

Why India's monster highway building plan is in the slow lane

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Summary

The Centre has decided to take a short-term view of its highway development programme in a move that will see long-term planning on the lines of Bharatmala programme and the proposed Vision 2047 plan getting dropped.

The Centre has put its grand highway expansion plan spanning decades on the backburner, shifting its preference to short-term projects that can be approved and rolled out quicker, two people aware of the change said.

The complexities of long-duration projects prompted the Union road ministry to stop pursuing its Vision 2047 blueprint, the people cited above said on the condition of anonymity. Earlier, the government had decided to end Bharatmala, itself a massive highway building plan, in favour of the Vision 2047 plan.

"While long term-planning is not being shelved altogether, Cabinet clearance would now increasingly be taken for a limited number of projects, where work can be completed over a shorter duration. Projects under the Bharatmala programme where work is still going on would continue, and even the balance projects under the programme could get separate clearance," one of the two people cited above said on the condition of anonymity.

The government wants to focus on quicker clearance and implementation of new road projects, many of them multi-lane access-controlled roads which are more complex, the people cited above said. As highway construction matures, the length of highway construction per year may decline, but lane kilometres may rise.

While the Vision 2047 Plan remains intact, it would be more of a vision document, while project approvals and implementation will be more short-term, the person quoted earlier added.

Long-duration approvals

The Vision 2047 plan involved investment approvals over a longer duration, and projected highway construction till 2047, when India celebrates 100 years of independence. Pursuing this plan, the ministry had suspended the Bharatmala-1 programme mid-way and junked the proposed Bharatmala-2, deciding to integrate unfinished projects under them into Vision 2047.

Conceived in 2017, the Bharatmala-1 projects envisaged building 34,800 km of highways. Under it, contracts for 27,384 km roads have been awarded so far. The balance 7,500 km were to be aligned with the Vision 2047 plan, along with the proposed construction of about 5,000 km under Bharatmala-2.

A query emailed to the road ministry remained unanswered till press time.

The annual project identification approach aims to adapt more dynamically to changing infrastructure requirements, and allows for better coordination and synergies with schemes in other sectors, according to Kushal Kumar Singh, a partner at Deloitte India. "Long-term vision and short-term flexibility are both necessary for the highway sector, as they provide a balanced approach to infrastructure development."

The ministry had earlier indicated that after the Lok Sabha elections, it would try to secure approval for a ₹20 trillion plan, involving building over 75,000 km of highways over the next decade and a half, including 50,000 km of access-controlled highways or expressways by 2037. The Vision plan itself would have set long-term goals for MoRTH, integrating unfinished projects under Bharatmala-I for completion.

More dynamic

"With programme-based construction for the last 25 years having achieved maturity, the project approach facilitates more dynamic response to evolving needs like certain regions requiring urgent connectivity or if traffic patterns change. Annual planning can also accelerate approvals if there is a well-structured process for project evaluation and funding," said Davinder Sandhu, co-founder and chairman at Primus Partners.

"However, the NHAI (National Highways Authority of India) will have to guard against fragmented planning and not lose sight of a coherent, long-term strategy. Programmes like Bharatmala are designed to create synergies between economic corridors, traffic movement, and regional connectivity, and the annualized approach must keep this in focus," he added.

India currently has a highway network of around 1,46,000 km, which is expected to rise to around 2,25,000 km by 2037, saturating the highway programme. Road-building agencies such as the NHAI, National Highway Infrastructure Development Corp. Ltd and Border Roads Organization would then largely be entrusted with the task of operation and maintenance while widening the existing network.

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