

Innovators, not pirates

Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) has expressed his desire to make India a hub of innovations at several fora, be it in his address to young CEOs or in his speech during his recent visit to Israel. In his words: "Innovation is life. When there is no innovation, there is stagnation". In his budget speech in 2015, the finance minister announced the setting up of the Atal Innovation Mission. But the progress in this respect has been tardy.

This is not the first time that India has aspired to be an innovation hub. The importance of innovation was also recognised by the UPA government, which constituted the National Innovation Council (NIC) in 2010 under Sam Pitroda, then adviser to the prime minister on innovations. The NIC's key mandate was to draw a roadmap for innovations between 2010 and 2020. The council submitted three annual reports to the government, the last of which was in 2013. Sectoral innovation councils were set up in 25 major departments of the Union government, including in the ministry of agriculture. State Innovation Councils were also set up. The idea behind the setting up of these councils was to mainstream the idea of innovation in the functioning of the Union and state governments. However, it soon became evident that despite the government's best intentions, there were hardly any innovative ideas which could be scaled up to the national level. This shows that government organisations are not ideally suited to devise game-changing innovations as they are mired in routine work. The work of the councils proves that innovations are designed in a supporting environment, irrespective of the size or nature of an organisation. The most important support that the government can provide is to protect the innovation itself.

The first lesson, therefore, for the NDA government would be to create an enabling environment to safeguard the intellectual property of individuals, private and public companies that develop new products and ideas using their own investments. India is placed 60th among 127 countries according to the Global Innovation Index of 2017 - an index prepared by Cornell University, INSEAD and the World Intellectual Property Organisation. Switzerland tops the list followed by Sweden, the Netherlands, the US and UK. Singapore is ranked seventh, Japan is at the 14th position, Israel is ranked 17th, and China 22nd.

In the Forbes list of the 10 most innovative companies in the world, six come from the US. Interestingly, in a recently released International intellectual property (IP) index that studied 45 countries, India ranked a poor 43rd. It is this poor record on IP protection that is holding India back from being a leading nation when it comes to innovations.

In this article we focus on innovations in agriculture as the challenge to feed 1.3 billion people cannot be met without innovations along the agri-value chains. Take the case of herbicide tolerant (HT) Bt cotton. It is now widely known that one of the biggest innovations in Indian agriculture in the past 15 years was the introduction of Bt cotton in 2002. The innovation owed much to a policy decision of the [Atal Bihari Vajpayee](#) government, which made India one of the top producers of cotton and the second largest exporter of the crop. Mahyco Monsanto Biotech, which released Bt cotton through its 40 or so odd licencees, wanted to release HT Bt cotton as well and applied to the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC). HT cotton is an innovation on Bt cotton, as it takes care of the problem of weeds at a cost much lower than that incurred by farmers in employing labour to take out weeds.

But before Mahyco Monsanto Biotech could be granted permission for HT cotton, some unscrupulous elements pirated this cotton variety, probably from countries like the US and Australia, where HT cotton had already been released. These pirated seeds were multiplied in the country and this kharif season, several companies have sold an estimated 35 to 45 lakh packets of HT Bt cotton seeds. About 7 per cent to 10 per cent of the area under cotton in the country is now

under this counterfeit crop. In view of the blatant violation of its IPR, Mahyco Monsanto Biotech withdrew its application in 2016. Interestingly, the company had alerted the GEAC, the ministries concerned and the states way back in 2008 about such illegal activities. Mahyco Monsanto Biotech had even provided details of plots where such activities were taking place. But the government of the day did not take action to stop these activities. The scale of pirating has become so large that it poses a major challenge to the current government.

It is, of course, noteworthy to see farmers' appetite to acquire better technologies and even pay premium prices ranging from Rs 1,100-1,500 per packet - despite the price cap of Rs 800 per packet for Bt cotton. But such illegal sales of HT cotton seeds indicate an "organised racket" by a few companies that seem to be making a mockery of the regulatory system comprising the GEAC and the Ministry of Environment and Forests.

How can India aspire to be an innovation hub, if such clandestine activities flourish and innovators suffer? Only stern and exemplary action by the prime minister can restore the credibility of India's regulatory institutions and put innovations on a safe and reliable path. Also, regulatory bodies need to clear applications for innovative products (like GM mustard or Bt brinjal) quickly, lest they are introduced by pirates surreptitiously. Without such action, making India an innovation hub will remain a pipe dream for decades - pirates can never be innovators.

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