

Life, as the curtains go down at AstraZeneca R&D Bangalore

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The state-of-art center was the showpiece of Bangalore and was instrumental in placing India in the global biotech map. The center, when closed has added a wealth of trained scientists to the Indian pool of researchers.

For Dr Vasanthi Ramachandran, it was just any other Monday. She woke up early morning and hurriedly finished the household chores. In no time, the breakfast was ready. The clock ticked 8.30 and Dr Ramachandran knew she was late! She hurried into the room, wore a nice red and golden cotton sari, carefully put a bindi on her forehead, tied her hair and off she left for work. As she paced towards her car, a plethora of thoughts were running in her mind. Her three decades career at AstraZeneca had shaped her into a strong team leader, with expertise in handling most contagious pathogens and solving challenges in drug discovery processes. She was thinking about the unfinished tasks for that day and issues to address posed by her team from the previous evening. The company's research projects were very well poised at that juncture, with a lot more interesting work to be done in the coming months, thereby bringing them a step closer to their ultimate goal of discovering novel and safe medicines for neglected diseases. As these thoughts rushed in her mind, the ever so familiar gates of the state-of-art AstraZeneca research center appeared; Dr Ramachandran got down and quickly walked inside after swiping her ID card at the entrance.

Morning greetings followed. Dr Ramachandran acknowledged her colleagues and team with a smile. They smiled back. She quickly put her handbag away and marched excitedly towards the meeting room to discuss the day's agenda and previous day's results with her team. The team happily shared the new positive outcome of the test they had incubated. Dr Ramachandran's joy knew no bounds! She acknowledged their hard work and immediately rushed to the manager's cabin to convey the news.

The manager was busy checking his mails. The usual smile on his face was missing. Dr Ramachandran greeted him, and sat on the chair.

With complete enthusiasm she explained the achievement made by her team. Still this encouraging news too failed to bring a smile on to his face. 'Good' was the only answer she received. A little dejected, Dr Ramachandran returned to her desk. Her

colleague, Dr Sunita de Sousa was passing by. She greeted Dr Ramachandran and asked her how her weekend was. But Dr Ramachandran was in no mood to discuss. In a confused tone, she told De Sousa, "I feel something bad is about to happen today." "You appear a little disturbed, nothing will happen," comforted, Dr DeSousa.

With around 75 researchers, AstraZeneca R&D center for TB and malaria research, was more of a family than a workplace. For Dr Ramachandran and Dr De Sousa, who was the associate director and manager of external collaborations, AstraZeneca was much more than a research lab. It was their second home, where they had spent close to three decades of their life playing with microbes, carrying out innovative research with an intention to solve the healthcare woes of India and the world. The swanky research center was a show-piece of Bangalore and also had the AstraZeneca Pharmaceutical Development lab housed in the same campus, which employed around 100 scientists.

The R&D center was focused on developing drugs for neglected tropical diseases. In the last three years, AstraZeneca had published several research articles in top journals, thus speaking about the quality and credibility of the innovative research carried at the facility.

Soon, it was tea break. The team gathered together in groups for tea. Suddenly the quiet workplace seemed very jovial. The clutter of tea glasses, the gossips, the chatters all filled the atmosphere with complete cheer. Young interns at the center were busy discussing Bollywood movies, the senior team members also joined in the fun. It seemed a perfect setting for an early morning break. Suddenly one person announced that there was an urgent email summoning all of them to a compulsory meeting in the auditorium. All employees rushed to the auditorium curious about what this early morning meeting could be! As the employees gazed towards the podium a foreign official arrived on the dais. The official, who identified himself as a member of AstraZeneca's global senior management team, announced with a solemn voice, "With great difficulty, I am announcing that AstraZeneca is planning to shut its Bangalore R&D center."

A silent wave swept through the room. The employees looked at each other in a state of dismay and disbelief! Many sat on their chair, unable to trust what they just heard. 'Why us' was the major question in Dr Ramachandran's mind. Back in 1986 when she came to Bangalore post marriage, Astra had welcomed her with open arms. At this very center she had completed her PhD, through IISc, Bangalore. The center was more than a workplace to her. "What will I do next?" she said, confusion and sadness clear in her voice. "I would have loved to continue working for a few more years."

Soon, the fun-filled atmosphere of the room was suddenly filled with tears, anxiety and grief. Few of them said that the decision was probably not true and it would change. "The center had established a strong foothold in research! Why will they want to close it?" they argued in a worried tone. But they somehow knew that their argument was futile. For many employees who were sustaining families, school fees, monthly EMI, their bills flashed in front of their eyes. "What will I tell my people back home," said an employee, "that I was given a pink slip! How will I meet my mother's treatment costs?"

Dr De Sousa and Dr Ramachandran were very upset. More than anything the two were worried about the eminent research carried out at the facility and the beautiful memories associated with the place. "We started and built our career here," Dr De Sousa said to Dr Ramachandran in a depressed tone. "What will happen to the new molecule we have discovered for treatment of malaria?" Dr Ramachandran's team members gathered around her. In a worried tone a girl asked her, "What will I do next? This is such a unique center. Will I be able to find something similar?"

Closure

The company had decided its strategic focus areas and clearly this Bangalore R&D center was not its priority. Dr Vasan Sambandamurthy, team leader, who had worked at the AstraZeneca Pharma R&D center for six years, said, "There were several reasons that could have led to the shut down-to cut down operating costs and reduce headcount; lack of commercial potential for drugs to treat diseases of the developing world; research culture within India not being conducive and sustainable in the long run among many"

The announcement was made in January and time was given till April to exit the site. According to the employees' statements, AstraZeneca did a marvelous job of helping employees with the transition, by hiring an HR company, to help employees with writing resumes, interview skills, training for alternative careers and trawling job opportunities depending on what each individual was looking for. The local management was very supportive in placing people through their contacts. Many people have said to have found appropriate replacements. Though initial confusion and brooding happened for a few, many others looked at this as a welcome opportunity to explore new avenues and challenges. A few had to make compromises with the new job, others had to relocate. Many scientists used this notice period granted as an opportunity to publish the research done and improve their CVs. Later, with all the support the company offered for the transition, it left most people in a comfortable space and there were practically no bitter feelings.

Dr Sambandamurthy, who was also impacted by the shutdown said, "The news of closure came as a shock to all of us. That

day was probably a day I would never forget. Every colleague with whom I was associated with during the blissful six years at AstraZeneca, had the somber expression of 'what next'."

Having worked abroad, this situation was not particularly unfamiliar to me, however going through the process was not a welcome feeling. No doubt, the company's departure represents a "tremendous loss", and painful experience, but for many of us it was also an opportunity to explore newer research avenues and broaden our skill sets and knowledge base."

"Many of the research work carried at the center was in collaboration and has been continued by the partners," said Dr De Sousa. "The tests for the malaria molecule which was pending, was continued at the UK AstraZeneca site. Recently Medicines for Malaria Venture supported the selection of this molecule as a candidate drug for development (AZD13721412 (MMV674253))."

"It would have been great if the AstraZeneca infrastructure at Bangalore could have been taken over by institutions involved in drug discovery best exemplified when Piramal took over the CIBA facility in Mumbai when CIBA closed. Such an infrastructure takes years to build and sustain, it being dismantled is indeed a sad event in the history of research on neglected diseases in the India context," said Dr TS Balaganesh, former head AstraZeneca R&D center.

With increase in R&D spending and decline in success rates for clinical trials, research and development in India is becoming tough. The closure of the center, would certainly have an impact on the quality of research as well on the quality of scientific human resource. Moreover, start-ups will be deprived of valuable technical support and incubation facilities, which no other R&D center has encouraged.

"Our work in AstraZeneca was a contribution to the scientific community. There was no money in it, concluded Dr Ramachandran, "however we were discovering molecules that had the potential to become wonder drugs in future. I fervently hope that the efforts to bring out newer and safer drugs for the neglected diseases like malaria and TB which basically affect the millions living in 3rd world countries will be pursued in earnest elsewhere. It will be great if another facility like AstraZeneca comes up in India."