

Growing Indian innovation

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Stepping beyond the traditional barriers attributed to a developing country, India is prepared to move ahead and do what it takes to get to the top, say Indian innovators and analysts.

"It is time we structure our institutions of knowledge to be a global player in the 21st century," said Sam Pitroda, chairman of the Indian National Knowledge Commission, speaking at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington Thursday.

The National Knowledge Commission, constituted by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2005, was established to explore ways of creating, disseminating and applying knowledge for public benefit, "to make India more competitive and increase our prosperity," Pitroda said.

The commission, with three years to make recommendations, has been tasked with the opportunity to strengthen access to knowledge not only in science, education and technology, but also at governance in general -- ensuring computerization of much of the information and processes.

"Whatever we do will have long term implications -- if we are going to be a global player, we must focus on strengthening infrastructure," said Pitroda, also adding the need for many changes to be implemented in a relatively short amount of time.

Since Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi began implementation of IT programs in India in the 1980s among a hue and cry of controversy, the country sits on about \$150 billion of foreign exchange reserves. This

success story convinced the country to storm forward with innovation in several disciplines, making it a current global leader in the IT, software and communications industries.

"I believe that intellectual property will take on a different meaning," said Pitroda.

Labeling this new need as only a "small piece of the puzzle," he called for "developed countries to put the patent regime on a global platform," as it presently does not allow those without money, a lot of time and a good lawyer to participate.

In 1994 India filed 70 patents in the United States -- by 2004 this number rose to 1,300 filings.

"Our goals can be complementary and cooperative," said Victoria Espinel, acting assistant U.S. trade representative for intellectual property.

Citing the inaugural session of the U.S.-India Trade Policy Forum between U.S. Trade Representative Rob Portman and Indian Minister of Commerce and Industry Kamal Nath in New Delhi last November, Espinel stressed that "we (the United States) wish to cooperate with India generally."

President Bush is due to visit the Indian capital in March.

John Calfee, resident scholar at AEI, said that the country is developing so rapidly that "pretty soon India will have a mature intellectual-property regime just out of self-interest."

Known as the world's largest democracy, with an immensely large workforce, India has realized a need for training its population to better

serve its own needs. In modernizing its processes, the country hopes to organize itself in terms of education as well.

Education is a challenge in India with a mere 6 percent of children attending institutions of higher education at present. "We need to increase that number to 25 percent," said Pitroda.

India, a country rich in private-sector resources, will face "major challenges" said Tarun Das, formerly chief executive and now chief mentor of the Confederation of Indian Industry.

He named one major challenge as being reformation of mind-sets, governance and use of technology in education, healthcare and the rural economy, stressing the need for "motivating and creating an environment for those not just in urban areas, but also in rural areas, to take advantage of the technology."

With Indians now being globally competitive, Das said that new entrepreneurs need to have a better environment in which to perform -- one of the key goals of the commission. "A concurrent challenge for the U.S. is how do we build a partnership between India and the United States for global competitiveness," said Das.

Increasing transparency and collaboration within the country -- from homogenizing the famed Indian bureaucracy to solving the shortage of science and technology teachers by bringing together the professors who don't do research and the researchers who don't teach, the commission admittedly has a long way to go.

"We must overcome the mindset barriers," said Pitroda, "we know there is going to be resistance at all levels, but that is the challenge."

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