

Is CSIR the fountain head of innovation in the country?

05 October 2012 | News



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Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) celebrated its 70th Foundation Day on September 15, 2012. Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh in his address at the CSIR Foundation Day function complimented the Council on its unique attempt to make healthcare affordable by exploiting the power of open source drug discovery. "As a concept, this is a global first and the world has turned from skepticism to partnership. After India embraced globalization, introduced economic reforms and joined the WTO, CSIR quickly emerged as the flag bearer of the Intellectual Property movement in our country and became the single largest holder of US and European patents. The Council, in recent years, has also become a world leader in several domains of biotechnology and recombinant DNA products," said Dr Manmohan Singh.

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There is no doubt that CSIR has been at the forefront of creating indigenous capacity and enabling industrial development. However, very little was known about its tryst with Intellectual Property, especially on details related to the status of patents, the success story of licensing, the royalty income. Vayalar Ravi, Minister of Science & Technology and Earth Sciences and Vice President, CSIR on this occasion revealed a few interesting details. "CSIR is granted 90 percent of US patents granted to an Indian publicly funded R&D organization. About 9 percent of its patents are licensed-a number which is above the global average. Amongst its peers in the publicly-funded research organizations in the world, CSIR is a leader in terms of filing and securing patents worldwide. Major industry houses of India and numerous MSMEs have benefited from CSIR. The scientific staff of CSIR only constitute about 3-4 percent of India's scientific manpower but they contribute to 11 percent of India's scientific outputs," said Ravi.

Prashant Reddy, who is working towards a LLM degree in Law, Science and Technology at Stanford Law School, informs me that more than 400 patents have been licensed over the last 10 years. It may be noted that Reddy has followed up with CSIR for almost six months through RTI applications, appeals and reminders, to get more details on the patents. CSIR finally provided him with a comprehensive, lab-wise list of all the patents that it has licensed in the last 10 years this August.

"The only information not provided was royalty figures. I'm glad to note that, contrary to popular opinion, CSIR has actually been quite successful in licensing its patents. It was a pleasant surprise to browse through the list of over 454 patent licensing deals," said Prashant Reddy. The technologies licensed by CSIR spread across several areas including pharmaceutical inventions, medical diagnostics, water filtration technology, mining and construction technologies, and chemical technologies. These have been licensed to a diverse set of companies both in India and abroad. Some of the licensees in life sciences include Cipla Pharmaceuticals, Nicholas Piramal, Nostrum Pharmaceuticals, DRDO, USV Ltd, Tata Chemicals, Ranbaxy, Shreya Life Sciences, and Emcure Pharmaceuticals.

"The information disclosed in response to my RTI application reveals that CSIR does seem to have an active network to licence its patents. It would be interesting to study how CSIR has been marketing its patents so far. The only problem seems to be that there is little co-ordination at the national level since each CSIR lab seems to act in isolation from the larger CSIR network," writes Reddy. CSIR clearly has great potential, provided its leadership can get its act together.