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Patent Pools in the Light of Antitrust Regulations: A Comparative Analysis of India and the European Union

Akansha Yadav† and Satish Kumar

Jindal Global Law School, O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonipat — 131 001, India

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The recent COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the tension between incentivizing pharmaceutical innovation through intellectual property (IP) rights and ensuring broad access to life-saving technologies. This paper examines patent pools as collaborative arrangements that enable multiple patent holders to license their patents collectively and how such arrangements have been addressed under antitrust regulations in India and the European Union (EU). Adopting a comparative approach, it highlights how the pandemic prompted a re-evaluation of patent pooling as a mechanism to balance innovation incentives with public health needs. We have analysed patent pools' core benefits in mitigating patent thickets and fostering innovation, alongside their potential anti-competitive risks.

We then compare regulatory approaches in the EU and India, noting how competition law in each jurisdiction affects the formation and operation of patent pools. The impact of COVID-19 on these regimes is emphasized, particularly how emergency circumstances led to adaptations in antitrust enforcement to facilitate collaboration. Real-world examples, including the WHO's COVID-19 Technology Access Pool (C-TAP) and vaccine partnerships like Oxford–AstraZeneca and Pfizer–BioNTech, illustrate the practical challenges and outcomes of patent pooling during the pandemic. The discussion explores how aligning antitrust policies with IP rights can either hinder or promote innovation. The paper concludes with recommendations for policy reforms to encourage pro-competitive patent pooling and ensure that innovation and access advance in tandem.

Keywords: COVID-19, Pandemic, Patent Pool, Patent Holder, Technology Access Pool, Patent

Innovation in the pharmaceutical sector often confronts a dense landscape of overlapping patents, sometimes described as a "patent thicket." When multiple patents cover different components of a single product or process, a would-be innovator may find development blocked or burdened by the need to obtain numerous licenses.[1] In response, patent pools have emerged as a cooperative strategy: they create usable bundles of patents that overcome these fragmentation problems while preserving incentives for patent holders to innovate.[2] Pooling of patents is essentially an agreement among different patent holders to allow access to their innovation to each other or to third parties as a package and gain mutual benefit out of it.[3] Such pooling arrangements have a history of aiding technological development when rights are splintered among many owners.[4] By consolidating patents under a single umbrella, pools allow licensees "one-stop" access to all the necessary technologies, reducing transaction costs and accelerating innovation.[5] Patent pools have emerged as a cooperative strategy to address this problem. These pools create bundled portfolios of patents that overcome fragmentation while preserving incentives for patent holders to innovate.

In the pharmaceutical industry, patent pools are increasingly viewed as an advanced solution to address complex challenges at the intersection of intellectual property (IP) and public health, especially where at times innovation and protection of technology seem to be at an impasse.To oversee and collaborate on patented technology, they bring together a number of pharmaceutical corporations, research institutes, and other related stakeholders. The objective is to bring together the development, production, and easy dissemination of critical medicines, especially in remote areas where such medical needs are still not met in times of global health emergencies, by mitigating legal hurdles and facilitating knowledge transfer.[6] Notably, the European Union has reaped significant health gains from new medicines and vaccines in recent decades, with average life expectancy rising steadily (in 2023 it reached 81.4 years, an

†Corresponding author: Email: ayadav1@jgu.edu.in

increase of 3.8 years since 2002).[7] This progress is partly attributed to robust innovation ecosystems and collaborative R&D efforts that have brought forth treatments for diseases from hepatitis C to Ebola.[8]

India, for its part, is now known as the "greater manufacturer and distributor of medicines at rather cheaper rate to the world" due to its massive generic drug industry. As of 2023, India ranked third globally in pharmaceutical production by volume and supplied over 50% of the world's vaccine demand.[9] The Indian pharmaceutical market, valued around USD 50 billion in 2023, is projected to grow rapidly, reflecting the country's crucial role in manufacturing affordable medicines.[10]

Given this potential, India's policy environment must carefully balance IP protection with competition to foster growth among stakeholders.[11] Historically, India's patent laws (notably the Patents Act of 1970) focused on process patents to encourage local generic production as a strategy that led to a booming generics industry. Although India transitioned to product patents in 2005 to comply with international agreements, questions remain on how its competition law will handle collaborative IP arrangements like patent pools, which are relatively novel in the Indian context.[12]

This paper aims to analyse the concept of patent pooling in the pharmaceutical sector and its interface with competition (antitrust) law, comparing the frameworks of the EU and India. We use a doctrinal analytical approach, reviewing legal statutes, guidelines, and case studies in both jurisdictions. Key advantages and concerns of patent pools are examined, followed by a comparative discussion of how EU competition law and Indian competition law regulate (or fail to regulate) these collaborative agreements. Crucially, we explore how the COVID-19 pandemic stress-tested these regimes, as the urgency for vaccines and treatments prompted unprecedented collaboration as well as tension between exclusivity and accessibility.[13] The pandemic context provides real-world illustrations of patent pooling initiatives and antitrust flexibility, from the creation of global pools for COVID-19 technologies to voluntary licensing partnerships between pharmaceutical giants. These examples ground the theoretical discussion in practical outcomes, highlighting lessons for policy.

Concept and Benefits of Patent Pools

Patent pools operate by agreement among patent owners, often with a managing entity, to license a set of patents as a package to one another or to third parties.[14] Instead of negotiating separate licenses with each patent holder, an implementer (such as a drug manufacturer) can obtain all needed rights in one transaction. This mechanism offers several pro-competitive benefits for industries burdened by multiple patent rights.

Reduced Transaction Costs and Litigation and easy accessibility is prominent benefits of having patent pools. By consolidating licensing, patent pools eliminate the need for dozens of bilateral negotiations and reduce the risk of inadvertent infringement. Companies can avoid costly patent litigation and focus resources on product development.[15] A pool creates a clear licensing framework, which decreases legal uncertainties for all participants. Licensees gain access to a broader range of complementary patents through a single agreement, streamlining R&D. This one-stop shop approach accelerates innovation by allowing firms to quickly bundle technologies without negotiating each license individually.[16]

Faster product development by simplifying the licensing process can speed up the development and commercialization of new technologies.[17] When essential patents are readily available, firms can integrate new innovations into products more rapidly, which is especially vital in health emergencies. Risk Sharing and Cost Reduction can be done by having Pool participants to share the risks and rewards of R&D. Royalties from licensing out the pooled patents are often distributed among members, which spreads financial risk. Moreover, pooled licensing can cap the total royalty stack, preventing excessive cumulative fees that would otherwise be passed on to consumers.

Standardization and interoperability are other important feature of having patent pools. In fields where multiple technologies must work together (common in medical devices or biotech platforms), patent pools can help establish common standards. By bringing together essential patents, pools ensure interoperability and can set industry-wide technology standards, benefiting both producers and consumers.[18] In pharmaceuticals, this could apply to platform technologies (for instance, mRNA delivery systems) that multiple vaccine makers might need to use. Improved Information Sharing among potential candidates who can effectively exhaust the patented

innovation for good of larger public can be achieved by having patent pools in existence. The collaborative nature of pools encourages the exchange of technical knowledge among members.[19] This can spur follow-on innovation as companies learn from each other's patented technologies in the pool, leading to improvements and new applications that might not have arisen in isolation.

Through these benefits, patent pools can enhance innovation, efficiency, and consumer welfare simultaneously.[20] By lowering barriers to entry (e.g. a start-up can license a package of drug formulation patents in one go) and reducing duplicate R&D effort, well-designed pools have the potential to increase competition in downstream product markets rather than decrease it. Notably, patent pools in other industries (such as electronics and telecommunications) have successfully enabled complex products by aggregating standard-essential patents under fair terms.[21] The promise is that similar collaborative models in pharma could accelerate the availability of medications, provided they are structured to comply with competition laws.

Potential Anti-Competitive Concerns of Patent Pools

Despite their efficiencies, patent pools also raise anti-competitive concerns that regulators scrutinize closely. If misused, a pool can become a vehicle for collusion or market foreclosure. Key concerns include-

Price Fixing and Output Control is most dangerous side effect that can be seen as a by-product of unsupervised patent pools. Pooling may enable member firms to collectively set licensing prices or production quotas. By agreeing on royalty rates or prices for products using the pooled patents, they risk fixing prices at higher than competitive levels.[22] Such coordinated control can harm consumers by keeping drug prices artificially high or limiting output. Market Foreclosure and Entry Barriers are another drawbacks of patent thickets. A dominant group of companies might use a patent pool to lock up essential technologies, denying outside competitors access to key patents. If the pool members collectively control a technology domain (e.g. a life-saving drug formula), they could exclude new entrants or dictate stringent licensing terms to them.[23] This could lead to a monopolistic market structure with reduced choices for consumers.

Collusion and information exchange can happen because pools primarily require coordination among competitors, which can spill over into collusive behaviour beyond the scope of the pool. The process of pooling might facilitate the exchange of sensitive business information (pricing, R&D plans) under the guise of licensing discussions, potentially damping competition in innovation or marketing.[24] Antitrust authorities worry that a pool can serve as a cartel if participants use it to align their conduct outside the pool's legitimate activities. Including substitute patents together is another drawback of patent pools because ideally, pools should comprise complementary patents (technologies that work together). If competitors include substitute patents (rival technologies solving the same problem) in one pool, it eliminates technology competition between them.[25] Such inclusion of alternative solutions in a single pool can reduce innovation incentives (why invent a new method if the patent must be pooled with the old method?) and lead to unified high royalties. Antitrust guidelines typically require that pools exclude substitute (competing) patents or license them independently to preserve competition.

Royalty Stacking Complexity is frequently seen as a drawback of patent pool agreements because while one goal of pools is to reduce royalty stacking, an improperly managed pool could introduce complex royalty-sharing arrangements that discourage use. If multiple patent owners demand separate royalties within the pool or the cumulative royalty is excessive, it may deter licensees from entering the market. This complexity can particularly burden smaller companies or generic manufacturers with thin profit margins. More subtle concern is that by providing a comfortable collaborative environment, pools might reduce the pressure to innovate. Firms earning steady licensing income from the pool might invest less in R&D for breakthrough technologies, especially if the pool includes all major players (damping the competitive race to invent).[26] In other words, if not carefully structured, a pool could make firms "easy-going" and reliant on existing patents rather than striving for next-generation solutions.

Because of these risks, both the EU and Indian competition regulators are cautious in evaluating patent pooling arrangements. The goal is to prevent scenarios where a pool shifts from being a pro-innovation tool to a conduit for anti-competitive practices. Clear safeguards such as independent experts vetting which patents are truly complementary, open licensing on fair, reasonable,

and non-discriminatory (FRAND) terms, and allowing members and third parties to develop competing products are essential conditions to keep pools on the right side of competition law. The next sections discuss how the European Union and India approach these issues within their legal frameworks.

Patent Pools under European Union Competition Law

In the European Union, any agreement between undertakings (companies) that may prevent, restrict, or distort competition is subject to Article 101(1) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU). Patent pools, as cooperative agreements among patent holders, fall within the scope of this rule and can be deemed unlawful if they have anti-competitive effects.[27] Since 2004, companies must self-assess the legality of such collaborations, guided by block exemption regulations and Commission guidelines that clarify what arrangements are permissible.

EU Block Exemption and Guidelines

The primary instrument guiding patent licensing collaborations is the Technology Transfer Block Exemption Regulation (TTBER), along with the accompanying Guidelines on Technology Transfer Agreements.[28] The TTBER creates a *safe harbour* for licensing agreements (including patent pools and cross-licenses) that meet certain conditions. In essence, if the pooled licensing arrangement is between parties below specified market share thresholds (generally 20% when participants are competitors, 30% when not competitors) and contains no "hardcore" restrictions (like price-fixing or market allocation), it is exempt from the Article 101(1) prohibition.[29] This means the agreement is presumed lawful without case-by-case scrutiny.[30] For patent pools specifically, the EU's 2014 TT Guidelines acknowledge that pools can be pro-competitive by integrating complementary technologies and reducing transaction costs. They outline best practices, such as ensuring participation in the pool is open to all interested patent holders, excluding any restrictive output or price agreements, and licensing out to third parties on FRAND terms.

If a patent pool arrangement falls outside the safe harbour (for example, if the participants' market shares are above the threshold, or if the agreement includes a potentially anti-competitive clause), it does not mean it is automatically illegal. Instead, it requires an individual assessment under the rule of reason approach of Article 101. The question becomes whether the pool's pro-competitive benefits (innovation efficiencies, faster product rollout, etc.) outweigh its anti-competitive effects. Article 101(3) TFEU provides that otherwise prohibited agreements can be exempted if they contribute to improving production or promoting technical progress while allowing consumers a fair share of the benefits and without imposing unnecessary restrictions. In practice, the European Commission has approved certain patent pools after detailed review, for instance, earlier pools in digital video technology were allowed subject to conditions that only complementary patents were pooled and licenses were offered openly at fair rates. Conversely, if a patent pool were to include substitute technologies or enable collusive behaviour (e.g., pooling key COVID-19 vaccine patents but then jointly limiting output to keep prices high), it would violate Article 101(1) and likely fail to meet Article 101(3) criteria, thus being unlawful.[31]

The EU's soft-law guidance plays an important role. While the TTBER and Guidelines are not legislation, they are influential in shaping business behaviour and are often treated as authoritative by courts.[32] They provide predictability for example, they explicitly state that pooling agreements managed by an independent third party, where patent essentiality is vetted and pooled patents are licensed non-exclusively on FRAND terms, are generally compatible with EU competition law. These conditions aim to ensure the pool is truly meant to reduce blocking patents and encourage innovation, rather than become a cartel.

Antitrust Flexibility During COVID-19

The COVID-19 crisis tested the EU competition framework's flexibility. Recognizing the need for unprecedented collaboration among pharmaceutical companies to ensure supply of medicines and develop vaccines, the European Commission issued a Temporary Antitrust Framework in 2020. Under this framework, the Commission assured companies that it would not enforce Article 101 strictly against necessary cooperation aimed at addressing the pandemic. Notably, on 8 April 2020 the Commission issued a *comfort letter* to "Medicines for Europe" (a generic drug industry association) authorizing a coordinated effort to prevent shortages of critical COVID-19 medicines.[33] This comfort letter outlined permissible collaboration, such as sharing stock

information and production plans to scale up supplies, which ordinarily might raise antitrust concerns.

Similarly, in early 2021, as vaccines became available, the Commission gave another comfort letter to a European matchmaking initiative for vaccine production, which coordinated manufacturers to use any available capacity to produce COVID-19 vaccines.[34] These steps show the Commission's willingness to relax enforcement to facilitate pooling of information, IP, and resources in a crisis. However, the Commission stressed that such cooperation must be temporary, transparent, and no more than necessary to achieve the objective (e.g., no discussing future pricing or markets once the emergency subsides).

Regarding patent pools specifically, during the pandemic the EU did not create a new formal patent pool mechanism, but it politically supported global efforts for voluntary pooling of COVID-19 technologies. For instance, EU officials endorsed initiatives like C-TAP. Post-pandemic, the experience has influenced policy discussions in Europe about whether competition law needs clearer provisions for emergency situations. The European Commission's Pharmaceutical Strategy for Europe (2020) acknowledged that innovation must be balanced with accessibility, and one proposal is to make the legal framework more conducive to competition in pharmaceutical markets.[35] In 2023, EU regulators also began reviewing and updating the TTBER and guidelines for the next period, considering lessons learned, including how collaborative R&D and pooling can be encouraged without undermining competition. It is evident that while the EU's core competition law principles remained intact, enforcement showed adaptability: a generally strict stance on coordination was temporarily loosened to encourage lifesaving collaborations. However, European competition policy still requires that any patent pooling (pandemic-related or otherwise) demonstrably serves innovation and consumers, and does not become a cover for anti-competitive conduct.

Patent Pools under Indian Competition Law

India's competition regime is governed by the Competition Act, 2002, and CCI is the implementing authority that supervises the market. The Act seeks to prevent anti-competitive agreements, abuse of dominant position and to regulate combinations (mergers). Patent pools, being agreements among enterprises (often competitors), are scrutinized under Section 3 of the Act, which broadly prohibits agreements that cause or are likely to cause an appreciable adverse effect on competition. Specifically, Section 3(1) forbids any agreement that "causes or is likely to cause an appreciable adverse effect on competition in India".[36] Horizontal agreements like cartels (including price-fixing, bid-rigging, market allocation) are presumed to have a negative effect on competition and are per se void under Section 3, unless an exemption applies.

Importantly, the Competition Act includes a provision safeguarding legitimate exercise of intellectual property rights. Section 3(5) of the Act states that reasonable conditions imposed for protecting any of the rights conferred by specified intellectual property laws (including the Patents Act) shall not be deemed anti-competitive.[37] This means that if patent holders impose certain restrictions or enter agreements purely to protect their patent rights, those may be exempt from the competition law prohibition, as long as the conditions are "reasonable". For example, two pharma companies cross-licensing patents or forming a pool to enable each to use the other's patented inputs could argue this is a reasonable condition to protect their IP (and to develop new products), not a cartel to exploit the market. However, the term "reasonable" is not defined, leaving room for interpretation.[38] The CCI or courts would likely consider factors such as the necessity of the restraint for innovation, the proportionate impact on competition, and consumer benefits to judge reasonableness.

As of now, India does not have specific block exemption regulations or detailed guidelines addressing patent pools akin to the EU's TTBER. The assessment is thus on a case-by-case basis under the general provisions of the Competition Act. In practice, patent pooling is still a novel concept in India's pharmaceutical industry,[39] with few if any high-profile cases directly examining a pool. However, insights can be drawn from related instances in IP and competition. For example, in the LM Ericsson v. CCI case (2016),[40] the Delhi High Court dealt with the issue of whether the competition authority could investigate a patent holder (Ericsson) for alleged excessive pricing of standard-essential patents. The court observed that patent rights are a special domain and that disputes over royalty reasonableness might be governed by patent law remedies unless there is clear evidence of abusive

conduct beyond mere exercise of patent rights.[41] This indicates a cautious approach where the courts do not want competition law to override patent law's domain without good cause.

That said, if patent pool members abuse their dominance or the pool results in practices like price-fixing or exclusionary tactics, the CCI can intervene under Section 3 (anti-competitive agreements) or even Section 4 (abuse of dominant position, if the pool collectively is dominant in the relevant market). The Act's focus is on whether an arrangement causes appreciable adverse effect on competition, considering factors listed in Section 19(3) such as creation of barriers to entry, improvement in production or distribution, accrual of benefits to consumers, etc.[42] A pro-competitive pool that enhances efficiency and access could be seen as yielding positive factors that offset any negative effects.

From a regulatory standpoint, India's Patents Act, 1970 indirectly facilitates pooling through its provisions on licensing. Patent holders have the freedom to assign or license their patents (Sections 68-69 of the Patents Act) with terms and royalties mutually agreed.[43] There is no explicit mention of patent pools in the Act, but nothing prevents multiple patent owners from collaboratively licensing to each other or a common licensing body as long as agreements are registered. Additionally, if voluntary licensing fails to ensure needed access, Indian law provides for compulsory licensing (Section 84 of the Patents Act) in cases of public health needs or if a patented invention is not reasonably available to the public.[44] In an extreme scenario, the government can also issue a compulsory license or utilize inventions for public non-commercial use (Section 92 and 100) to address public health emergencies. These IP law mechanisms, while not patent pools per se, reflect an orientation towards ensuring access that they serve as a backdrop against which voluntary pooling might be encouraged (to avoid harsher measures like compulsory licenses).

Overall, India's competition law regime recognizes the need to foster innovation and efficiencies while preventing abuse. The interplay with IP rights is still evolving. The lack of detailed guidelines for patent pools means firms must tread carefully: a pool that clearly benefits consumers (e.g., making a range of HIV drugs available in a bundle to generic producers for low-cost production) would likely be seen favourably, especially if it aligns with public health goals. In fact, India has been supportive of international initiatives like the Medicines Patent Pool (MPP), which negotiates licenses for essential medicines so that generic manufacturers (often in India) can produce affordable versions for developing countries.[45] The spirit of such pooling with the objective of providing access to critical medicines in low-income markets is consistent with Indian policy objectives of the Competition law as well as of the Intellectual Property Rights Law. However, a patent pool that looks more like a cartel (say, major pharma companies pooling patents for a set of blockbuster drugs and agreeing not to license to any new entrant, or setting high uniform prices) would draw CCI's ire.

In summary, while Indian law does not explicitly detail patent pools, it provides broad principles and IP exceptions that could accommodate pro-competitive pooling. The challenge and opportunity for India will be to develop clearer guidelines or legal precedents in this area, learning from global best practices, so that companies have confidence to engage in beneficial pooling without fear of violating antitrust rules.

The COVID-19 Pandemic: Harnessing Patent Pools for Equitable Innovation

The COVID-19 pandemic was a crucible that tested intellectual property regimes and competition policies worldwide. On one hand, the rapid development of vaccines and therapies demonstrated the value of strong innovation incentives. On the other hand, the urgent need to provide billions of people with vaccines and treatments spotlighted the limitations of a strictly proprietary approach to IP. Patent pools and cooperative licensing emerged in discussions as pivotal tools to bridge the gap between innovation and access during this global crisis.[46]

Early in the pandemic, calls were made for unprecedented sharing of knowledge, data, and IP to accelerate R&D and scale up production. In May 2020, the World Health Organization, with support from numerous countries, launched the COVID-19 Technology Access Pool (C-TAP) as a means to facilitate such sharing. C-TAP was envisioned as a voluntary patent pool or "one-stop shop" where developers of COVID-19 health products (vaccines, diagnostics, medicines) could deposit their IP, data, and know-how to be licensed out for manufacturing around the world.[47] The aim was to overcome legal and technical barriers and ensure that life-saving

innovations reached all regions, not just wealthy nations.[48] C-TAP promised transparent, non-exclusive licensing through partners like the Medicines Patent Pool, with royalties to patent holders while enabling generic production to boost supply.[49] In essence, it sought to treat critical medical technologies as global public goods, leveraging patent pooling to prioritize public health over exclusivity.[50]

However, the implementation of C-TAP faced challenges. Crucially, it depended on the voluntary participation of patent holders, and the major pharmaceutical companies were reluctant to join. As an example of industry sentiment, Pfizer's CEO labelled the pool "nonsense" and "dangerous" at the time, reflecting fears that sharing IP would undermine profits or innovation incentives.[51] Indeed, throughout 2020 and 2021, C-TAP attracted endorsements from governments and mobilized researchers to share data, but it secured few actual licenses for commercial products. This highlights a fundamental tension: companies that invested heavily in new vaccines (often with public funding support) were concerned that broad IP pooling could erode their control and future revenue, whereas public health advocates argued that old models of exclusive rights were ill-suited to a pandemic.[52]

Despite limited direct participation in C-TAP, the pandemic did witness significant voluntary licensing and collaborative agreements that mirror the goals of patent pools. A prominent example is the partnership between Oxford University and AstraZeneca for the Oxford/AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine. Oxford, which had developed the vaccine, entered an agreement with AstraZeneca to manufacture and distribute it globally. AstraZeneca in turn sublicensed production to multiple partners, notably the Serum Institute of India (the world's largest vaccine manufacturer), among others. By partnering with Serum Institute, AstraZeneca enabled the vaccine to be produced at scale for India and many low- and middle-income countries.[53] This collaborative model of a form of pooling know-how and IP led to the vaccine (branded COVISHIELD in India) being available worldwide at a relatively low cost. AstraZeneca also pledged to sell the vaccine at no profit during the pandemic emergency. Observers noted that this licensing approach showed how sharing IP and manufacturing rights can dramatically expand access without eliminating patent incentives.[54] In effect, it balanced innovation and access: the innovators were recognized (AstraZeneca retained patent rights and the prospect of future profits), but the broad licenses ensured rapid and equitable dissemination in the short term.

Another instructive case is the collaboration between Pfizer and BioNTech to develop an mRNA vaccine (Comirnaty). This was an intra-industry partnership combining BioNTech's mRNA technology with Pfizer's development and distribution capabilities. The two companies shared IP and expertise with each other, which was crucial to bringing the first mRNA vaccine to market in under a year. However, beyond their bilateral partnership, Pfizer–BioNTech did not join any broader pooling of IP during the initial pandemic wave. They retained tight control over manufacturing by contracting only a limited number of facilities (mostly in the US and Europe) under Pfizer's oversight and refused to license the vaccine widely to other capable producers. This strategy ensured quality control and protected their know-how but drew criticism for contributing to inequitable vaccine distribution, as many regions depended on Pfizer's own production capacity.[55]

There were also patent disputes around the new vaccines, for example, Allele Biotechnology sued Pfizer–BioNTech alleging the use of its patented research tool without permission[56] while highlighting the complexity of IP even amid urgent vaccine development. While these disputes did not derail the vaccine rollout, they underscored how a thicket of research tool patents could complicate rapid innovation. Interestingly, as the pandemic evolved, Pfizer took a significant step towards broader access for one of its innovations: the oral antiviral treatment Paxlovid (nirmatrelvir/ritonavir). In late 2021, Pfizer signed a *voluntary licensing agreement* with the Medicines Patent Pool to share its patents and know-how for Paxlovid production.[57] Under this agreement, MPP can sublicense Paxlovid to qualified generic manufacturers in 95 low- and middle-income countries, royalty-free while COVID-19 remains a Public Health Emergency.[58] This move was hailed as a "ground-breaking" deal, as it opened the door for generic versions of a new pharmaceutical to be produced within a year of its development.[59] The contrast with Pfizer's vaccine approach is notable: for a therapeutic (perhaps because it was developed with significant public-sector support, or because high-income market demand was expected to plateau), Pfizer opted for a pooling approach via MPP to ensure global supply. This indicated that sharing IP in a controlled way

(with generic firms producing for poorer markets) could enhance global health outcomes without severely undermining the company's incentives.

From the competition law perspective, these pandemic-era collaborations and pools prompted regulators to clarify their stance. Competition authorities in various jurisdictions publicly stated that they would prioritize public health and not stand in the way of necessary cooperation. The European Commission, as mentioned, issued comfort letters to facilitate cooperation in the pharmaceutical sector, essentially saying that *competition law would not be an obstacle in a public health emergency* so long as firms acted in good faith. At the same time, authorities warned against opportunistic collusion where companies were cautioned not to use the crisis as cover for cartel behavior unrelated to pandemic relief.

In summary, the pandemic experience demonstrated that patent pooling and cooperative licensing can be powerful tools to balance innovation and access when the stakes are highest. Where voluntary mechanisms were embraced (the AstraZeneca model, MPP licenses), they arguably saved lives by expanding production and lowering prices due to broader manufacturing participation. Where pooling efforts fell short (C-TAP's struggle to attract industry support), the world saw a more uneven access, with low-income countries often waiting longer for critical vaccines. The experience also showed that antitrust frameworks can adapt: regulators signalled flexibility for pro-public-interest collaboration, essentially affirming that *the greater good of public health can align with competition policy*. This is likely to influence future policy where there are calls for permanent legal frameworks to facilitate patent pools or other sharing arrangements in future global health crises. The pandemic, in effect, has accelerated the conversation about aligning competition and IP policies for the sake of global well-being.

Policy Recommendations for Balancing Antitrust and Patent Pooling

The analysis above suggests that, under the right conditions, patent pools can enhance both innovation and accessibility, but clear legal frameworks are needed to prevent anti-competitive abuses. Based on the lessons from the EU and India, especially in light of the pandemic, we propose the following policy recommendations to align antitrust regulations with the goals of patent pooling in the pharmaceutical sector:

(i) Transparency and Openness: Regulators should mandate a degree of openness in patent pool arrangements. All pooling agreements could be required to be notified (even if not for approval, at least for information) to competition authorities, disclosing their key terms and membership. This transparency helps watchdogs and the public ensure that the pool's purpose is collaborative innovation, not hidden collusion. Open pools where any patent holder with relevant technology can join under fair conditions should be encouraged.[60]

(ii) Antitrust Oversight and Safe Harbours: Competition authorities should develop clear guidelines or safe harbour criteria for patent pools. For example, pools that fulfil certain pro-competitive conditions (such as including only complementary patents, capping combined royalty rates, and permitting independent licensing outside the pool) could be presumptively allowed.[61] Regulators might conduct periodic antitrust reviews of active pools to assess their market impact. By articulating what constitutes an acceptable pool, authorities give companies confidence to form pools without fear of antitrust violations, so long as they stay within the lines.

(iii) Exemption for Public Health Collaborations: During global or national health emergencies, authorities should have explicit provisions to exempt or fast-track cooperation agreements (including patent pools) that demonstrably expand access to essential medicines. The EU's temporary framework and comfort letters during COVID-19 provide a model.[62] Embedding such an emergency exemption in competition law (with appropriate safeguards) would remove uncertainty and delay. Firms would know that if they collaborate to increase the supply of critical drugs or vaccines, they won't face antitrust penalties, provided they avoid unrelated profiteering.[63]

(iv) FRAND Licensing Obligations: Patent pool participants in healthcare should commit to licensing key patents on Fair, Reasonable, and Non-Discriminatory (FRAND) terms to all interested manufacturers, including generic firms and competitors. This prevents pools from turning into exclusive clubs. It also mirrors how standard-essential patent pools in tech operate,

ensuring that downstream producers (like vaccine makers in various countries) can get licenses on reasonable royalties. FRAND terms are especially important in pools involving publicly funded innovations or critical medicines, as a way to guarantee affordable access.

(v) Time-Limited Arrangements: To alleviate concerns of prolonged collective dominance, patent pools might be subject to time limits or periodic review. For example, a pool could automatically expire or come up for evaluation after a set number of years. This encourages pools to serve as transitional mechanisms to jump-start technology dissemination. If continued beyond the initial term, they would undergo scrutiny to ensure they still meet pro-competitive criteria and have not outlived their necessity.

(vi) Monitoring and Enforcement: Competition regulators, possibly in collaboration with public health agencies, should actively monitor the effects of patent pools in the pharma sector. If evidence emerges that a pool is engaging in price-fixing, limiting production, or otherwise harming consumer welfare, regulators must be ready to intervene ranging from modifying the pool's conduct to dissolving the arrangement. Having the authority to impose penalties or require the pooled patents to be licensed on different terms (or even to mandate a patent pool in extreme cases of public necessity) can deter anti-competitive behaviour.[64]

(vii) Public Interest Criteria: Include public interest criteria in antitrust analysis of pools. Authorities should weigh improvements in access to affordable medicines and accelerated innovation as benefits offsetting potential harms. This ensures competition policy remains focused on consumer welfare and health outcomes.[65]

(viii) Stakeholder Consultation: Policymakers should involve diverse stakeholders when crafting regulations for patent pools. Beyond pharmaceutical companies, voices from generic manufacturers, healthcare providers, patient advocacy groups, and international organizations (e.g. WHO, WTO) should be heard. Their input can help ensure that the legal frameworks encourage genuine innovation collaboration while guarding against abuse. Generic producers might highlight if certain pool licensing terms are unworkable in practice, or public health experts might identify which patent barriers are most crucial to overcome in a crisis.[66]

(ix) Capacity Building and Awareness: Especially in developing economies like India, there is a need to build awareness about patent pools and their potential. The government can facilitate workshops or model agreements demonstrating how firms can pool patents without violating laws. As patent pools are still relatively new for Indian pharma, creating a repository of best practices and even piloting a patent pool (e.g., a domestic pool for certain hepatitis C drug formulations) under CCI's guidance could provide a template for industry.[67]

These recommendations seek to strike a balance between promoting collaborative research and ensuring competitive markets in the pharmaceutical industry. By refining antitrust laws and policies to accommodate beneficial pooling, governments can foster an environment where both innovation and access are optimized.[68] The end goal is a competition policy that supports patent pools when they serve consumers (for instance, by expediting research, reducing costs, and improving availability of essential medicines[69] and restrains pools when they veer into anti-competitive territory. Effective implementation of such nuanced policies can lead to a virtuous cycle of innovation and public welfare, which is especially vital in the context of global health.

Conclusion

This comparative study illustrates that competition law can significantly influence the formation and operation of patent pools in the pharmaceutical sector. A key insight is that more permissive and clear antitrust policies tend to facilitate the growth of patent pools, whereas uncertain or overly strict regimes may stifle these potentially pro-innovation collaborations.[70] In the European Union, we observed that while policies formally acknowledge the benefits of pooling (through the TTBER safe harbours and guidelines), some aspects of EU competition law still have a cautious, even anti-pooling bent that can slow the establishment of pools for emerging technologies.[71] The soft-law nature of guidelines and the high scrutiny outside safe harbours mean companies proceed carefully. Nonetheless, the pandemic showed that EU authorities could adapt, providing reassurance for collaborative efforts in extreme circumstances. Moving forward, the EU's challenge will be to accelerate its regulatory

framework to keep pace with cutting-edge technologies while ensuring that competition policy does not unduly delay cooperative solutions like patent pools for critical innovations in health care.

By contrast, India's pharmaceutical sector, one of the world's largest by volume, presents a different set of opportunities and challenges. The historical evolution of India's IP regime (from process-only patents that fostered a robust generics industry, to the TRIPS-aligned product patent system post-2005) and its huge domestic market have made access and affordability prominent policy goals. Indian competition law, though younger than Europe's, embraces similar principles but is still crystallizing its approach to IP-related collaborations. Little jurisprudence exists on patent pools specifically, indicating a gap in both practice and scholarship. However, India's experience during COVID-19 being a manufacturing hub for vaccines and drugs did underscore the potential of collaborative licensing for global benefit. The conclusion is that emerging economies like India could greatly benefit from well-structured patent pools, provided their policy framework evolves to clearly support such models while guarding against misuse. There is untapped potential in India's pharma industry that could be unlocked by strategic pooling, especially to supply low-cost medicines domestically and abroad, and this merits further research and policy innovation.

Ultimately, patent pools are neither panacea nor peril by default, but their impact on innovation and access is determined by the consonance between antitrust policies and IP regimes. If competition law and patent policy work in harmony, they can encourage collaborative innovation (for example, multiple firms pooling patents to develop a new platform vaccine) and simultaneously ensure that competition and follow-on innovation are not choked off. In such a scenario, consumers win through faster access to new therapies and potentially lower prices due to efficiencies of scale and shared risk. Conversely, if there is dissonance, say, antitrust rules are too rigid or unpredictable, or IP law grants absolute exclusivity with no allowances for public interest, then innovation may be effectively hindered. Companies might shy away from pooling even when it's socially beneficial, for fear of legal pitfalls, or they might engage in pooling in ways that secretly smother competition.

In light of the pandemic's lessons, it is clear that future policy must proactively address this balance. The stakes are high: future health crises will similarly demand swift innovation and widespread access. Patent pools, under the watchful eye of well-calibrated antitrust enforcement, can be a significant part of the solution. Therefore, both the EU and India (as well as other jurisdictions) should refine their laws to foster patent pools that drive innovation, ensure FRAND access to crucial technologies, and enhance consumer welfare, while remaining vigilant against anti-competitive outcomes.[72] With thoughtful adjustments and international cooperation, patent pools could become a mainstream strategy in tackling not only COVID-19 but also other pressing global health needs, marrying the twin goals of innovation and equitable access.

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