

BUSINESS FAMILY INSIGHTS

PLANTING THE SEEDS OF 'SMART FARMING'

by Genevieve Cua

THAT Ankesh Shahra chose the field of agri-business to carve an entrepreneurial path for himself is perhaps not surprising. Mr Shahra is the third generation member of the family that founded Indian conglomerate Ruchi Group, which itself has its roots in agri-business. But he has traversed well beyond his original intent of setting up a logistics fulfilment base for the global agri-commodities market.

His brainchild Agrimax Ventures has an ambitious vision: It seeks to address the inefficiencies and imbalances in global agriculture through technology, and ultimately catalyse the next green revolution via "smart farming".

The challenge is huge. A 2017 paper by the Food and Agriculture Organization spelt out the hurdles facing food and ag-

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Ankesh Shahra,
founder and managing director
of Agrimax Ventures

riculture. Demand is expected to increase by 50 per cent between 2012 and 2050. But the natural resource base on which agriculture depends is becoming increasingly stressed. According to the paper, the world has to produce more with less, while still preserving and enhancing the livelihoods of small-scale and family farmers. Climate change poses yet another stressor, as more intense weather events put food security and farmer livelihoods in jeopardy.

Smallholder farmers are a major stakeholder for Agrimax Ventures. "I view a business to be only as good as the 'true value' that's created for its stakeholders, by way of positive change... A successful business is one that provides a supportive pillar to the community."

"Similarly, success for me is defined by the impact my endeavours make on the lives of our stakeholders. I have spent the last 12 years working with small and marginal farmers in different parts of Asia. These experiences have and continue to be a big part of my learning journey towards defining the metrics of success for Agrimax."

AGRIMAX is part of a wave of businesses that have made sustainability part of their operating ethos. This means imbuing a purpose into their business, even as they seek to be self-sustaining and profitable.

Mr Shahra says Agrimax has three long term goals – to provide smallholder farmers with affordable solutions to boost productivity and create an exportable surplus of food; provide people in both urban and rural areas with food security using agri and food-tech solutions; and to connect smallholder farming communities with the global consuming community, with "a common agenda of sustainable production, consumption and waste reduction".

Mr Shahra came to Singapore in 2008 to work on logistics fulfilment in the global agri-commodities market. He was also involved in developing a proprietary global grains and oilseeds platform.

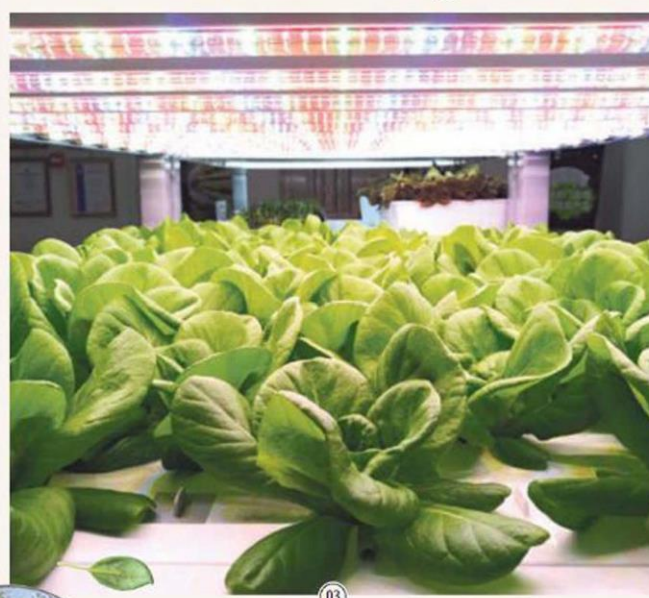
In order to improve the quality of trading information, his team was working on an in-house research platform that used quantitative modelling, satellite imagery and crop cutting experiments to be able to better anticipate weather patterns and their impact on agricultural yield.

He also spent "considerable" time between 2010 and 2013 on large scale agricultural projects in Africa and South-east Asia for his family. "The sum total of these experiences of emerging market farming, yield

Ankesh Shahra's company, Agrimax Ventures, seeks to address inefficiencies and imbalances in global agriculture through technology



PHOTO: YEN MENG JON



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GREEN REVOLUTION

- 1) Mr Shahra spent the last 12 years working with small and marginal farmers in different parts of Asia
- 2) Plant grafting techniques for improving traits
- 3) Controlled environment cultivation without the use of sunlight or soil
- 4) VertiVegies is committed to sustainable urban food production and community well-being for Singapore
- 5) Exploring seed breeding in indoor environments with the research team of Ruchi Hi-Rich Seeds

"The Covid-19 pandemic is a wake-up call for all businesses, and brings the topic of sustainability to the forefront. Challenges ranging from cash flow management to disruptions in global food supply chains have led many family firms to accelerate the implementation of sustainable business practices. Many families have stepped up to help, extending bridging loans and pivoting their operations to help build a more resilient community. We believe that with family firms' long-term orientation, virtues and values, the world would be a more compassionate and caring place post Covid-19."

BFI@SMU

This column profiles business families and how they approach issues of governance and stewardship. They support the Business Families Institute's mission. SMU established BFI in 2012, in response to the growing needs of business families in Asia. It encourages business families to Think Generations, Think Growth, Think Giving and Think Global.

uncertainties, shifting global grains and oilseeds trade flows and climate change-induced weather disruptions inspired me to set up a seed company in 2013."

Based in India, Ruchi Hi-Rich Seeds is a partnership between Agrimax and two other parties, working on research and development of high-yielding, climate resistant seeds for farmers in Asia.

Over the years, Agrimax's efforts have spanned seed genetics and precision breeding, smart urban indoor vertical farms, food tech software and farm digitisation tools, among others.

"We're also working directly with several hundred thousand farmers spread across Asia to implement our products and services."

IN SINGAPORE, he is also chief executive and co-owner of precision indoor farming company, VertiVegies.

In 2018, the company entered into a joint venture with Chinese indoor farming leader SananBio to develop indoor farms for Singapore and other cities globally. "Together we wish to contribute to the Singapore government's vision of '30 by 30' or to meet 30 per cent of Singapore's nutritional needs by 2030."

He believes the Covid-19 crisis has given the agri-food industry globally a much-needed shot in the arm. "I believe it can be extremely positive in terms of driving a change in consumer mindset. Almost overnight, the issues related to food security and availability have become the first thing on people's minds. These powerful emotions have the capacity to drive change and draw much needed attention to the upstream farming sector."

He adds: "In Asia especially, we are and have been struggling with limited arable land, rising populations and consumption habits, declining yields, weather change etc. Broken supply chains further contribute to the mounting food waste problem."

"Covid could very well be the inflexion point, and we all need to now become more food conscious. Questions like where and how our food is grown, and how we can reduce food waste and play our part in mitigating climate change can really go a long way."

Mr Shahra cut his teeth in business through his family business the Ruchi Group, which has vast interests in steel, agriculture, power and metals. The Ruchi Group claims to be the largest food and steel conglomerate of Central India with turnover of US\$6 billion.

MR SHAHRA had a front seat view of the corporatisation of the business, when flagship company Ruchi Soya was publicly listed in 1986. Through the years, the company has undergone financial restructuring and his immediate family, even as it runs other businesses, is no longer involved in Ruchi Soya.

"Growing up observing a diversified yet closely knit family business, I witnessed first-hand what it takes to be an entrepreneur. The drive and emotional strength required to set up a business can never be over-emphasised. There are cycles to contend with, and if caught on the wrong foot, can have far reaching consequences..."

"In the face of adversity, our family values have been put to the test. I believe we've emerged stronger by drawing upon each other's strengths... with the spirit of collaboration and innovation... My greatest insight has been that we're not defined by stimulus, but only by our reaction to it."



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