

Entrepreneur of the Year

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Dr KK Narayanan

It's business and pleasure

Fact File

of Dr KK Narayanan

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Dr KK Narayanan's passion for agriculture and good entrepreneurial skills has resulted in Metahelix gaining a significant traction in the agribiotech field. It aims at becoming one of the leading agri-biotech company in the next few years.

From taking up a temporary job of that of an assistant at a Krishi Vighana Kendra to becoming the managing director of Metahelix, Dr KK Narayanan has come a long way.

Basically hailing from an agricultural family of Mohombi Science Village near Alleppey in Kerala, he had always wanted to do something which would practically help him be closely associated with farming.

Armed with a B.Sc in Agriculture and a Master's degree in Plant Breeding and Genetics from the Kerala Agricultural University, Dr Narayanan had a short stint with the Kerala State Department of Agriculture. He was posted to Wyanad district as a Junior Agricultural Officer and remained in service for only six months.

The experience, he recalls, was wonderful - his interactions with farmers, putting his theoretical knowledge into practice etc.

His passion for agriculture drove him to pursue his higher studies and he went on to do his Phd in the same subject from the Tamil Nadu Agricultural University at Coimbatore, between 1985 and 1988.

He joined the SPIC Science Foundation (SSF) on the understanding that he would be allowed to do his post-doctoral research which he eventually did at the Department of Biological Sciences, Stanford University under a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship between 1989 and 1990. This was the major attraction for Dr Narayanan to join the SPIC Science Foundation at that time when there were several other job offers including one from the Rubber Board.

At the SPIC Science Foundation, he initially worked as a scientist, a senior scientist and then as group leader. A bigger opportunity came knocking towards the end of 1998 and he joined Monsanto Research Centre in Bangalore as programme leader for crop transformation and functional genomics. Always having wanted to do something on his own, Dr Narayanan's wide exposure to topics global in nature, extensive travel and networking with experts in the field of agriculture only strengthened his conviction that technology exchange that had been happening at Monsanto, could be used profitably in India.

This made him initiate talks with people who mattered and in one of their informal meetings, they discussed the idea of making available the latest products and services in the bio agriculture sector at an affordable cost.

While Dr KK Narayanan was still working at Monsanto, his friend and colleague Dr Gautham Nadig who had already come out of the organization, did the groundwork to set the ball rolling for the establishment of their company. Soon Dr Narayanan and Gautham Nadig along with three other scientist friends - Ganesh Kishore, Himadri Pakrasi and Suri Venkatachalam, who all had the common vision of harnessing technology to create societal value, joined hands and thus was born Metahelix.

After initial hiccups, the company was registered in December 2000, but was formally launched in July the following year, from a single bedroom apartment provided by Gautham Nadig's mother-in-law. While they had ample intellectual capital, funds had to be raised from other sources. They were lucky to find an angel investor in co-founder of software major Infosys, NS Raghavan who offered them Rs 6.5 crore in venture capital. With the availability of funds, they moved to a bigger place in VV Puram in South Bangalore.

The growth came fast and to accommodate the increasing numbers and facilities required, Metahelix acquired land at the KIADB Industrial Park in Bommasandra on the outskirts of Bangalore to set up its own lab and green house facilities in mid-2002. It also developed a 15-acre field research farm in South Bangalore to expand the genetic improvement activities. As part of a strategic expansion program, Metahelix also started a subsidiary seed company, Dhaanya, towards the end of 2002.

Position: Managing Director, Metahelix.

Date of Birth: January 22, 1961

Academics: B.Sc in Agriculture, Masters degree in Plant Breeding and Genetics from the Kerala Agricultural University, Phd in Plant Breeding and Genetics from Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, carried out post-doctoral research at the Department of Molecular Science, Stanford University.

Family: His wife Shobha Narayanan is a qualified CA with Agriculture and a Master's degree in Plant Breeding and Genetics from the Kerala Agricultural University. He has a short stint with the Kerala State Department of Agriculture. He was posted to Wyanad district as a Junior Agricultural Officer and remained in service for only six months.

Entrepreneurship: Started Metahelix along with four other scientists in 2001.

Other hats: Head of the special interest group on bio-agri sector at the Association of Biotechnology-led Enterprises (ABLE), member of sub-group constituted to recommend to the Prof. M S Swaminathan Task Force on a few regulatory issues.

In the pipeline: Metahelix plans to start production of protein biologicals and diagnostics. The company is also looking at first round of investment to facilitate further expansion. It is awaiting introduction of the product patent regime in 2005 to take full advantage of technological breakthroughs.

"Our vision is to be the leader in life science informatics & genomics"

What is the vision of your company?

Our vision is to be the leader in life science informatics and genomics; putting technology to work to address the needs of a broader section of our global society and creating a discovery engine which focuses on the needs of developing countries.

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Our mission is to create value by delivering a range of novel biotech products and solutions that bridge the technology gap in the developing world through innovative research for a holistic and sustainable enhancement of life.

What are the main objectives of your company?

Our company has three major objectives: First, to build informatics and gene discovery capabilities to discover and develop genes that can be harnessed to create value throughout the agri-feed, food, fiber and fuel value chain. Second, to build biotech and genomic capabilities to improve the productivity and nutritional attributes of crops. Third, to increase the availability of vegetables in developing countries by incorporating attributes such as insect, fungal and virus resistance, and shelf-life enhancement.

What have been the key learnings since you started the company?

One of the key learnings from our relatively short experience has been that a business model which combines services for the immediate revenues and a longer-term product development focus can be a successful one, particularly in the Indian context.

What factors do you attribute to the success of your company?

The ability to capitalise on opportunities, flexibility, right decision-making, great team work, support from well-wishers and of course luck!

What is the USP of the your company?

Agricultural biotechnology offers tremendous potential to meet societal needs. One cannot think of a biotechnology company that is totally dedicated to agriculture. I find no parallel to our company. I cannot see another company like ours. One is that it is fully Indian, second it is run by a bunch of scientist-entrepreneurs and third, starting off in a small way and then growing big in the discovery space as well as services.

Why did you choose to set up base in Bangalore?

Bangalore is world-renowned for its information technology capabilities and is the home of premier educational institutions such as Indian Institute of Science (IISc) and National Centre for Biological Sciences. The city is in close proximity to important agricultural regions of the country and home to some of the leading health and pharmaceutical research institutions. It is also the capital of Karnataka and a forerunner in promoting the biotech industry in the country. Last but not the least, Bangalore's pleasant weather.

How did you come up with the name Metahelix?

The word meta means beyond and we wanted to go beyond just the understanding of the helix of the DNA. It was Dr Gautham Nadig who came up with the name and we all approved of it.

Who are your role models?

Prof M S Swaminathan is one. In terms of ethical business and having values in business, I take cues from NS Raghavan and NR Narayana Murthy of Infosys. In terms of scientific competence, I hold several people in high esteem. My professor at Stanford University Dr Virginia Walbot and Dr Joseph Thomas are my other role models.

Apart from being the managing director of Metahelix, Dr KK Narayanan plays a significant role at the Association of Biotechnology-led Enterprises (ABLE). Initially he joined as a member and now he heads the special interest group on bio-agri sector at ABLE. Dr Narayanan believes in working closely with the biotech industry and is keen on seeing the birth of more bio-agri companies in the country. He feels the activities of ABLE need to be strengthened. It should become a powerful guide for the biotech industry and it should in many ways promote responsible biotechnology.

From the start, the company has concentrated on acquiring a revenue stream, in addition to developing its own products and IP positions. In addition to contract research for several Indian and foreign customers, Metahelix also focuses on trait development in crops through genetic transformation, where the returns come only in the long term. The company has adopted a novel method of raising working capital for such activities by getting the customer to pay for the product upfront. It has major customers and runs on cash flows.

Metahelix plans to patent its products. The company is awaiting the introduction of the product patent regime in 2005 to take full advantage of technological breakthroughs, the latest being insect protection technology. It will file for preliminary trials next year and expects to come out with its first product by 2007. Metahelix also plans to start production of protein biologicals, diagnostics and paralely launch marketing and sales operations for protein biologicals. It is also looking at first round of investment to facilitate further expansion.

Today, Dr KK Narayanan and Dr Gautham Nadig are actively involved in running the company. Their individual expertise along with the experience of the other founders has helped Metahelix go up the path of growth.

Namratha Jagtap