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Q & A | Srinivasan Ramani

Breaking Digital Barrier

After Microsoft, Intel, Lucent Technologies and Motorola, it is the turn of Hewlett-Packard to set its sights on Indian research and development prowess. When H-P's powerful chairman, president and CEO Carly Fiorina had come visiting in April 2001, she had stated H-P Labs India would soon start operation and focus at developing economically and culturally appropriate solutions. Last week, the IT major announced it was appointing well-known R&D specialist Srinivasan Ramani as head of H-P Labs India. Ramani, a former R&D director at Silverline Technologies and the founder director of Mumbai-based National Centre for Software Technology, is a known face in Indian IT circles. He is expected to spur HP's efforts of generating innovative solutions. Ramani spoke to Neeraj Saxena on his action plan. Excerpts:

What will be your agenda while setting up the H-P Labs India in the months and years to come?

H-P has always had a strong focus on innovation, right since its garage days. So, clearly our focus will be on innovation, innovation in the context of emerging economies. As you know, serving developing countries on a significant scale cannot be done by mere philanthropy. We need sustainable models for working with developing countries. The beneficiaries should be able to pay for the solution they are seeking and the solutions should increase their productivity. Look at 90 or 95 per cent of the population in developing countries, which does not have access to the fruits of technology. We have to devise software, systems, and solutions that suit such users in a developing economy. There is the issue of taking information technology to a large number of people who cannot read or write, but can make use of it through voice. Microphone and phone are language and culture independent as against a keyboard. Speech recognition technologies are today ready for large-scale deployment. Research is needed to make them useful to different language groups.

Do you intend to work with other institutions or organisations in India and abroad from the viewpoint of both socio-economic and commercial R&D?

H-P Labs is already working closely with MIT Media Labs. HP

in the work of MIT's Media Labs Asia. The two programmes will have some overlap. We are also studying what many other groups devoted to the task are doing, and we will be in touch with them. Major challenges in the world can be overcome only by joint efforts. The challenges facing us are so huge that even if a 100 times more people join hands and pool resources, it will not be sufficient. India's total R&D effort in the IT area would probably be less than \$100 million, as against an estimated \$10 billion in the US alone.

We will be working in close association with the top institutions of higher learning in the country. All of us have to synergise. We have already had discussions with faculty members at the Indian Institute of Technology, Chennai. Of the three units we will have in India, one will be located at IIT, Chennai. We are also talking to Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore. IIT Chennai has an ongoing rural connectivity project that is working on the use of wireless in local loop to solve the

earlier, we have no hesitation in working with others, including other companies. For example, a telecom infrastructure provider or an ISP and we can be natural partners with complementary strengths.

How do you see the slowdown and recent turn of events in the wake of attacks in the US impacting the R&D efforts of the Indian infotech companies?

I have no expertise on this. The truth is I understand only Indian needs, not software and services market in the US. But in the sense of overall economic climate, R&D efforts could suffer. Consider this: when you are in a tight spot, would you first spend money on the grocery, or on sending your daughter to school? The same could apply to Indian IT companies looking towards the US market. Their earning growth may have been affected, but there is a brighter side to it. In times like this, the surplus staff can be redeployed for doing R&D, learning and creating new things.

Can you list some steps that India should take to boost the R&D climate in both technical as well as socio-economic space?

We need to believe that our economy will grow quickly and become important for most companies, even in technologies where the global market is so much more attractive to many companies. We also need to worry first about improving the economic situation of large numbers of people. You cannot sell them something

worth Rs 10,000 unless you give them value worth well above that. So, the question is how can we improve people's productivity at an affordable cost? I should confess that I am envious of the people who carry mobile telephones. I would be in seventh heaven, if only we can do as much for Indians as the mobile people have done. For a long time, there has been some feeling in the academic world in India that real R&D can be carried out only in academic institutions and in government labs. I strongly believe that labs run by private companies can make a major contribution to solving our problems.

Computing in Indian languages has to be encouraged in a big way. Currently, the Indian market does not seem to demand Indian language computing in a big way. This is mainly because computer usage has not still made any significant inroads into rural areas and small towns. But, IT will have to work with Indian languages when it goes beyond the top 10 per cent



Uday Shankar

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last mile problem. We might work together on this programme.

What will be the shape and structure of HP Labs India? Will it be a separate entity and link with HP Labs worldwide?

The main lab will be co-located with the H-P ISO headquarters in Bangalore and will benefit from its infrastructure. Overall, we will employ about 40 professionals. We do not see the need for any massive capital investment, but will invest what is necessary. We will work with HP India, HP ISO and with HP's e-Inclusion programme to make a significant impact.

How close would be the linkage with HP Labs worldwide in terms of exchange of information and joint development? Would H-P Labs India look at innovations in the commercial space also?

The linkage with other units of HP Labs is very close because the objectives and spirit are the same. Also, we have a commitment towards technical R&D in the context of well-understood needs of



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Hewlett-Packard Company has named **DR SRINIVASAN RAMANI** as director of HP Labs India. Dr Ramani will be responsible for spearheading the growth initiative of a new research unit focussed on innovation for emerging economies, developing and managing the laboratory's research agendas and promoting HP Labs India as a research organization.