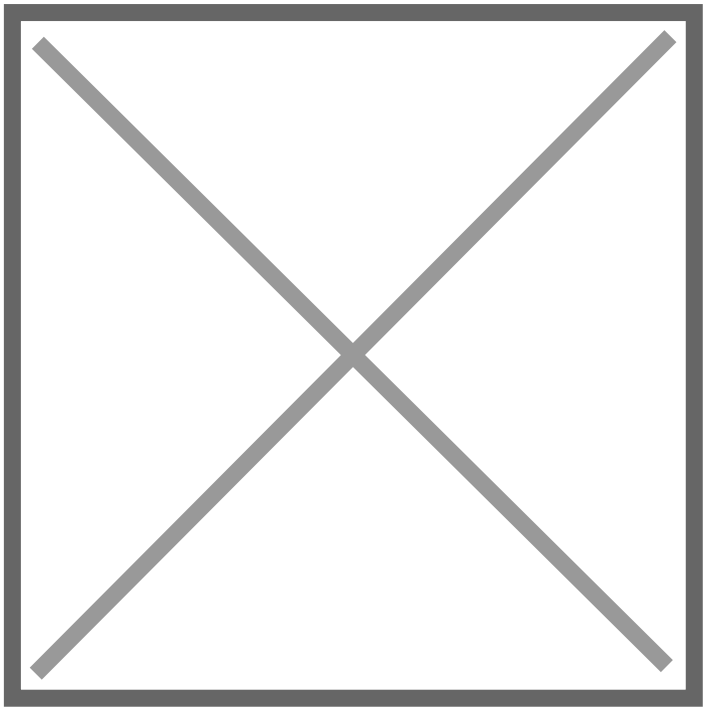

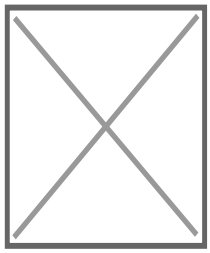

Strong determination and one lakh rupees were all that Kiran Mazumdar Shaw had with her when she entered into a joint venture with Biocon, an Irish company, to manufacture enzymes. Biocon, the country's biggest biotech company, had humble beginning at Shaw's garage in Bangalore in 1978. Later, she shifted to a small house, on rent, in Koramangala, a suburb Bangalore where she set up her business unit. Her Irish collaborators were ready to support her with whatever she wanted, but her pride didn't allow her to take help. She wanted to build the company with her own bare hands. Her zest to succeed has today brought her to the forefront of India's booming biotechnology business.

After 25 years of existence, the Bangalore-based Biocon India Group has today grown to a Rs180 crore major in the fledging field of biotech. The company, which is growing much faster than the rest in the industry, has projected a turnover of Rs 280 crore for the fiscal 2002-2003. The company is making rapid inroads into the US statins (cholesterol-lowering drugs) market. It is perhaps the first Indian company to get approval in the US to use solid-state fermentation for manufacturing statins, a group of cholesterol-lowering drugs. The latest news about Biocon having captured 10 percent of the US cholesterol lowering drug market with Lovastatin, in less than six months of its launch, is yet another feather on its cap. They are aiming at 25 percent market share by the end of next year.

Biocon Group and Shaw have many success stories to their credit. The Biocon Group's Research and Development (R&D) and manufacturing facilities received ISO-9001 certification in 1993. In March 2001, their proprietary bioreactor, the PlaFractorTM was granted the US and worldwide patent. The group has also played an important role in the formulation of a biotechnology policy of Karnataka. Shaw is the first woman in the country to step into the field of brewing and industrial enzymes. She is also the first woman to be appointed the Honorary Consul of Ireland. Shaw has won almost every recognition awarded for entrepreneurship in the country.Â

She was conferred the prestigious Padmashri award in 1989 and the Rotary Award for Best Model Employer. She has been recognised for her significant achievements as an industrialist and for her contribution to the society with M Visweswariah Award in 2002.Â

Kiran never even dreamt of being an entrepreneur. Her childhood ambition was to become a doctor. In those days most opportunities existed either in engineering or in the medical field and she was very keen to join the medical profession. Unable to secure admission to a medical college, she was forced to do Zoology honors at Bangalore University. By the time she completed her honors degree, she realized that medicine was something that could not be gained without spending around five years for that. And she was not ready to waste another five years and made up her mind to pursue a career in some other field of science.Â

Her father, who was a brewer, influenced her to take up fermentation science and pursue brewing as a career. She went to Australia for doing master's degree in brewing at Ballarat College, Melbourne University. After completing her studies in malting and brewing, she came back to India and practiced her profession for a few years in Calcutta, Mumbai, and Bangalore. Kiran, along with her father, worked as a consultant for breweries in all these cities before setting up her own business in Bangalore.Â

After the humble beginning in Koramangala, her company acquired 20 acres of land for Rs12 lakhs in 1980 and moved operations to the place where it is presently located. The completion of the construction works took three years. That was the first big step for Biocon.Â

Today, Biocon India Group has a contract research subsidiary Syngene. Established in 1994, Syngene has garnered experience and expertise in providing customized R&D services to the pharma and biotech sectors on a strong platform of confidentiality and intellectual property protection.Â

The company is the first Indian biotech Contract Research Organisation (CRO) to be grantedÂ
special export status by the Government of India. With state-of- the-art facilities, dedicated connectivity and experienced researchers, Syngene International offers its customers a powerful, cost-competitive edge in the field of outsourced R&D. Clinegene is Biocon's clinical research subsidiary established in 2000.Â

Clinegene aims to advance medical wisdom through well-defined clinical studies in select disease segments. It works closely with specialized clinics to create large analytical databases that dovetail with the data-mining capabilities at Syngene. Employing this bio-informatics platform, Syngene endeavors to identify new biomarkers that will eventually result in proprietary diagnostics and therapies.Â

As a woman achiever, Kiran Mazumdar Shaw is far ahead of others. Her story illustrates the classic model of entrepreneurial spirit. Surefooted and confident, she aims at becoming a biotechnology expert of global reputation. Biocon has already attained global recognition biotechnology market. In insulin manufacturing, it is already in the top 10. Shaw dreams of seeing Biocon in the top 10 global companies in the next few years. Ã¢â?¬Å?If Biocon figures in the top ten companies in the world, that will be everything for me,Ã¢â?¬? concludes Shaw.

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Ã¢â?¬Å?Whatever I do, I do it with a lot of seriousness and with a very determined mind to succeedÃ¢â?¬?

In a conversation with Roby Ajith of BioSpectrum, Shaw detailed the hardwork that went into making Biocon what it is today and also how she achieved the status of a celebrity entrepreneur.

Q. Educated in Australia, you could have joined any multi-national company abroad. What made you return to India?Â

A. I was not keen on taking up a job abroad, because I felt that there was a big opportunity for brewers in India. And I was eager to come back and grab it. But on reaching here, I realized the strong stigma of actually being a woman in brewing. Most of the companies were willing to let me do a lot of trouble shooting for them, and they were happy to call me whenever they had problems while commissioning projects. But none of them had the courage to entrust me with their breweries as a full-fledged manager just because they felt that being a woman I had lot of disadvantages. Lot of the companies had unions and they asked me, Ã¢â?¬Å?how will you manage unions?Ã¢â?¬? Also, work at breweries is such that you have to come in at all hours for something or the other. In those days, few women were in business and I had a tough time trying to prove myself.Â

Q. How did you feel when you got a chance to venture into a business?Â

A. I was initially quite diffident when I got the opportunity to set up Biocon. In fact, I was telling my collaborators, Ã¢â?¬Å?I don't know why you are asking me to get in to a joint venture with you. First of all, I am a woman; I don't have an MBA and in addition, I don't even have the money to set up a company.Ã¢â?¬? The answer was this Ã¢â?¬Å?We are looking for somebody with a lot of initiative and a challenging spirit. We are sure that you will make a success of this company.Ã¢â?¬? They had more faith in me than myself.
I took it as a challenge. Whatever I do, I do it with a lot of seriousness and with a very determined mind toÂ
succeed and that is what you require when you do anything. There has to be determination and a sense of challenge, if you want to succeed. With that in my mind, I set up Biocon when I was 25 years old. Second, I had no experience running any business.Â
Fortunately, I had some experience in working with companies, certain projects. So I knew what it was toÂ
manage activities and how to plan out an operation. Nevertheless, when youÂ
are doing your own business it is a very different challenge.Â
It was a good opening. Biocon became the first Indian biotechnology company. In 1979, Biocon started exporting its products. In 1990, Biocon entered the pharmaceutical business.Â

Q. Looking back to past 25 years, how do you feel?Â

A. Biocon's is an exciting history. Every year was a year of learning and a year of earning too. Growth has been exponential every year. A very rich experience for me is all the various passage that we have gone through and how successful we have been in each. Our subsidiaryis the largest contract research company in the country. Synegene has got very high profile internationally. In the enzyme sector, we look forward to become one among the top 10 companies in the world. Our pharmaceutical initiatives are gaining international importance. The pharmaceutical division is focusing on developing drugs for diabetic, cardiovascular diseases, and cancer.Â

Q. You are known to be one of the best employers in the country. How do you keep your employees motivated?Â

A. I believe that motivation is all about empowerment. In our case, we encourage employees to own a problem rather than owing a task. In Biocon, employees are encouraged to solve problems themselves. We have a flat organisational structure. Any one can walk to my door and speak to me. Gardener to president, all have equal access to me. The moment you start building boundaries, you destroy that open culture. We have generated a committed bunch of people who are empowered in the best working environment.Â

Q. What are your initiatives for social and community development ?Â

A. Our community instincts are quite strong. Biocon has contributed enormously to the development of health and education through building schools and sponsoring training programmes for teachers. We have built schools in Anekal, Gollhalli, Hoskur, and upgraded computers in the neighbourhood schools. We have also trained around 30 teachers to use them properly. Significant contributions have also been made in improving the health of the community. Around 6,000 children were vaccinated for both polio and hepatitis-B. Setting up of small medical centers is on the cards. We are committed to extending primary education and healthcare to the rural population.Â

Q. How do you view the fast multifaceted industrial development of Bangalore?

A. I am a Gujarati, born and brought up in Bangalore. I am very much Bangalorean and speak Kannada better than Gujarati. Grown up in Bangalore, I have seen it as a very clean, beautiful city with a soul. There are many things that make it so multi faceted other than IT or BT. The city has its own ethos -- theatre, food, music, academics, architecture etc. But I think all that is disappearing now. There is not enough public participation in improving civic amenities. Everyone thinks that there are others who are responsible. People don't find a sort of involvement in participating in civic kind of movement.Â

Roby Ajith