

2019 focus will be on building expressways network: Gadkari

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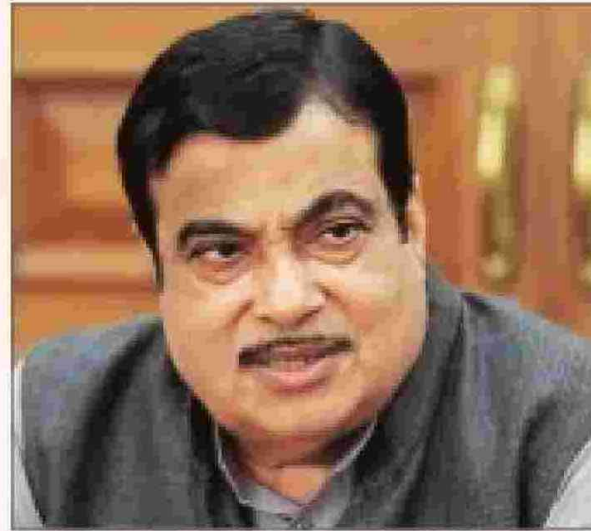
IT WAS SADDLED with many stuck projects and several big players faced the risk of getting blacklisted amid a big financial quagmire, but the mess got cleared eventually as the year 2018 progressed and the minister at the helm says it also helped banks save over ₹3 lakh crore from becoming NPAs.

The focus in 2019 now would be to build a network of “world-class expressways”, Union minister for road transport and highways Nitin Gadkari said.

According to him, the one formula that worked to roll out 99% of stalled projects was “negotiations and marathon meets to iron out issues instead of mad rush to black-list or brand players as offenders.”

He said ‘habitual defaulters’ and ‘wrongdoers’ should certainly be branded ‘offenders’ but caution should be exercised for those with a good past record of delivering projects and this was done precisely in 2018 to restart the stuck projects.

The National Highways Authority of India (NHAI), at the fag end of 2017, had debarred a number of major players like Larsen & Toubro, HCC and Essel Infra from bidding for projects for defaults. But soon after, Gadkari put on abeyance the black-list order and initiated marathons meetings with



bankers, players and other stakeholders throughout the first half of the 2018.

“As many as 403 highway projects worth ₹3.85 lakh crore were stalled and were on the verge of becoming NPAs. We initiated negotiations and held marathon meeting with bankers and companies. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and finance minister Arun Jaitley came with help and 22 cabinet decisions regarding policies for the sector were taken and the ultimate result was saving of over ₹3 lakh crore NPAs of banks,” Gadkari said in an interview.

“If we had gone ahead to declare such players as offenders, not only the same would have turned NPAs but would have resulted in huge losses to the sector,” he said.

In 2019, the focus of the ministry will be on creating a world-class network of expressways, after delivering of country’s first express highway by the government - Eastern Peripheral Expressway (EPE), built in a record time of 500 days.

The prime minister in May 2018 inaugurated the 135 km EPE – India’s first green and smart highway – built at a cost of ₹11,000 crore and lit by solar power besides provisions of rain water harvesting, auto challan system and intelligent highway traffic management system.

After completion of 14-lanes 9 km first leg of ₹7,500 crore Delhi Meerut Expressway, “a dozen more expressways” are on the anvil and that will improve the sector drastically. “We will complete the work till Meerut” by April, the minister said.

Besides, land acquisition for Bangalore-Chennai Expressway has been done while contract has been awarded for ₹44,000 crore Vadodara-Mumbai stretch of ₹1 lakh crore Delhi-Mumbai new expressway. He said the tender for Jaipur-Gurgaon stretch will be out soon.

Asserting that work worth ₹10 lakh crore has been done across highways, shipping, ports and inland waterways, the minister said: “Now we are aiming to award work for ₹6,000 km under Bharatmala initiative.”

The government in October 2017 had approved a mega plan to build 83,677 km of highways in five years at a cost of about ₹7 lakh crore which includes the ambitious Bharatmala project. The total length of National Highways (NHs) has been enhanced to 1.31 lakh km at present from 91,287 km earlier.