

"I left my job in the US and returned to India to do something"

12 April 2011 | News

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Dr. Shama Bhat,
founder, chairman and managing
director

The urge of doing something different than working as a professor or a scientist made Dr Bhat come to India and give wings to his entrepreneurial dreams.

The thought of returning to India came into Dr Bhat's mind when he along with his wife Ms Susheela attended an AIDS conference in New Delhi in 1993. After having spent nearly 17 years in the US at University of Pennsylvania, it was not an easy decision for them. However, being aware that the diagnostic kits for the detection of HIV were unavailable in India at that time, Dr Bhat felt it was the best time to start a company for manufacturing diagnostic kits for HIV and other diseases.

After discussing about this venture with two of his close friends, Dr Ramesh Bhat and Dr Krishna Bhat, he received their whole-hearted support. He went ahead and set up Bhat Bio-Tech India in 1994. Since he was working in the field of HIV, making diagnostic kits for HIV detection was not difficult. By the time he came to India he had these kits almost ready to be

manufactured.

As the promoter of Bhat Bio-Tech, Dr Bhat has leveraged his 35 years of experience in R&D and manufacturing in the biotechnology area, to conceive this enterprise. An alumnus of Kasturba Medical College, Manipal and the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, trained at the University of Connecticut Health Center, Farmington, US, Dr Bhat worked as the faculty at the Neurology Department, University of Pennsylvania, US, from 1983 to 1994. His discovery of Galactosyl Ceramide, as an alternative receptor for HIV in neural cells, won him both universal acclaim as well as the undivided attention of global scientific circles. He has over 40 publications to his credit and is a recipient of the prestigious Ranbaxy Award.

According to Dr Bhat, the journey of Bhat Bio-Tech was bumpy in the beginning. After his return to India, he found it difficult to adjust himself to the bureaucratic set up after being in the US for more than 16 years.

Narrating the same, he says, "They blindly told me that, you may have good credentials and experience but for the paper work we need a collaboration from abroad, which will help in approving the loan immediately. I was shocked and had to argue with the authorities that I left a lucrative job in the US and returned to my homeland to do something and I'm ready to take the risk. I realized that the local authorities give much importance to the papers from abroad instead of evaluating how much our own people can do. Finally, the loan was sanctioned and Bhat Bio-Tech was set up in 1994."

Bhat Bio-Tech started with pregnancy test kit in 1996 and today, it has more than 100 kits for diagnosis of many diseases and conditions. The company that started with a handful of people, today under the leadership of Dr Bhat has more than 200 working people and more than 300 people benefited indirectly. In response to the recent epidemic of chikungunya and swine flu, Bhat Bio-Tech worked round-the-clock to bring out the diagnostic kit for chikungunya in about six months time. Similarly, when H1N1 was a national health threat, the company worked hard to bring a molecular level detection kit in record time, now waiting for the license from the drug authorities.

At present, Bhat Bio-Tech is working on molecular diagnostics, pharmacogenomics, lab-on-a-chip for several parameters, diagnostics for veterinary, agriculture and food safety. The company is focusing on both protein-based and molecular biological methods for the development of diagnostic kits. Dr Bhat believes that despite pharmacogenomics, the so-called personal medicine, the major hospitals and big diagnostic centers will continue to use the automated machines for the diagnosis.

Rahul Koul in New Delhi