India's IP Numbers Tell a Bigger Story About Startup Founders in India

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India's startup ecosystem is becoming increasingly innovation-led, and the country's intellectual property numbers offer an interesting glimpse into that evolution. Behind the rise in patent, design and trademark filings is a broader story about Indian businesses creating new technologies, developing distinctive products and building brands with long-term value.

The numbers are striking. Patent applications filed by Indian citizens increased from 24,326 in FY2020–21 to 68,176 in FY2024–25. Design filings rose from 10,594 to 38,804, while trademark filings increased from 4,18,594 to 5,38,665 over the same period.

These figures are not limited to startups, but they form an important backdrop to the changing nature of entrepreneurship in India. As founders move from an idea to a product, a technology, a market identity or an entirely new business model, the intellectual property created along the way can become an important part of the enterprise itself.

That makes IP strategy particularly relevant at the early stage—not as a question of simply what to register, but as a way of understanding what a startup is creating, where its distinctive value lies, and how that value can develop alongside the business.

What actually constitutes a startup's IP?

A startup's intellectual property may extend well beyond a patent or trademark.

Its commercially relevant assets can include a brand name and identity, inventions, software, product designs, original content, technical documentation, confidential information, processes, know-how and other forms of proprietary knowledge.

Not every asset necessarily requires the same form of legal protection. A technology company may derive substantial value from an invention, while a consumer startup may depend more heavily on its brand and product design. A software business may have multiple layers of copyright, confidential information and contractual rights operating together.

An IP strategy therefore begins with understanding what the business has created, what it uses, and what gives it an advantage.

IP strategy changes as the startup changes

IP decisions are rarely static.

At the idea or product-development stage, the central issue may be identifying what is genuinely novel or proprietary. Once a product enters the market, brand identity, customer recognition and competing rights can become more significant. As the company scales, licensing, partnerships, employee and consultant contributions, international markets and transactions may introduce additional IP questions.

The strategy therefore has to evolve with the business.

This is particularly relevant in India, where the startup ecosystem has expanded dramatically. DPIIT-recognised startups increased from approximately **500 in 2016 to more than 2 lakh by 2025**. By 31 March 2026, the number had crossed **2.23 lakh**, according to the Government of India.

The expansion of the startup ecosystem is occurring alongside a substantial increase in IP activity.

India's IP data shows a changing innovation landscape

India's IP filing data tells a larger story than registration volumes alone. Over five financial years, the sharp rise in patent and design filings, alongside continued growth in trademarks, reflects a business environment in which intangible assets are assuming greater commercial significance.

Financial Year	Patent Applications	Trademark Applications	Design Applications
FY2020–21	24,326	4,18,594	10,594
FY2021–22	29,508	4,34,084	19,245
FY2022–23	43,301	4,53,325	18,170
FY2023–24	51,574	4,63,108	26,536
FY2024–25	68,176	5,38,665	38,804

Across these five years, total IP filings by Indian citizens increased by 44%. Patent applications increased by 180%, design applications by 266%, and trademark applications by 28%.

However, it does not mean that every startup needs an extensive IP portfolio. It does show that intellectual property is becoming an increasingly significant part of India's innovation and entrepreneurship landscape.

Timing can be as important as protection

An IP strategy also has a temporal dimension.

The dates on which an invention is developed or disclosed, a brand is adopted, a work is created, or a product enters the market can become relevant to the legal position.

For founders, this makes IP strategy different from simply deciding whether to obtain a registration. A business may make decisions about publicity, product launches, collaborations or commercial disclosure before considering their potential IP implications.

The relationship between creation, ownership, disclosure, use and protection can therefore matter as much as the eventual registration itself.

Ownership is different from creation

One of the less visible IP questions in an early-stage company is ownership.

A founder may create an asset personally. An employee may develop software. A consultant may create branding or content. A technology may come from a university, incubator, contractor or collaboration.

The fact that something was created for the startup does not, by itself, answer every question concerning ownership or control.

As the business grows, these questions can become relevant to licensing, investment, due diligence and commercial transactions.

What happens when IP strategy is absent?

The consequences of having no coherent IP strategy are not limited to losing the opportunity to register something.

They can include disputes over ownership, competing claims to a brand, difficulty commercialising technology, complications in licensing arrangements, rebranding, infringement disputes and questions during investor or transaction due diligence.

For an early-stage company, these issues can be particularly significant because an intangible asset may be closely connected to the product itself.

An IP problem discovered after substantial commercial investment can be materially different from the same issue identified while the business is still developing its product or identity.

IP strategy is ultimately about business architecture

For an early-stage founder, intellectual property should not be viewed simply as a legal compliance exercise or a race to accumulate registrations.

A meaningful IP strategy connects the startup's innovation, brand, ownership structure and commercial direction.

The right question is therefore not how much IP a startup owns, but whether the intellectual property it creates, uses and controls is aligned with what actually makes the business valuable.

As India's startup and innovation ecosystem continues to expand, that distinction is likely to become increasingly important.

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