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INTERVIEW VILLOO MORAWALA PATELL, FOUNDER, CHAIRPERSON AND MD, AVESTHAGEN

'Bt brinjal issue has been highly politicised'

Having gone through a year's struggle with a deferred IPO and a financial crunch, Villoo Morawala Patell, founder, chairperson and managing director of Avesthagen, an integrated systems biology platform company and makers of the Good Earth brand of health food, feels that her company managed to sail through a huge crisis without compromising on its business model. In a conversation with FE's Shreya Roy, Patell talks about the year gone by, the lessons it taught, an impending IPO and the company's acquisition plans. Excerpts:

Last year you had to defer your IPO due to market conditions. How did that impact your business?

We had to keep our businesses humming along. We did manage to sail through. There were delays, but we did manage a big crisis. Right now the markets are very fluctuating. We are working towards it. We have to wait for the right time.

Are you looking at private equities for raising funds?

We are in talks with a couple of them.

Are you working on any JVs like the one with Limagrain?



We are discussing deals with several companies for our units. We also plan to launch our genome-based diagnostics for which we are in talks with a few hospitals. These will be built on a "bench-to bedside" model, wherein we will leverage our capacities to do DNA-based analysis for hospitals. We are working out a business model in which high throughput genomics comes towards providing predictive, preventive diagnosis in a cost effective manner. We will work mostly on cancers.

Your seed unit ATASH Seeds was formed in September 2009 through a joint venture with Limagrain. How has that business progressed so far?

ATASH is doing well. We licensed out 18 intellectual property pieces

linked to drought and salinity tolerance; environment adjusted crops, as we call them. We control 49% in this JV. They do the running of the seed company because that is not our ultimate aim. We retain percentage share to get the upside on deals and IP and at the same time go back to our core competency which is innovation. We will, of course, continue to supply IP to this JV. Now, ATASH is growing on its own. We look forward to acquire more companies in its domain.

Much is being said about genetically modified food crops in the wake of the BT brinjal issue. Avesthagen is also testing genetically modified food crops. What is your stand on the issue?

The BT brinjal issue has become highly politicised and I don't want to comment on it. That said, let me state that I do work on genetic engineering. But Avesthagen's strategy is environment driven. We are working on what we have branded—environment-adjusted crops, meaning crops engineered for abiotic factors such as drought and salinity tolerance. We do not focus on biotic stressors such as insect tolerance or disease tolerance through GM. There we use a technology called

SMART breeding or marker assisted breeding, which is gene technology, but not GMO technology.

Also, Avesthagen's technology is based largely on cleaning up tech. We use only homologous genes and do not cross organisms. We use non-antibiotic markers for selection. So, we have circumvented the issues the public has with GM crops.

What crops are you working on?

Our major focus is on rice. With oil seeds we have focused on sun flower, in bio fuels we are working on pearl millet. Again, with bio-fuels our strategy is to let the grain go to the food chain and let the stock go for bio-fuels. The intention is to not affect food production.

Which products were launched this year and which ones do you plan to launch in the coming fiscal?

This year we put our product launch on hold owing to financial crunch. We were working on getting things ready and will launch new products in the next two months. Essentially, we will launch two bio-actives—one for bone health and the other for cardio vascular health—which will then be used as ingredients in a wide range of our products such as the muesli and rice.