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The Biopharma Twins

How the engineer and MBA brothers ended up heading two biopharma companies in Mumbai

ALL ROADS LEAD TO SERUMS

Twin brothers **KV Subramaniam (KVS)** and **KV Balasubramaniam (KVB)** studied at NIT-Trichy (regional engineering college at that time) and IIM-Ahmedabad

KVB was in the private sector, working for Rallis and SB Billimoria, before joining Merck Sharp & Dohme India, and then NDDB's Indian Immunologicals Ltd which he headed. He moved to the **Daftary family-promoted Bharat Serums as CEO in 2016**

KVS spent a long time in public sector IPCL, before joining Reliance Industries. After donning various hats at Reliance, he was asked to **set up the pharma, serums and biosimilars business Reliance Life Sciences**, where he is still the president and CEO

While **KVS has taken up writing** (he is on his second book), **KVB pursued and completed a PhD** at the age of 58 in 2016

This was in the early 1980s. A student at IIM-Ahmedabad at the time, KV Subramaniam, faced a hostile professor: "You think you are very smart?" The professor wondered why the young Subramaniam was following him from class to class. "I saw you sitting in my last class," said the professor, only to hear an even smarter retort. "Sir, if you go back to that class, you will still find me sitting there." Chaos ensued, as all his classmates jumped in at this stage to explain what was going on. The splitting image of Subramaniam, who was sitting in the other class, was none other than his twin brother, KV Balasubramaniam. Let's call them KVS and KVB – that is how they address each other – especially as both of them have ended up as CEOs of well-known companies. Like all other identical twins, KVS and KVB have fun stories to tell about growing up together. Even while at work, they had some fun. Once at the Hyderabad Airport, for instance, KVS was surrounded by colleagues of KVB, not realising that they had suddenly met the wrong brother. "We sometimes play along for a while," says KVS.

The twins studied engineering together at what is now called the National Institute Technology, Trichy. NIT-Trichy is also the alma mater of Tata Sons chairman-designate N Chandrasekaran. KVB studied mechanical engineering and KVS did chemical and both moved to IIM-Ahmedabad for their MBAs.

Thereafter, their paths diverged. KVS joined the public sector IPCL and KVB went the private way with Rallis. Thirty-five years and many assignments later, living their lives in different cities (KVS in Mumbai and KVB in Hy-

derabad), the careers of the twins seem to have converged. As if they had followed each other. Today, KVS heads Reliance Life Sciences as its CEO, a biotech business he set up from scratch for Reliance. KVB, for his part, is CEO at another biotech company Bharat Serums & Vaccines Ltd, having moved to Mumbai in 2016 after a long stint heading the public sector biotech firm Indian Immunologicals.

Sector Agnostics

KVS wrote in his recent book *Taking Wings and Winning* that it was either sheer coincidence or "machinations of a higher power" that the divergent careers of the twins ended up in biotechnology.

The career paths had kind of crossed once in the early 2000s. "When KVS moved to the private sector from public sector IPCL, joining Reliance Industries (which acquired IPCL in 2002 from the government), around the same time I moved to the public sector with Indian Immunologicals," says KVB.

Today, Reliance Life Sciences and Bharat Serums also compete with each other on a couple of biotech and serum products.

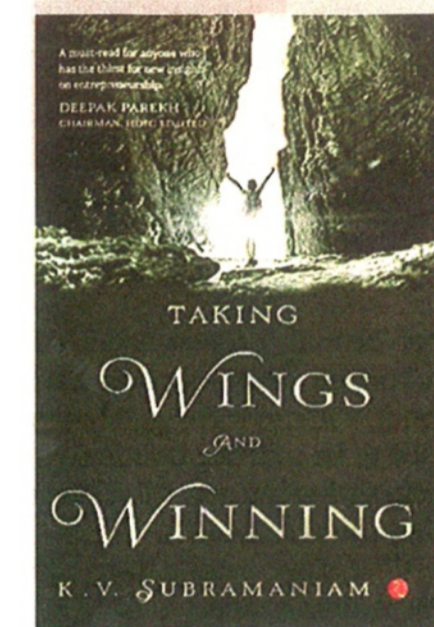
During his last year at Indian Immunologicals, in 2015, KVB also completed a PhD at the Hyderabad University, attending classes with students decades younger than him. "Actually, he got strange looks from his classmates, till he topped an exam and earned their respect," says

KVS. KVB nudged his brother in the same direction of doctoral research but, instead, KVS preferred to become a writer on the side, publishing his first book. "I wanted to capture the way things are done at Reliance," says KVS, who is working on his second book now.

Life has not been all hunky-dory for the brothers though. The twins had a younger brother, KV Srinivas, who had followed his siblings to IIM-A, after graduating from IIT-Madras. Srinivas suffered a freak accident hitting his head on a goalpost while playing football at the IIM. An almost five-year-long period of hospitalisation and treatment ended with his death in 1992. Tragedy aside, the accident also brought along financial ruin of the entire family. Their father passed away within two months of Srinivas.

The tragedy also showed KVS how middle-class families can get devastated due to medical emergencies and how the medical practice in India can sometimes be inhuman. In the book, he recalls, how during his brother Srinivas's treatment, untrained doctors would have to try a few times to puncture the spinal cord to draw cerebrospinal fluid for testing. Srinivas would scream in pain. In fact his last words were during one such test: "This doctor is a fraud." KVS writes that only later did he realise that the doctor was not only inexperienced, but he was using Srinivas to practise and experiment. This inadequacy and inhuman nature of medical treatment, KVS promises, is the subject of his next book. ■

"I wanted to capture the way things are done at Reliance," says KVS on his first book



BHARAT CHANDA