

Interview Article with Mr. Krishna Kumar (Executive Director, Kumar Founder and MD, Simbus Technologies Pvt Ltd)



On 13th February 2023 Mr. Krishna Kumar Founder and MD, Simbus Technologies Pvt Ltd was at SDMIMD to provide a talk on the topic Startups. Pre session the Dimensions committee had the opportunity to take an interview to capture insights from his experience rich illustrious career.

The interaction was as follows:

Dimensions Team: “In the wake of rather revolutionary technologies like blockchain, language models AR and VR, what are your views on tech-aided strategies vs tech as a strategy?”

Krishna Kumar: “Interesting. Tech added strategy and tech as a strategy. My own view on this is that every organisation in whatever field they are in, they could be business organisation which is not for profit like social organisation need to have digital as one of the strongest enablers not just of strategy but also of execution. You’re all young. You’ve not seen how the world used to be thirty years back, for example when we had to open a bank account the whole process used to take a phenomenal amount of time, friction and pain. Today opening a bank account at least in the private banks is actually...you can do it in a jiffy, in a matter of seconds. How has this been enabled? Purely because of digital. So, my own view is that, if companies have to survive and thrive, they need to invest in tech, they need to make sure that in their DNA tech is an important part of their entire thinking and the whole culture of technology has to be disseminated across organisation. Sometimes people think that tech is only IT’s job and digital job but I think every employee of the organisation irrespective of the levels or level of thinks they work on needs to be sensitized to the wonders of technology. They used it in their everyday life so it’s just a question of transitioning that into their work life and professional life. I mean that’s what I believe in, tech is here to stay and with newer technologies like AR and VR, even we all know what’s happening to ChatGPT, it’s going to become mainstream very soon. So, it’s going to become embedded in our life. So work is going to become technology assisted, it’s already happening in many fields, for example in the field in which I’m in supply chain technology...take hothousing for example, the entire picking, packing used to be so manual now you have robots, you have AI assisted enablers and all that. All this is really going to transform life and transform the way we are going to live in the future.”

Dimensions Team: “Since you brought up ChatGPT, there’s a popular argument that AI will take over our world and humans will have nothing to do, however many respond and say, our job will be to get tech to do best, something like get ChatGPT to give me the best response. But the underlying problem is that AI is based on ML which is in turn based on past data which therefore limits any scope for innovation, what are your views on that?”

Krishna Kumar: “I’m not an expert on deep tech but I do know some things about AI and ML. Let’s take a step back, there was this great fear and has been there for example when banks in India started on a computerization drive there was this huge cry by bank unions that all our jobs are going to be lost, computers will take over. I don’t think that will happen because the banking sector per se has probably grown multiple from the time we saw the introduction of technology and also look at the other aspect, globally and even in India in some sectors there is an acute shortage of labour. For example, even in some white collared jobs and entry level jobs you see acute shortage of labour, more than labour I’d say acute shortage of skills. This problem is compounded if you go to developed economies. If you go to US and UK there is a phenomenal amount of shortage of skills companies are getting hit. So, what’s the answer for this? I think eventually tech especially AI will coexist with the human workforce. How’s this division going to happen? I think that’s an ongoing exercise, so will get to see a lot of mundane and repetitive tasks being taken over by AI because the requirement there is...you want something to be done practically the same thing day in and day out without any mistakes, it has to happen at a six-sigma level. So that when you AI and ML to do this. I’m not sure about your proposition that AI and ML is purely based on past learning there is no innovation there. Today there are innovative models, there are self-learning models which are coming and that is going to increase. So, AI will start being much smarter, it will actually start proposing better ways of doing things probably ways in which humans have not even thought about. So that thing is going to happen as technology evolves the way these engines work is also going to evolve and I’d not be surprised sometime in the future...we see in Sci-Fi movies that AI has taken over the world, I hope it doesn’t happen but I should not be surprised if there are AI engines that don’t exactly do what you ask them to do. So that’s my view, AI and ML will definitely evolve it will become smarter and yes, it is based on past learnings but you could use even that level of technology to take out some of the mundane tasks and leave the humans to focus on the more creative aspect of every job, the more value-added aspects. There are a lot of things one can do in a job I mean you don’t want to waste the human bandwidth and intelligence doing repetitive tasks so you actually allow them to think about what can we do better so, the whole process improvement is something which many of Indian companies especially don’t focus on I mean people go to work and only do repetitive things so imagine if thirty forty percentage of their time is actually spent on doing new things or discovering new ways of doing things, so that is what I think should be the aim of AI and you will see the convergence happening. The objectives of human work versus what AI can do is going to converge at some point in the future.”

Dimensions Team: “We’ve seen how in every company every technology is moving towards cloud. How useful is cloud for supply chain and logistics? Because when data is stored in cloud there is scope for data

breach and security concerns. So how do you think companies can adopt cloud safely coming out of traditional ways with respect to current logistics?”

Krishna Kumar: “I think it has already started happening I mean if you look at my field supply chain per se the entire...whole supply chain technology...most of it is actually moved to the cloud. I would say perhaps some of the industrial sector, supply chain would rank amongst the leading sector in terms of adoption of cloud technology. The sector which has not really adopted cloud to the extent to which it should be is banking, so they are at the one end because they are worried about privacy and security of data because it's very sensitive data. As far as supply chain is concerned it's already happening. Today's cloud technology has become much more secure, much more scalable and available all the time. It takes away the pain of company running their own in-house systems. So, supply chain is adopting cloud in a very exponential way and I'd not be surprised let's say in ten years' time nobody would look at an on-premise kind of an implementation they would completely move to the cloud, it's already happening actually. It's accelerating very quickly in India and globally it has already happened in my view.”

Dimensions Team: “What about blockchain in supply chain management and logistics?”

Krishna Kumar: “Very interesting that you raise this question. As part of my own learning, I keep doing these short courses on edX and coursera. So, one of the courses I am currently undergoing is actually from Rutgers, they offer a supply chain course and one of the topics there was actually blockchain and application of blockchain in supply chain. Very surprisingly there's great evidence...I mean there is enough evidence to say that blockchain is not as attractive to supply chain as it is in other industries. Today the largest demonstration of blockchain technology is in bitcoin, so what is blockchain essentially? It's a trust less system, you don't want to depend on any intermediary to verify any transaction. Financial transaction or a bitcoin transaction involves millions of people so it's impossible for one intermediary or two layers of intermediaries to moderate this entire transaction whereas in supply chain if you see, the people you deal with are all whom you know for example if I'm a company and buying from vendors I know these vendors are all part of my ecosystem. So, I know I have enrolled them and verified them so I don't need a blockchain to really intermediate between me and them. Same thing applies to my customers. Same thing applies to my truckers. So, as much as companies have tried, they have not been very successful in implementing blockchain because the value out of this entire technology is very limited, there is no strong value proposition. There's a cost attached right? Every time I do a blockchain transaction I need to pay somebody. So, that's why I would say in the supply chain sector I don't think blockchain really made the kinds of inroads which it should have compared to the other industries. So, unless there is some fundamental transformation in the way blockchain works we will continue to see low adoption of blockchain in the supply chain.”

Dimensions Team: “Why are Indian brands failing to establish themselves abroad as compared to abroad brand establishing themselves domestically?”

Krishna Kumar: “Interesting. I can take an example of the industry in which I spent a very significant part of my career. I spent a lot of time in the fashion industry and I worked for the Indian’s largest fashion apparel which is Madura garments so, all the brand like Louis Philippe and etcetera. We always used to wonder why is that its not possible for us to go abroad and establish ourself? I’d give primarily two reasons. One is...if you look at India primarily it’s been a manufacturing country as far as fashion apparel is concerned. We were happy servicing the needs of international brands which came to us and sourced but why we could create our own brand and sell? I think it’s a misty which actually even boggling me as much as it is befuddling you but id primarily put two to three reasons for that. One is...Indian companies should be much bolder and what I’d say risk taking. Our risk-taking ability is very limited so, we don’t want to take risk, we’d rather do things in a small way. I’m only talking about apparel I mean if you look at other areas, I think we’re better off, if you look at for example SasS we have a lot of Indian SaaS companies like Zoho and all that who have made significant enrols but if you look at sectors apart from this I think one is our risk taking ability. We are not very...we are risk averse we don’t want to spend money on established brand. Second, brand building is a very long afire. More importantly brands need to have strong values which will connect them culturally to the people there. For why does a H&M or Zara appeal Indians? Because there’s a lot of westernisations which is happening in India so, Indian youth want to basically re-live some of the...they’ve adopted some of the western’s values and cultural so, there has to be a cultural connect and I think this is where my view Indian brands have not been able to do. One of the good things we can take as an example is ayurveda I mean ayurveda as a system of medicine and health has a lot of international appeal. Yoga is another good example I mean it has got a global appeal, right? But I’m surprised why Indian brands could not leverage some of these successes and become successful themselves. Let us hope it changes in the future. To summarise one is risk aversion which we have, second the cultural connect which is required to establish a brand and grow the brand is probably lacking in my view.”

Dimensions Team: “Just a follow up question. We spoke about the risk aversion, isn’t it that since young age we’ve been fed the idea of finishing 12th then engineering to be on a safer side?”

Krishna Kumar: “It is yes, it is a mind shift...I think lot of it has come from the colonial rule want we had, they taught us so that submissiveness and meekness is there in our DNA. It will take a couple of generation to wash out and I’m hoping that young generation like you kind of get out of the rut, think differently, scale new height and create new boundaries.”

Dimensions Team: “What are your advices for MBA phaseouts?”

Krishna Kumar: “You have phenomenal amount of avenues to excel in. When I did my MBA 30 years back there were couple of sectors normally got in, most of used to get into FMCG, manufacturing, banking and consulting was just in the beginning of its infancy in India but today there are phenomenal amount of opportunities. Irrespective of which ever channel you want to get into I would advice two three things. One is, what ever you want to do you’ll have to be extremely passionate in the way you apply yourself. I think the

commitment and passion has to come out very clearly, to me that's the foundation to excel. Not CGPA and this thing, those things do matter but I think if you have the passion to excel, if you have the sincerity to work hard then you can excel in any field. Second important thing I'd say is to keep learning because the day you believe you have learned enough, I've done my MBA so I'm now ready to conquer the world that's going to be the day your downfall is going to happen, so keep learning and always keep your mind open. Third is...please take risk. I'm not saying that start a company or be an entrepreneur. There are many ways to take risk, for example instead of working for a large company where you are going to be one small let's say cog in the whole wheel look at opportunities where you are part of a smaller company, where you have opportunities to work with the senior management right from day one because your learning will accelerate, your experience will be very very profound. So, this are the two things I think generically I mean if MBA students keep in mind, I see no reason they can't excel."