Mr Raviprakash, CEO, Millitoons, could not have dreamt of such a miraculous change in his career path. From a marketing person selling televisions, he turned into an entrepreneur by launching a technology company dealing with telecom, networking and media space. And then it happened. A contact helped him get an invitation from a French gentleman, keenly interested in India, asking him to explore the possibility of setting up an animation company here. France has a pretty strong animation culture. It also has a strong movie culture. The French are very proud about their movies and consider the Hollywood invasion with strong suspicion. Just as the US has a strong animation component in the entertainment industry, the same is true for France.

The US has often outsourced its animation activities to cheaper destination across the world to countries like Korea and Philippines. France has often outsourced its work to Eastern Europe, a region with great strengths in animation, thanks to its association with the erstwhile Soviet Union which was always in direct competition with the US in everything from nuclear warheads to, well, animation!

So, Mr Raviprakash, visited France and Eastern Europe - on the invitation of the French animation company - Millimages – in June 1997 to understand the animation business. By November 1997, Millitoons was set up as a joint venture with Millimages holding a 51% stake. In February 1998, the company hired the first batch of around 25 people with bachelors or masters degree in Fine Arts. A trainer was especially invited from Romania. It took almost six months to churn out the first batch of engineers. By October 1998, Millitoons had animation work coming to it at a hectic pace. So much so, that by 2001, Millitoons had a staff strength of 220 people. However, with “9/11” and its adverse impact on the French animation industry, Millitoons employees have been bogged down with a lot of idle time. This situation has resulted in the unhappy situation for the company incurring a huge wage bill with no proportionate revenues to match. Millitoons has since then downsized to only 118 people.

Animation involves a variety of steps. The first stage involves layout planning and scripting. For Millitoons, this is done by its parent company in France. Millimages sends the rough script and layout planning to Millitoons. The next step is sound breaking and identification of shots at which sound starts. The third step is drawing the background. After drawing the background, posing starts. Poses involve drawing key shots at which the changes of position occur. The next step is animation, which would involve drawing intermediate shots.
between different poses. Usually 25 frame shots have to be drawn for every second of animation. However, it is not uncommon to save on the effort by just drawing 10 to 11 frame shots per second and repeating certain drawings for 2 to 3 frames. Then the clean-up artist cleans the images and draws in-between cleaned animations. Most of the steps above are manual with the exception of sound breaking which would require computer intervention. After this the digital steps commence. This would involve scanning images. Painting the background and animation is the next step. Composing involves superlaying the animation over the background.

Millitoon is tied to its French parent company Millimages. Hence, it cannot carry any marketing efforts on its own. All the work is outsourced by its parent company. This has often meant considerable idle time for its employees. Hence, Millitoons has come up with innovative means to handle the vagaries of the animation business. For instance, after downsizing from 220 to 118, Millitoons has introduced a variable component to the salary. The variable component, which is almost 50%, is payable depending on the availability of work and performance of the staff. This has led to considerable efficiency in the use of resources. For instance, while the revenues for this year are likely to be around the same as for the previous two financial years - around Rs 3-3.5 crore, this revenue is being generated by almost half the employees. However, Mr Raviprakash feels that things need to get better. Animation is almost like the movie business and there must be a provision to disband project teams the moment a project gets over. This would considerably reduce unproductive costs. Furthermore, he also feels that the government must offer support by setting up animation schools. As of now, training graduates in fine arts in animation is rather cumbersome as animation work is robotic and involves considerable monotony. Hence, many new employees are not able to cope with the style of working and have to be requested to consider alternate employment. Setting up animation schools will go a long way in solving the inadequacy in manpower currently plaguing the Indian animation industry. It is only then that India can compete with intense competition from countries like China and Philippines. While India is barely able to manage within rates of 1,800 euros per minute of animation, Chinese companies are offering rates as low as 1,400 euros per minute of animation.

The one silver lining is the worldwide shift from 2D animation to 3D animation. While 2D animation involves mainly manual work, 3D animation involves use of computers to draw cartoons. India can successfully compete in 3D animation. Millitoon is working with parent Millimages to transform itself from a 2D animation company to a 3D one.
Start-Up Year: 1997
Area of Operation: Animation
Location: Chennai
Managing Director: Mr Raviprakash
Ownership and Funding Details: 51% stake held by Millimages, a French animation company
Approximate Headcount: 120
Approximate Revenues: Rs 3.5 crore (2002-03)