

Time to launch another 'Quit India' movement

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I started writing this article on the sombre day of Mahatma Gandhi's death anniversary. Some of us have been less fortunate to be born several years after the era of Gandhiji but our travels far and wide have made us proud, when we learn that he has been a leader of all leaders, a world ratna (jewel).

But what is the context that I am invoking Gandhiji in an article which is to touch on the future of biotechnology in India?

It is on account of Quit India, the greatest movement that he began that made life untenable for the occupiers to do business in India.

Alas, today our policy makers and bureaucrats have reinvented the Quit India movement to ensure manufacturing, capital, and man power quit India and the biotech business does not grow.

We honored actor Kamal Hasan with Padma Vibhushan recently only after it was virtually untenable for him to work in India

and he almost came to quitting the country.

We make a home-grown, iconic biotech CEO like Dr Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw to issue an ultimatum to our administrators that she would quit manufacturing biotech medicines in India if she is not provided the environment.

So as a nation we are not aiding these celebrated Indians to grow and aid the growth of other fellow Indians around them.

We were happy to throw Pepsi out in 1977 and then feel elated when India-born Ms Indra Krishnamurthy Nooyi became its CEO. We provided no canvass when intellectuals quit India like Dr S Chandrasekhar and Prof. Amartya Sen.

We noticed them only after the world recognized them. What message are we sending to the rest of the world-that we do not recognize merit and we aid people quitting the country?

In my opinion the time has come that even if we run we will appear to be standing still in the view of rest of the world.

We seem to be making it a habit to miss opportunities to grow and move to leadership position. Our executers of planning have brought our country to the current sorry state.

The question that is haunting me as the President of ABLE (Association of Biotechnology-Led Enterprises) is does anybody really care? As Indians we are happy that we have to expend so much of energy on futile tasks which is a given in most of the East Asian countries.

How can we pride in ourselves when we frustrate even the most stout-hearted optimist who means well for the country? So the question that is begging an answer is: have our bureaucrats and government created the most conducive environment for excellence to quit our country?

If so what are we then left with for the future?

India is closely watched today by a large number of international observers more than ever before. There are a number of rating agencies (even if say we don't care about them) that influence people outside in the way they look at us.

It is therefore important that we send the right signals outside for people to come and do business with us. Besides the talk of GDP by our overseas educated economists, have we ever heard anybody saying I will ensure that we break into the top 50 countries in the ease of doing business from our current abysmally low 137th ranking?

We may not hear this or this could be so inaudible that even the person sitting next to the speaker would not hear. The reason could be many, but my view is this is because there is huge eco system of power, corruption, and nepotism that surrounds this mind set of not allowing progress even if the country is doomed.

We do not know how to celebrate success, success of fellow Indians like Mr NR Naryana Murthy, Mr Lakshmi Narayanan, Mr Ratan Tata, or Mr Aditya Birla.

We do not know how to treat successful people who have toiled relentlessly day and night to build a successful business in India. On the contrary our system has the same force of the erstwhile "Quit India" movement to throw out our next generation of successful thinkers and doers out of India.

I am conscious that this may appear to be an overreaction. However, it is certainly not out of frustration but a candid inward looking analysis of what we should not do in the future.

The point is in the larger context of what stops us from growing. Do we lack planning?

The answer is an emphatic no. I myself have sat in several national committees on planning for the future and there is great enthusiasm and wisdom.

But then what goes wrong with all these plans? It is the execution. We have not bothered to educate our bureaucrats or administrators that their incompetence and sluggishness will be missed opportunities for this great country to quickly catapult into the world stage.

When I mean growth it is also a large ecosystem of the future that grows with it. If we procrastinate everything gets affected.

India is at the fork in the world's expectations. We have said the biotech opportunity is worth \$100 billion and we aim to be one of the largest bio economies in the world.

But two years after our meticulous planning of the biotech roadmap with the government, our implementation has gone in reverse gear. India is now not the most preferred destination to do business in this space.

Even Indian companies want to do business outside. So while the planning and understanding the opportunity has been fantastic, the road to get there is like our roads, full of pot holes, twists and turns with no end to misery.

Our young population, the growing middleclass, and the extra ordinary progress in the adaption of mobile telephony and digital technologies are all our positive assets (poor Mr Sam Pitroda still takes Rs 1 as salary which if inflation is applied could be in the negative after so many years) but we have taken the success of this sector as granted.

We do not care to decorate him or celebrate his efforts. He is the father of the telecom revolution.

He has left his comfort zone in the US to come and serve us. However we rave when every Indian gets elected or recognized abroad as our own success story even though it is very obvious that these people left the Indian shores generations before as they felt that our country did not provide them the opportunity.

The consistent fact about us is we let go talent then and now. No lessons learnt till this day.

So essentially what is the problem that retards growth in spite of opportunities? I think we have brushed too long under the carpet as a nation the key deterrents of growth namely corruption and lack of respect for excellence.

We have thrown spanners to the growth of people and industries who mean well to India. We have also shown needless patience when routine things do not happen and we believe that is how it will be in our country-thereby encouraging mediocrity.

We have been soft when public money was spent on populist measures than investing in basic and core infrastructure that would have spurred growth. India has lost more than it has gained by these reckless acts.

We do not have tall leaders to go out and explain to the people that this approach will ruin our country.

There are now a number of options for people, capital, and projects to locate themselves anywhere globally. The world is flat now. The recent elections in New Delhi has demonstrated the first sign of changing political landscape.

A change which should make the few hundred politicians who had perfected the art of staying in power to quit politics.

A change the US was able to bring when a black president like Obama could come to power because of several illustrious leaders who fought for equality inspired by the teachings of Gandhiji.

It is therefore obvious that people should launch the "Quit India" movement once again. This time though to make people quit who are obstructionists. I will now take a moment to explain what is holding the biotech industry back.

Everybody knows that health is wealth. A nation's productivity is directly proportional to the health of its citizens.

But do people know that our regulators are simply so inefficient that they lack skills to take informed decisions to spurn the growth of this industry? The healthcare industry as a whole is suffering.

The courts today have to intervene in such basic things as how to run a clinical trial without people dying. In my view these are the fundamentals of running a clinical trial for which people have been trained for decades.

Another example is in agriculture. Our entire food security and prosperity are dependent on adaptation of new technologies. Our technical experts of this country went through reams of data and concluded that we should adopt modern methods of crop improvement for the future.

However, a dozen fear mongers convinced our politicians that this is not the way forward. A number of years have been lost in this debate and again the court had to intervene Environment and biodiversity are very important subjects of how we can responsibly industrialize without causing harm.

However we know only one way either it is all or none. Thousands of dollars' worth of projects never saw the light due to delays. Some may never due to project cost and time over runs.

So who pays for all these opportunity losses which causes serious growth impendence?

Who takes into account these losses every year? Is this not an accountability issue? What is the point in making plans after plans if we cannot implement it? The biotech industry roadmap for \$100 billion is now more than two-years old predicting that in the 2020-25 window India would emerge as the leader in the world and will be turning into a leading bioeconomy.

However, in reality, we have done nothing that will take us closer to our goals. Who should take the blame for this disastrous start to this goal?

What is the reality around us? CRO companies have quit India. Manufacturing is quitting India. Talent is slowly quitting India, while we sit here and make plans for skill development. When will India as a nation converge?

Should we not have a right to good health through affordable medicines which takes two decades of hard R&D efforts? Who is going to discover medicines that we need? It is not always possible to assume somebody will and we can arm twist and usurp under compulsory licensing. When will we create a climate for doing business instead of frustrating people?

I would like to conclude by saying one thing. We have absolutely all the wealth needed--great minds, resources, and opportunities for a great future; however our fellow Indians in power do not see the big picture.

It is obvious we need reforms. Not only in the financial world but also in regulatory environment that is needed for the growth of the biotech industry. We should have zero tolerance to anything that stops us from growing and being the country of destination of millions around the world to do business.

We should be ready to hand over stiff penalties for mediocrity and delays that stymie growth.

The next elected government should worry less about growth, but worry more about what stops us from growing. We have to remember growth can be exponential. Opportunity misses could be compounding mistakes that our future will inherit.

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