



In the News

Passage back to India

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USA Today

August 23, 2006

Vani Kola, founder of two successful U.S. tech companies, is on the phone from Bangalore. She's looking outside at the night rain and wondering aloud how to explain how she ended up returning to the country of her birth.

"A year back, if anybody said I'd be in India, and bring my family, and be here for the long term, I would've given it zero probability," she says. "I would've bet a million dollars not."

But this is what happens when you get caught in a historic wave. One minute you're bobbing along, sipping a daiquiri and minding the jellyfish ... and the next you're washed up on a distant shore.

Kola, at 42, is part of a fascinating diaspora. A couple of decades ago, Indian émigrés poured into Silicon Valley and played a significant role in shaping it. Vinod Khosla co-founded Sun Microsystems and invested in dozens of other start-ups. Gururaj Deshpande launched Juniper Networks. Suhas Patil started Cirrus Logic. The list is long. California estimates that the state is home to 3,000 companies owned by Indian entrepreneurs.

But now, Indians are going back. Many are younger folks who see an opportunity to become India's version of a Khosla or Deshpande.

They see burgeoning tech newbies such as Infosys and Wipro Technologies — both tech services companies in Bangalore — and think they can do better. They want to jump into the nation's booming, crazy, thrilling tech industry and take advantage of their knowledge of both India and the USA. Some hope to get rich. Others want to help their homeland. Most want to do both.

Probably none of the returnees has been as high-profile as Kola, and the fact that she's doing it probably says a lot about the level of talent that India is about to suck back out of Silicon Valley.

In the late-1990s, Kola founded RightWorks, which made software for procurement. She sold the company in 2000 in a deal that valued RightWorks at \$1.2 billion.

I first met Kola about two years ago, when she was running her next company, Nth Orbit — later named Certus Software. Its products help companies comply with that financial-reporting headache called Sarbanes-Oxley.

Kola has an instantly infectious personality. She was in training to climb Mount Kilimanjaro (which she later did). She is one of the few CEOs I've met who prefers to work in an office decorated primarily with her children's artwork. Her ego, while great, is

also capable of taking a back seat. After I interviewed her, she drove me to a bookstore so she could buy a copy of my book.

Certus is still going strong, but last year Kola and the board clashed and Kola left. "I was at a point in my life where I was thinking, what's next for me?" she says.

Kola already knew India well — or thought she did. She was born and reared there, getting her electrical engineering degree from Osmania University in Hyderabad. She moved to the USA at 20 to work in the tech industry and has since seen India through business eyes. Both RightWorks and Certus had offices and developers in India. Kola traveled there every 90 days or so, but she says she never looked at it as a place to live and work.

Along the way, Kola became friends with Vinod Dham. He had also left India for Silicon Valley. At Intel, Dham became a vice president and will forever be known as the "father of the Pentium processor." Dham put the idea into Kola's head about maybe moving back to India.

To see if she'd want to go, Kola spent a month in India. "I spent random time meeting entrepreneurs, going to companies, meeting random people," Kola says. "I'd be (out) until 1 a.m. talking to people."

As you can see, two words often used to describe Kola are "driven" and "focused."

"I came away feeling that I have to be part of this," she says, "if I can bring my knowledge and in some way play a small role in the global impact India is going to have. This moment in time comes, and you either take advantage of it or not."

She adds: "In the next decade, I see technology, innovation, global brands and internationally respected companies coming out of India. It's too interesting a possibility. I had to find a way to participate."

Kola decided to move her family to Bangalore, a city the Indian press has dubbed "Silicon Valley with potholes." Its infrastructure is abysmal, like a construction project that never ends. But it has the energy and hope of the San Francisco Bay Area circa 1980.

Kola faced one hurdle — or so she thought. They were in the form of two daughters, ages 13 and 8. "Talking to my husband about it was the easy part," she says. "Then I talked to the kids. If they fought me too much, I wasn't going to do it. It was shocking that they were excited about it. My (older) daughter said, 'This is a global economy, so we should go because it will look good on my Harvard application.' "

Apparently, those driven and focused DNA strands passed from mother to daughter.

Kola has been in Bangalore for four weeks. She's already hosted three guests from the USA who want to check out India. She sent me photos of her house, which, interestingly, looks like a very nice stucco house in Silicon Valley. Kola seems to have settled in for the long haul.

So there you have a microcosm: one individual's story of coming to America because it was the exciting place to be, and moving back to India because, she feels, it's now the exciting place to be.

It comes with a sinking feeling that Kola is indeed part of a wave. Americans have worried about immigrants coming here and taking their jobs. We've worried about U.S. jobs getting outsourced overseas. Rarely have we worried about losing special immigrants.

But here are the facts: Vani Kola came to the USA, created jobs, created wealth, created technology — and now has gone home to do the same elsewhere.