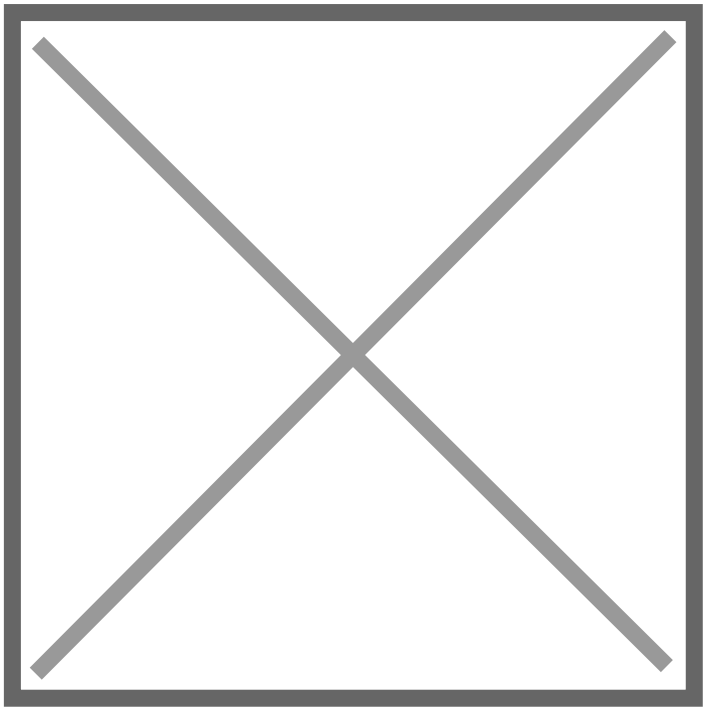
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Make India 'hassle-free' for innovation

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IKMC 2011: Global Innovation Exchange discusses the steps to be taken in order to make India a global hub for innovation, not just in life sciences but also in other knowledge sectors

Ikmc2011inauguralcmmi
L-R: Dr M K Bhan, secretary, Dept of Biotechnology, Mr N Kiran Kumar Reddy, chief minister of Andhra Pradesh & Dr J Geeta Reddy, state industry minister

Many sectors of the Indian economy have embarked on innovation. But has this innovation bug bit every one? When will innovation become a way of life? And what are the things that are needed to be done in order to make the country a global hub for innovation, not just in life sciences but also in all the knowledge sectors.

These were some of the topics of discussion during the two-day IKMC 2011: Global Innovation Exchange, organized by the IKP Knowledge Park in Hyderabad in mid-November. The fourth edition of this annual exercise, by one of the country's leading bioparks, expanded the focus beyond its core life sciences sector to energy and mobile applications and health?

Dr M K Bhan, secretary, Department of Biotechnology (DBT), set the tone in his key note address by discussing the various nuances of the nation's tryst with innovation in recent times. The eminent technocrat admitted that the nation had wasted precious time until the late 1980s by ignoring the need for innovation in a closed economy. Ã¢â?¬Å?We got the freedom from the colonial government in 1947. However, have we used it fully to make the environment hassle-free for innovators in various fields,Ã¢â?¬? he asked rhetorically.

Indians have a strong work ethic and the spirit of entrepreneurship. These are all coming to the fore in the economic freedom enjoyed by the people in the last two decades. We are restarting our journey on innovation. We can see far reaching changes in our economic landscape for the better in the next few decades"

Mr Narayanan Vaghul
chairman, IKP

The DBT secretary said most of the national systems, including the government, were not prepared for large scale innovation till recently. Innovation, to a large extent, is driven by demand. Similarly, creation of hassle-free environment is also a factor driven by demand from innovators. So there is a need for citizens to demand more from the system. Ã¢â?¬Å?The more you demand, the more you will get,Ã¢â?¬? said Dr Bhan.

Given the nation's current state of socio-economic development, there is a need to focus on forward looking and socially-relevant innovation in many fields, Dr Bhan said. Ã¢â?¬Å?Even as we embark on this innovation journey, we need to be aware that innovative products and services happen through trial and error. As a society, we also need to accept that failure is also a part of the innovation process,Ã¢â?¬? he said referring to the society's premium placed only on success stories.

Dr Bhan highlighted the success story of India's vaccine industry which today supplies some of the most essential vaccines to the entire world. At the same time, he lamented that children of India get less essential vaccines than their counterparts in many African countries and even small neighbors like Bangladesh or Sri Lanka. The reason for this being the tender-based lowest pricing mechanism of the government that does not incentivize Indian vaccine makers to supply to the local markets.

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Dr M K Bhan
secretary, Department of Biotechnology, Government of India

There are opportunities galore for India's innovators. Imagination and excellence in execution are key ingredients for success. Also, there are immense opportunities to create innovative financial mechanisms to support new inventions that will happen in the near future, Dr Bhan said.

Funding innovation

For innovators, this is one of the best times. There are many institution in the investment game. One such agency is the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which has identified India as one of the focus areas for its global grand challenges program. In fact, the foundation has tied up with IKP to increase the program's reach in the country.

Dr Peter Small, program director for the Gates Foundation in India, said the foundation will give a grant of $100,000 for the best ideas. Ã¢â?¬Å?One bold idea is all it takes,Ã¢â?¬? Dr Small said. The foundation's focus is on development of cost effective healthcare solutions.

In fact, the foundation will fund up to 5 crore ($1 million) in order to take the selected ideas to the next stage. Since 2008, under the program, 603 researchers in 44 countries are pursuing their brilliant ideas with the support of the foundation. One of the Indian companies that has received the grant is Pondicherry Biotech, which is developing an effective intra-uterine device.

Another project that has got support is an electronic nose to detect tuberculosis developed by a research team at the International Center for Genetic Engineering and Biology (ICGEB), New Delhi.

Ms Deepanwita Chattopadhyay, CEO, IKP, said that their efforts were focused on identifying the pockets of knowledge that exists in the country. How do we identify them? She said that under the GCE program, 20 winning ideas will be shortlisted in the country and at least three of these will get the initial grant. She said that IKP will work as an incubator and mentor the winners for two years and also rope in the extended network of mentors in the country to help turn these ideas into successful products.

During a panel discussion in innovation, Mr Shekar Kirani, of Angel Partners, a venture capital firm, said that there is a surge in innovative ideas in the country. Accel received over 1,000 high quality applications last year. The company met nearly 250 of the applicants and had serious discussions with about 50. Ã¢â?¬Å?We may probably fund about 10 of these applications,Ã¢â?¬? Mr Kirani said while explaining the inner workings of a venture capital fund. Ã¢â?¬Å?And we usually look at a 10-year investment window for each of these projects.Ã¢â?¬?

Dr Bhan said the government has announced a new Ignition Grant to reward innovative ideas. Grants will be given to individuals with excellent ideas. So far, most of the government schemes were restricted to institutions or companies and rarely supported individuals with good ideas. He also highlighted the two new schemes, SIBRI and BIPP, which have been providing soft loans and grants to biotech companies for the last three years.

India's innovation need

Stressing the need for innovation, IKP's chairman and former banker, Mr Narayanan Vaghul pointed out the unique position of India in the global affairs. He referred to eminent historian Niall Ferguson's observation that the 21st century will be defined by the conflict between the ancient civilization of China and the western Christian civilization based on strong protestant work ethic and innovation.

Ã¢â?¬Å?There is a dimension to this, missed by the eminent historian,Ã¢â?¬? Mr Vaghul said. He opined that a rising India will also be a key factor in the 21st century. Ã¢â?¬Å?Indians have a strong work ethic and the spirit of entrepreneurship. These are all coming to the fore in the economic freedom enjoyed by the people in the last two decades,Ã¢â?¬? he added. Ã¢â?¬Å?We are restarting our journey on innovation. We can see far-reaching changes in our economic landscape for the better in the next few decades,Ã¢â?¬? he said.

IKP's mentor and chairman of ReaMetrix, Dr Bala Manian, anchored various key sessions on fostering innovation. Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh Mr N Kiran Kumar Reddy and Industry Minister Dr J Geeta Reddy also attended the conference.

There were nearly 60 posters displayed by small companies and research groups at the conference, which were scanned thoroughly by the participants on both the days. It was an innovative step to spread the message of innovative research work by those who could not be present in person to interact with the participants.

-Narayanan Suresh in Hyderabad