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A Prize for India's Patent King

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By Shefali Anand

In a country where intellectual property laws are often flouted, Lalit Mahajan could be considered a champion for property rights. The 65-year-old inventor is the man who holds the most individual patents in India.



Courtesy of J. Mitra & Co.

Lalit Mahajan, right, receives an award from the Minister for Commerce and Industry, Anand Sharma.

Mr. Mahajan was recognized for that accomplishment on Tuesday—World Intellectual Property Day—at an event organized by the Confederation of Indian Industry and the Indian government.

So, how many patents does it take to reach the top? Mr. Mahajan, who runs a medical diagnostic firm, was granted 23 patents in the last five years.

That's a pretty small number compared to developed countries like the U.S., where some individuals hold 200 to 300 patents. American companies have even more patents—International Business Machines was awarded 5,000 patents in 2010 alone. In comparison, the Indian company with the highest number of patents received in the last five years is Bharat Heavy Electricals Ltd., with just 240 patents.

Patenting in India "is in the infancy stage," said Mr. Mahajan in an interview, adding that many people may not be aware of patenting and its benefits.

Lack of innovation is another reason that the number of patents granted to individuals and Indian companies is low, said P.H. Kurian, controller general of Patents, Designs and Trademarks, a government authority that grants patents in India.

Mr. Kurian said patents are given only where there is a "technical advance over the existing technology," said Mr. Kurian. To foster such innovation companies should be investing in research and development, but Mr. Kurian said that large Indian companies instead focus on growing sales and acquisitions.

Besides, Indian inventors don't have much incentive to patent their technologies because they don't know how to make money off them. "We have to develop a market for patents," said Mr. Kurian.

India's top patent-holder has that part already figured out.

He licenses his patents to a few companies and earns royalties on them, he said. Many of Mr. Mahajan's patents are for medical kits that diagnose diseases like HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, and mosquito-borne dengue fever. His company, J. Mitra & Co., also manufactures these kits.

Of course, having a patent is not enough on its own to keep people from trying to copy someone else's invention without paying royalties, which might be another reason Indian innovators may be reluctant to pursue patents. Mr. Mahajan had had to go to court at least two times to punish companies that copied his technology. It took him two to three years to get a verdict in these cases, he said, but when the cases were finally decided, they went in his favor.

While both filing for a patent and protecting it can be a time-consuming and draining exercise, Mr. Mahajan highly recommends that fellow inventors make the effort because it can help protect years of hard work.

More innovation will also help make "India more self-reliant," he said.

Why don't more inventors patent their technologies in India? Share your thoughts in the Comments section. And follow Ms. Anand on Twitter @shefalianand.