

My dream is that people will soon zoom on smart highways: Gadkari

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Nitin Gadkari, minister for road transport and highways, said his dream project of smart highways is progressing in the right direction. Smart roads, he said, will be green, pollution-free and tolling will be based on the distance travelled, to make driving safe and comfortable. In an interview, Gadkari talks about his vision for smart infrastructure and transportation in India. Edited excerpts:

Everyone these days is talking about smart infrastructure. What is your vision?

For me infrastructure which is cost-effective, pollution free and public-friendly is smart. One has to look for such solutions. Our government's initiative to transfer freight and traffic from roads to inland waterways is an example of how smart infrastructure is being built in India. We are trying to run public transportation like buses, Metros on ethanol and electricity and this is again an example of smart infrastructure. We are installing electric vehicle chargers in government buildings. We are trying to use national highways to land airplanes and helicopters, especially in the North-East region, building all-weather connectivity roads in the regions of Jammu and Kashmir and the North-East. These are all ways how India is building smart infrastructure.

How would you define smart highways?

Smart highways are one of my dream projects and I am happy that we are in the right direction. A smart



Nitin Gadkari, minister for road transport and highways.

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highway is green, which means there is plantation all around the road, in case of space constraints, there are vertical gardens. You have latest systems installed where you would get SMS alerts on traffic during your travel

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on the highway, you pay toll based on the distance travelled on highways, no red lights. Similarly, the

power needs on national highways are met with solar energy—street lights equipped with solar panels, for tolling system you again have solar energy, no parking woes, and sound and air pollution free. These high-

ways will also provide speed and have local markets, restaurants, shopping complexes where the villager or local residents get employment.

I am happy that a prototype of it

has been prepared through the Eastern Peripheral Expressway, and soon the coming highways and expressways will offer these, making them smart highways. My dream is

that people would soon zoom on these smart highways.

But all these features you are mentioning come at a cost?

There is no dearth of money and I can raise as much money as required.

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Under the Bharatmala programme, we are trying to bring down the costs of the projects substantially by adopting new alignments and trying to connect backward areas with four- and six-lane highways and expressways. These new highways will be fast, cheap and good. The only roadblock is environment clearances and legal hurdles, which delay our work. We are trying to sort these out, too. For example, the Char Dham road project, which is now engulfed in a legal tussle at NGT (National Green Tribunal). We want to build an all-weather road so that people can travel comfortably all round the year.

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How do you see smart transportation? Is India heading towards it?

Our decision of mass transit to electric vehicles and using ethanol for public transportation system will take India a long way. When I used to say we should have electric taxis, people used to make fun. But now you have Ola running electric taxis. In fact, there are many other companies now keen to enter the electric taxi market. Similarly, a lot of states are now trying to run their public transportation buses on ethanol. We are also trying to run inland waterway vessels on ethanol and a committee under NITI Aayog member (V.K.) Saraswat is working on it. In fact, my parliamentary constituency Nagpur is a test case for smart transportation. I preach only after I show it can be done.

Do you think you will be able to achieve your dream of smart infrastructure?

When I took over as a minister in the Union cabinet, I had seen a dream of India having a vibrant infrastructure. We managed to increase the highway construction from 14km per day to 27km per day. We decided to take a plunge in electric vehicles and

many automobile companies are now trying to align with India's decision that electric vehicles are the future. Similarly, work on India's inland waterways is going at a good pace and we hope to transport people through inland water-

ways in the Kumbh at Allahabad next year through water. So, what I had dreamt of is being achieved but slowly, and I am hopeful the pace will increase in the coming years.