Innovation is high on the agenda of the corporate world. Be it any industry, CEOs are looking to ride to commercial success on the wings of innovative ideas and products. Innovation has today become the key to ensuring long-term competitiveness in an increasingly knowledge-driven economy.

Can India too employ an innovation-centric approach to fuel its national growth? Can a country saddled with a billion plus population and facing huge challenges in areas such as health, education, agriculture, energy, and rural development hope to unleash the power of innovation to look for solutions to its unique and pressing challenges? Can a culture of innovation bring about inclusive development in a country facing significant challenges of exclusion and inequitable access based on class, caste and gender? Well, the National Innovation Council certainly seems to think so.

Set up in September 2012 in the wake of the Prime Minister’s declaration of 2010-2020 as the ‘Decade of Innovation’, the National Innovation Council was tasked with the responsibility of implementing a model of inclusive innovation in the country. And, as Mr Sam Pitroda, Chairman of the National Innovation Council puts it, the Council is working towards creating ‘more from less for more’. According to him, India needs more ‘frugal, distributed, affordable’ innovations that produce frugal cost products and services affordable by people at low levels of income without compromising on safety, efficiency, and utility – in other words, innovation for the ‘Bottom of the Pyramid’.

The Council has taken some key initiatives that include an India Inclusive Innovation Fund for financing low cost innovations; creation of innovation ecosystems in Universities through University Innovation Clusters; promotion of innovation culture through an Innovation Portal; creation of institutional framework for innovations in government by facilitating setting up of State Innovation Councils, and setting up Innovation Design Centres.

The Council recently gave an insight into its Innovation Clusters Initiative that has been designed to transform micro, small & medium enterprise (MSME) clusters into innovation ecosystems with high efficiency and competitiveness. MSMEs are major engines of job creation and inclusive growth representing 45% of manufactured output and 40% of exports. India has almost 5000 MSME clusters, of which 200 are large clusters, in areas such as health, textiles, leather, bamboo, handicraft & handloom and several others. Innovations in these sectors suffer due to a lack of access to technology, R&D, finance, industry expertise and effective collaborative ecosystems.

The National Innovation Council has stepped in to fill this gap by creating Cluster Innovation Centers (CICs) that will act as networking hubs enabling the small enterprises to reach out to stakeholders such as R&D organizations, universities and financial institutions that can bring in technology, financing, and skill. This will enable the small enterprises to innovate and commercialize their innovations, eventually translating into enhanced productivity and growth and more job creation.

One cluster identified is in Krishnagiri in Tamil Nadu, which is the largest producer of mangoes employing 2.5 lakh people and with a turnover of 700 crores. The cluster generates 1,50,000 tons of waste annually. With inputs from the National Innovation Council the waste is now being put to good use – butter is being made from mango kernel apart from other value-added products such as biogas and briquettes. Similarly, Thrissur, which is emerging as an ayurvedic industry hub, is focusing on standardization and finding pathways of action in concert with R&D organizations. In fact, at a recently held press conference where he gave an update on the Innovation Clusters Initiative, Mr Sam Pitroda appreciated the role of CSIR scientists who he said had been superb in finding solutions.

The country’s growth and prestige may hinge on well-executed mega projects. But interventions at the level of small enterprises, such as the one that the National Innovation Council is targeting, are expected to fuel inclusive growth with rich social dividends.

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