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## Packaging CURES

Harsh Kabra profiles Mohan Bhandari, chairman, Bilcare Limited

The staid neighbourhood of Sadashiv Peth roared with the sounds of the PMC's demolition squad tearing down buildings to widen a road. Watching bewildered was an eight-year-old boy, the son of a waste paper merchant of meagre means. Before he could make sense of the situation, his father's modest shop too went down in a plume of dust. The boy hadn't even woven his first dream yet. And here he was, already choking with the pain of seeing one shatter. "Why us?" he thought, as his father tried making a shop out of a cubbyhole under their chawl's staircase and his mother salvaged belongings from their maimed two-room tenement.

Four decades later Mohan Bhandari, chairman of the Rs 425-crore Bilcare Limited, owes his success to a promise he made to himself early on — the

### BIZ MANTRA

promise to do something more than just make ends meet. Along the way, if he couldn't find the circumstances he wanted, he just got up and created them himself.

That is how he has made Bilcare into a globally-recognised pharmaceutical solutions provider, supported by a unique research foundation. "We provide packaging solutions across the entire spectrum of the pharmaceutical value chain through five focused business activities: Research services, clinical services, design lab, research academy and packaging materials," Bhandari explains.

For one, Bhandari has never reacted to adversity with brooding bitterness. Which explains why his memories of his stunted early life are incredibly warm: His doting mother; her profound sanskars, meticulousness and frugal habits that shielded the family from the coldness of scarcity; the sights of 'tulsi' and the scents of 'sadaphuli' and 'mogra' in their small but squeaky-clean house.

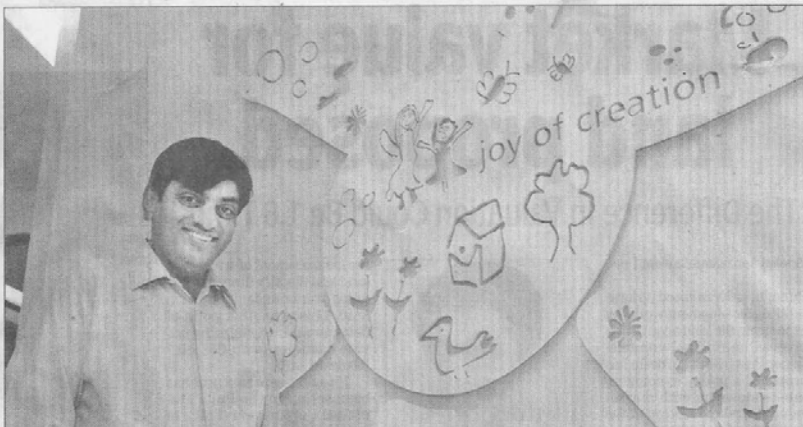
This notwithstanding, the challenges of a spartan family background could hardly be overlooked. As a student, Bhandari had to get his progress cards signed by his father's friends, since his father had never been to a school. "It was strange to go back with different signatures each time," he recalls.

When he enrolled for a diploma course at the Indian Institute of Packaging in Mumbai in 1980, he had to run from pillar to post to organise Rs 4,000 fee. "I realised the value of money then," he says. When he went on a school-

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arship to Germany for a three-month course, his mother had to arrange for Rs 10,000 by selling her ornaments. Even when he decided to set up his maiden unit to make paper tubes in the early 80s, he had to mortgage the family's entire gold savings — a kg of the yellow metal — to raise Rs 50,000 from a cooperative bank.

Yet, it was in his father's occupation that Bhandari found an unlikely but far-reaching takeaway — his fascination with paper as a packaging product that went on to drive his entrepreneurial headway. As an adolescent, he often thought about setting up a factory to make paper bags, the kind used for packing fruits. Soon after class twelve, he stayed with a family friend in Allibag to see his factory at work.



Mohan Bhandari in his office

While pursuing his diploma, he got a chance to visit many more factories. But it was his rendezvous with the packaging industry in Germany that left him overwhelmed. "I realised that packaging was much more than the paper bags I'd known."

More factory visits accompanied his Rs 600-a-month job at Kirloskar Consultants as a research assistant. "I wanted to give my mother a sari with my first salary, but was unnerved to find that even an ordinary one cost as much as Rs 250." Although that stint was a great learning experience, Bhandari knew he had to move on.

The opportunity dawned with his visit to a Garware Nylons unit after his father bagged their scrap contract. There, he was intrigued by piles of rock-hard paper tubes. As it was, these imported throwaways of the company's spinning function were the beginning of the homegrown entrepreneur's journey to textbook success.

Curious to see if the tubes could be made in India, he spent several months at a plant in Gujarat that made thin paper tube containers for a detergent brand. After learning the intricacies involved and devising a machine of his own to manufacture harder versions, he set about his dream project at a rental place in Rajgurunagar.

The property — an old oil mill — came cheap because it was a place that people believed was haunted by ghosts. "Nobody came to work," Bhandari reminisces. Exasperated, he packed his bags and went there to stay. "When people saw nothing had happened to me, they lost their fear."

But Bhandari soon outgrew this place and shifted to bigger premises. Work started pouring in, mostly from spinning companies. In 1989, he started making metal-capped paper tubes for ordnance factories. But, following

a brisk run until the early 1990s, drying coffers forced the government to cancel orders. Work evaporated overnight. However, without losing time, Bhandari took to diversifying his focus, as "paper tubes offered limited growth".

During his research, he realised that the state of packaging for crucial life-saving drugs was nothing short of rudimentary and decided to zero in on that space. Apart from the ability to safeguard the efficacy, safety and potency

tries, has developed markets across 18 countries. "I was never interested in being one of the commodity players," says Bhandari. "My focus has always been on winning customers through value addition. It's the opportunity to make a meaningful impact that matters most to me."

Over the years, the company has integrated its wide expertise with key areas of clinical supplies, clinical research and formulation research. "Innovation is the only way to sustain long-

### LIFE@HOME

For Bhandari, each day begins with an hour of squash and tennis. Besides, he is also into yoga and pranayam. "For me, meditation is the best way to beat stress. It helps me let go of things that upset me." Bilcare is one of the rare companies where meditation finds an official sanctuary. "We have institutionalised the spirit of meditation in the office, the practice is on its way," says Bhandari. "My people are very happy with this." Despite the rigours of a demanding job, Bhandari religiously adheres to his norm of an early evening dinner. "This keeps me active until I go to bed at 10 pm." Weekend meals are with the family — wife Nutan, daughters Kavita (22) and Anika (18) and son Shreyans (14).

### SOCIAL FACE

Bilcare Foundation has adopted 11 schools in a 10-km radius around Bilcare's Rajgurunagar plant. "We cover a student population of around 3,000," says Bhandari. "As part of our 'Window to the World' project, children are given lessons in English so that they can make use of the Internet and know for themselves what is happening around the world. These students and teachers have proved time and again that they can do a fabulous job if given an opportunity. Our entire staff participates in this project. It keeps Bilcareans grounded."

of the drug product, this area, he discovered, reeled from the challenge of five Cs: Counterfeit, compliance, communication, convenience of use and cost. Packaging, he felt, could play an important role in helping consumers get the most out of their medication.

This spurred the inception of Bilcare in 1993. Within two years, the company had started exporting its products. Today Bilcare, with manufacturing facilities and offices in eight coun-

try profitability and growth." Bhandari avers, convinced that this is where the future lies. "In manufacturing, it may be difficult beyond a point to compete with the scale of countries like China.

However, we can make it much bigger by blending manufacturing with innovation." That is also how he intends to make Bilcare a knowledge leader in the area of healthcare over the next decade.

Sadanand Godse