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Bl interview. Land acquisition challenges can be overcome by involving stakeholders in planning: REPL

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Balancing infrastructure development with environmental and social sustainability is another challenge for the sector, says CMD Pradeep Misra

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Pradeep Misra, CMD, Rudrabhishek Enterprises' (REPL)

India has substantially scaled up its infrastructure ambitions focusing not just on physical, but also digital and social infrastructure. However, the sector faces critical challenges such as land and finances, infrastructure consulting firm Rudrabhishek Enterprises (REPL) CMD Pradeep Misra said. In an interview to *businessline*, he suggested that collaboration between local communities, government, and private sector is the key. Excerpts:

Q What are your views on India's current state of infrastructure development?

Infrastructure has traditionally been associated with physical assets. However, India's recent growth narrative has seen an increased emphasis not only on physical infrastructure but also on the dimensions of social and digital infrastructure. The Budget for FY23 amplified this focus on inclusive growth through targeted investments in all three facets. However, there are various challenges in India's efforts to improve its infrastructure. Some are substantial investments, land acquisition issues and environmental clearances. Another challenge is balancing infrastructure development with environmental and social sustainability.

Q How do you approach planning and execution to navigate these obstacles effectively?

Land acquisition challenges can be overcome by early stakeholder engagement in the planning phase. Maintain transparent communication about the project's benefits and its impact on the local communities. Clearly articulate compensation and rehabilitation packages for affected individuals. Conduct a comprehensive social impact assessment to identify potential social and environmental impact; and develop mitigation measures to address adverse effects on local communities. Also, authorities can explore land pooling options to minimise the fragmentation of land parcels.

Funding issues can be overcome by exploring a mix of funding sources, including government expenditure, private investments and international financing. Diversification in the funding source can reduce the dependence on a single source and spread risk. Develop a robust risk management plan to identify and mitigate potential financial risks. Also, evaluate the financial viability of the project under different scenarios.

Q How would you analyse budget spending on infrastructure?

The government is set to maintain a strong emphasis on rapid infrastructure growth in the upcoming fiscal year, contemplating a substantial increase of 20-25 per cent in capital expenditure allocations for the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways to expedite road construction.

A significant portion of this augmented allocation will be directed towards meeting the capital expenditure requirements of National Highways Authority of India, which after a moratorium on market borrowings, is now solely government funded. The scale of this infrastructure push is evident in the substantial budget, and its impact is anticipated to ring positively through a projected 14-15 per cent growth in revenue for the domestic construction equipment sector in FY24.

Q What are your thoughts on India's efforts to decarbonise the transport sector?

India has been making significant efforts to decarbonise its transport sector as part of its broader commitment to sustainable and clean energy. The country recognises the environmental challenges posed by the transportation sector, which is a major contributor to air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions. Several initiatives and strategies have been put in place such as electrification of vehicles and charging stations. Emphasis on improving public transportation systems to reduce the number of individual vehicles on road and policy initiatives on fuel efficiency standards, emission norms, and regulations promoting biofuels are noteworthy. It is important to note that the success of these initiatives depends on various factors, including public acceptance, technological advancements, and the availability of financial resources.

Q How do you see the impact of initiatives like JAM trinity, Digital India in shaping the country's digital infrastructure?

The JAM Trinity specifically has expanded the availability and accessibility of digital services, resulting in laying the groundwork for the broader Digital India initiative, which are aiding in improving the delivery of public services and bridging the gap between urban and rural areas.

As far as the use of cutting-edge technologies is concerned, the provision in the budget to establish three centres of excellence for AI in leading educational institutions and creating 100 labs in engineering schools to develop applications using 5G services will enable India to explore new opportunities, create innovative business models and generate more employment opportunities. While these initiatives have immense potential, challenges such as data privacy, cybersecurity, and ensuring universal access need to be addressed.



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