

Bid to keep expressway work in fast lane

VIRENDRA SINGH RAWAT

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, while addressing a public meeting in his parliamentary constituency of Varanasi on November 30 last year, waxed eloquent on the Yogi Adityanath government, saying Uttar Pradesh had earned the sobriquet of 'Express Pradesh' owing to the rapid pace of infra projects, particularly expressways.

Four expressway projects — 340-km Purvanchal Expressway, 296-km Bundelkhand Expressway, 91-km Gorakhpur Link Expressway, and 628-km Ganga Expressway — with an estimated outlay of ₹80,000 crore are in different stages of development in the state.

Purvanchal Expressway, estimated to cost ₹23,000 crore, is likely to witness its main carriageway thrown open for the public by the end of June itself.

Even as the progress of these flagship projects was disrupted in the first wave of Covid-19 in 2020, civil work resumed full steam once lockdown curbs were lifted.

However, the unsparing second wave of Covid-19 this year — coupled with the gargantuan task of universal inoculation at an estimated cost of ₹10,000 crore — has raised another spectre of speculation of possible delays and funds crunch for the ongoing projects. The UP Assembly elections are also due early next year and the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) will seek re-election against the backdrop of the coronavirus crisis, the farm



stir, and an economic slowdown.

Now, the government, as senior officials claimed, has formulated a strategy to ensure the ongoing infra projects, including expressways and metro rails, were not hindered due to budgetary or labour issues. Awanish Kumar Awasthi, UP additional chief secretary (home department) and CEO of nodal agency UP Expressway Industrial Development Authority (UPEIDA), said the flagship projects were progressing well and that there were no funds or labour constraints.

"We have the adequate allocation for these projects and have spent more than ₹500 crore over the last month on Purvanchal Expressway alone. The labour availability is 60-70 per cent of the

original strength for the expressway projects," he told *Business Standard*, adding the project sites were mandated to conform to the Covid-appropriate protocol.

He informed that while the main carriageway of Purvanchal Expressway would be operational next month, UPEIDA was working dexterously to ensure Bundelkhand Expressway keeps its completion timeline of December 2021.

"Most of these infra projects have been funded with bank loans. Therefore, the UP government should not face any budgetary impediments towards their completion even during the pandemic

crisis. Besides, the states should strive to maintain the steady pace of these projects, since such capital expenditure injects money

in the rural and local economy, apart from creating jobs," said Yashvir Tyagi, former head of economics department, Lucknow University.

Purvanchal Expressway

It entails the acquisition of about 4,330 hectare. The project was divided into eight packages and awarded to different bidders. It cuts across nine districts — Lucknow, Barabanki, Faizabad, Ambedkarnagar, Amethi, Sultanpur, Azamgarh, Mau, and Ghazipur. It will provide seamless connectivity between the backward eastern UP districts and the NCR via the already operational Agra-Lucknow Expressway and Agra-Greater Noida Yamuna Expressway.

The Expressway will entail an airstrip in Sultanpur district for allowing landing and takeoff to the Indian Air Force (IAF) fighter planes during an emergency. Nearly 90 per cent of the civil work is already complete.

Bundelkhand Expressway

Estimated to cost ₹15,000 crore, Bundelkhand Expressway will link Chitrakoot, Banda, Mahoba, Hamirpur, Jalaun, Auraiya, and Etawah districts. Modi had laid the foundation of the flagship project on February 29, 2020.

It will connect Bundelkhand with the NCR via Agra-Lucknow and Yamuna expressways.

UPEIDA has already raised loans totalling ₹7,000 crore from a consortium of commercial banks for the project.

Gorakhpur Link Expressway

Estimated to cost ₹5,800 crore, it is the biggest infra project ever in Adityanath's pocket borough of Gorakhpur. It traverses four adjacent districts of Gorakhpur, Sant Kabir Nagar, Ambedkar Nagar, and Azamgarh.

It is estimated to benefit about 50 million people in the eastern part of the state.

Ganga Expressway

Entailing land acquisition of 7,800 hectare in Meerut, Hapur, Bulandshahar, Amroha, Sambhal, Badaun, Shahjahanpur, Hardoi, Unnao, Rae Bareilly, Pratapgarh, and Prayagraj districts, it is said to be the world's longest access-controlled expressway project once completed.

Nearly 40 per cent of the required land has already been acquired and a pre-bid meeting is scheduled for later this month, Awasthi informed.

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