Conference Report

"Railways is best example of big bang reforms"

GN Bureau

Railway minister Suresh Prabhu lighting the lamp. From L to R: Vinit Goenka, Milan Hovorka, Manoj Sinha, Liu Jinsong and Srikanth Karnakota.

Echoing the words of prime minister Narendra Modi, union railway minister Suresh Prabhakar Prabhu has said that the Railways is the best example of 'big bang reforms' in India. Speaking at the Railways Reforms and Governance Conclave 2016, organised by Governance Now in March in New Delhi, the minister said that in the coming decades, railways will transform the Indian economy.

"In the next phase of reforms in India, transport and especially railway will emerge the fastest growing sector. This will happen even though we haven't made much investment for its growth. For the 2030 plan, we have to ensure that money is well spent in terms of governance and structure. An integrated IT solution will play an important role in monitoring this." The minister said that a well thought out agenda, a concrete action plan and a monitoring mechanism will play important roles in the next phase of governance reforms.

Giving a brief overview of economic trends in the country, the minister said that reforms in India started in 1991 and now it was time to look back and evaluate the progress and find out where we need to go from here. He said that for the overall growth of the economy, all the sectors must grow simultaneously. Though infrastructure and transport were the fastest growing sectors, railways was growing even faster.

"We want it [railways] to grow at a faster rate and for that we will have to ensure that the growth is comprehensive. It cannot just happen if only passenger trains are taken care of or only goods trains are taken care of. We have already been working in that direction. The last budget was the first step in that direction. We are also working on a comprehensive agenda in physical terms - drawing a national railway plan. We are also putting infrastructure in place to ensure that money is well spent."

The minister also outlined the government's ambitious plan for the railway's continuous growth. These included improvement in customer services, installation of electronic display system at all stations and availability of Wi-Fi. He said that integration of IT will significantly lead to better governance.

"It [governance] needs to be taken out of books and put it into reality. We must practise it in a manner that
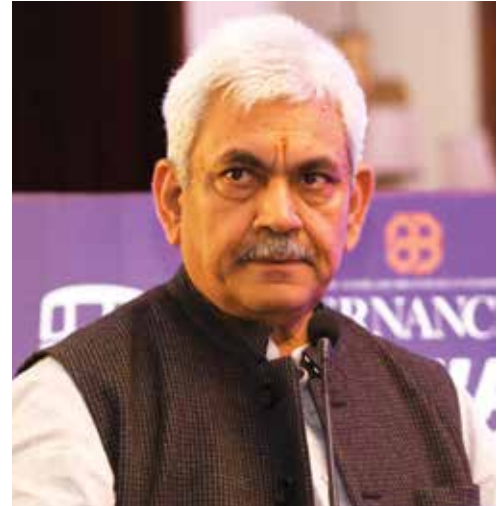
people can experience it. One of the things we have started doing is addressing the problems of people [travelling in trains] on real-time basis. People can now tweet and can get immediate reactions. It was unthinkable that problems could be solved on Twitter as well. There have been many incidents where we have helped people in distress using information technology."

He said governance was all about the experience of people, improvement of systems, services and delivery systems; and technology was playing an important role in this. "We must put in place an integrated IT solution so that all the operations are properly monitored." He also said that public sector companies including IRCTC will contribute significantly in improving railway outreach and delivery services. In the case of railways, it will take at least two-three years for the results to come out.

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10 key developments

Minister of state for railways Manoj Sinha said that there was a need to decongest and expand the Indian rail network. He was the guest of honour for the event. Key points of his speech:

- Investment roadmap of ₹8.8 lakh crore has been prepared.
- Budget allocation increased to ₹1.21 lakh crore from ₹1 lakh crore this year.
- 7 kilometres of railway lines are being laid per day, of which 3.5 kilometres being commissioned per day.
- Target of removing all unmanned railway crossings in next three-four years; 9,683 unmanned crossings already fixed.
- Target of increasing non-ticketing revenue from 4-5% to 10%.
- IRCTC to do third-party audit of cleanliness at all railway stations. Top 10 clean railway stations will be awarded.
- Officials working with dedication and integrity to be awarded in the annual railway week.
- Action taken report submitted to parliament on 139 announcements made in the previous budget.
- Work related to projects proposed for 2016-17 to be initiated within six months.
- Target of zero accidents and better reservation system by 2020; MoU signed with Indian space research organistion (ISRO) to use space technology.

Manoj Sinha, minister of state, railways

Five pillars of rail reforms

Bibek Debroy, member, Niti Aayog

Bibek Debroy, member, NITI Aayog and chairman, high level committee for railway restructuring, outlined five factors which can not only improve the financial condition but also accelerate the performance of Indian railways. These are: transition to commercial accounting, appointing an independent regulator, entry of private players, decentralisation of railways, and unification of entry into the services.

The Debroy-headed committee has made these recommendations to the government for improving the performance of Indian railways, which, had been suffering loses over six decades. Majority of these recommendations have been implemented and some are in the process of being implemented. "Bringing reforms in railways is not a binary process," said Debroy.

Debroy also said that around 400 of 8,500 stations across the country have been shortlisted for the process of modernisation. Highlighting the role of public-private partnership in the improvement of the railway sector, he said, "Private players cannot build the entire track line, but auctioning out certain paths to them is possible. Also, a whole train cannot be run by private players, but a few coaches can be managed by a private company."

Rail reforms and governance

Speaking at the event, Liu Jin-song, deputy chief of mission, Embassy of China, said, "As Indian economy gains speed against the backdrop of sluggish world economy, revitalisation of the railway network can be a driving force for economic growth." At the inaugural session, he said China was ready to share its railway technologies and expertise, especially in high speed railways, and work together with India for win-win results.

Milan Hovorka, ambassador of Czech Republic to India, said that his country too was facing the same challenges as were being faced by he Indian railways. However, they were able to overcome these through upgradration of netwroks over many years. He was hopeful that India too can overcome its challenges and make rail travel a comfortable experience.

Srikanth Karnakota, country head, Microsoft Cloud and Servers Business, likened Indian railways to Lord Hanuman. Quoting from Indian mythology, he said, as Hunumana was unaware about his inherent powers, the Indian Railways was also not aware of its potential. He also said that the humungous data being collected by the railways through passenger reservation and freight system was its biggest strength.

Karnakota also talked about how the Internet of Things, cloud technology and predictive analysis can transform the sector.

Vinit Goenka, member, IT taskforce, ministry of road transport and highways, said that technological intervention has changed the face of railway reservation system. "As we go forward, can we turn railway coaches into smart coaches, having Wi-Fi connectivity?" he asked experts.

He also suggested converting all rail platforms into smart platforms by having smart display boards that will have details of restaurants and rest rooms, etc.

Strengthening PSUs

The session on 'Strengthening PSUs for Railways Development' was moderated by Neel Ratan, executive director, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC). On the implementation of the coach management systems by the Centre for Railway Information Systems (CRIS), its MD Sanjaya Das said that they had started the system of bar-coding at Nizamuddin railway station in New Delhi. He said that now one could book platform tickets in metropolitan cities on mobile phones. CRIS is planning to extend this service to other cities as well.

Sanjay Gupta, CMD, Konkan Railways Limited, said that being a

From L to R: RK Bahuguna, NC Mathur, Neel Ratan, Sanjaya Das, Adesh Sharma, Dr Shailendra Chouksey, Dr AK Manocha, Prof NK Goyal and Sanjay Gupta

public sector unit of Indian railways, the company faces the same dilemmas as the railways. He informed the gathering that huge investments will be made in near future to increase the capacity of railways. He then asked the audience: "Should we focus on solving the social issues or make money?" He, however, said being a PSU which was part of the railways, Konkan railways' aim was to serve the nation. "We will work for our country, whatever it takes," he added.

Talking about the need for a dedicated freight corridor (DFC), Adesh Sharma, MD, Dedicated Freight Corridor Corporation of India, said that annually India loses $13 billion due to the inefficient transport sector. Therefore, there was an urgent need to enhanc capacity. DFC, he said, will increase the capacity of the railways from 36 percent to 50 percent. The corridor is slated for completion by March 2018.

AK Manocha, CMD, IRCTC, said that his company is in the process of setting up 3,500 water vending machines that will bring down the cost of packaged drinking water from ₹20 to ₹5. From being a 'butt of jokes', IRCTC has now become a force to reckon with. "We are saving ₹2,000 crore for the railways annually through e-ticketing." For e-catering services, IRCTC has brought on board the best caterers. "Amazon and Google are already our partners. Talk is on with Flipkart and Snapdeal," he said.

RK Bahuguna, CMD, Railtel, said that the revenue earned by his company was being utilised to improve the railway communications systems.

New technological horizons

Nagendran Sundararajan, executive vice president, Merittac India, highlighted the significance of technology in making the examination process of Indian railways easier. "The age-old system of giving tests on exam sheets creates a lot of confusion and unnecessary effort for the examination bodies," he said. Hence, to modernise the examination

(L-R) Jatinder Singh Pabla, SS Mathur, Sandhya Sharma, Sanjay Kumar and Sunil Kumar

system, the railway recruitment board (RRB) has started online tests. The challenge however, was to convince the students to take these exams.

In a bid to simplify and secure the process of identification of an Indian railways passenger, Sunil Kumar, GGM (IT), IRCTC, said that the online ticket booking service might be integrated with Aadhaar. He said, "The current system allows the users to book tickets with the help of any of the documents available with them, such as PAN card, passport and driving licence. IRCTC has been thinking about a safer and simpler way to confirm the identity of the passenger travelling in Indian railways. What is better than Aadhaar?"

In a similar vein, SS Mathur, GM (IT), CRIS, said, that if Aadhaar is integrated with IRCTC's identification process, a centralised authentication system will be developed to ensure safety of data records.

Sanjay Kumar, director-projects, Railtel, said that data is a treasure trove that can be converted into money with the use of technology.

Highlighting the importance of privacy of data, Jatinder Singh Pabla, director-ASM, Microsoft, said, that data privacy involves two key points: how we encrypt data, and how we protect data at the time of transit. He said that Microsoft encrypts the data itself which makes it impossible for anyone to break in. Vineet Durani, director-Windows, Microsoft, also talked about the significance of technology in day-to-day lives.

Sharing industry's experience with the Railways, NC Mathur, president, Indian Stainless Steel Development Association, said that over the years, Raiwalys are allocated enough funds to buy stainless steel from them. Shailendra Chouksey, president, Cement Manufacturers' Associcaiton, flagged concerns over the impact of increased freight a on the cement industry. NK Goyal, president, communications and manufacturers Association of India, highlighted various reforms by railways and industry's role in mega projects like Make in India. ∎

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