

CAN INDIA SPRINT FROM A 'STARTING UP' TO 'START UP' NATION?



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Former Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee used to say, "India's future is in IT, i.e. Information Technology." I also firmly believe 'India's future is in IT - as in Indian Talent!'

Several years ago, I had attended a seminar on export competitiveness of India. There was a discussion about what could be India's best export to the world. Someone cryptically remarked 'without doubt, they are the IIT graduates!' in other words, India is a great exporter of great talent!

And how true this is! We as Indians celebrated the appointment of Sundar Pichai as the CEO of Google and earlier, Satya Nadella's appointment as the CEO of Microsoft was highly lauded. India believes in Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram. May be, it is time to have Shiva as CEO of another global giant - who knows? So while we celebrate the Satyas and Sundars, should we, as Indians, not raise our ambition, and ask ourselves when will we be ready to create the new Microsofts and Googles?

Someone once asked me "Aren't there any Bill Gates in India?" I said, of course, there are. But having a Bill Gates is one thing and creating a Microsoft is another. It requires an innovation ecosystem, which trusts the young, takes risks and indeed celebrates failure.

A few years back, I attended a dinner with Bill Gates. There he mentioned that back in 1975, he made to a company in Albuquerque that was making the world's first personal computers and offered them to sell softwares. The person who received the call asked him to meet them a month later. This simple fact reveals the importance of trust. The company did not hang up after a youngish voice made an audacious offer to them. They trusted him.

Israel is not called the start-up nation for nothing. They have a courageous innovation ecosystem, which just does not believe in venture capital -- but in 'ad'-venture capital, and that adventuring is based solely on the trust of the young budding Israeli technopreneurs.

Can't we also build India as a start-up nation?

GETTING THE FUNDAMENTALS RIGHT

For Startup India to take off, we must create an ambition and ambience. And I see that the Modi Government and several state governments are going out of their way to rapidly build the ambience through several policy interventions. These include several fiscal and non-fiscal measures to make life hassle free for the start-ups.

We must build a powerful national innovation ecosystem. The essential elements of such a national ecosystem comprise physical, intellectual and cultural constructs. Beyond mere research labs, it includes idea incubators, technology parks, a conducive intellectual property rights regime, balanced regulatory systems, strategically designed standards, academics who believe in not just 'publish or perish', but 'patent, publish and prosper', scientists, who have the passion to become technopreneurs, potent inventor-investor engagement, 'ad'venture capital and passionate innovation leaders.

Let me just take one of the issues, namely Intellectual Property (IPR), specifically patents, as they pertain to start-ups. Patents can ensure a start-up's freedom to operate. Google is an industry heavyweight that complains about patents today. But as a start-up, back in 1998, it considered its seminal patent (PageRank patent No. 6,285,999) so vital that it had filed for it even before it had a business plan, venture funding, or a domain name - and then paid

Stanford University, to which it had been assigned the patent, \$336 million in shares to exclusively license it. As one analyst exclaimed then that without the patent "Google would have been trampled by copycat search engine offerings from Yahoo, Microsoft, and other big players, who once dominated the market."

Rupert Mayer, Founder and CEO, IPfolio, recently observed that patents have helped at least 10 major start-ups launch billion-dollar empires. These include Dropbox's network folder synchronization patent, Zynga's asynchronous challenge gaming patent, Square's patented system and method for decoding swipe card signals, GoPro's patented harness system for attaching a camera to a user, and of course Google's PageRank patent. ©

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