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Modi government walks the talk, has exceeded work done by UPA in 10 years: Venkaiah Naidu.

On completion of three years of Narendra Modi government, Union Minister of Urban Development and Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation M. Venkaiah Naidu spoke to India Today's Senior Associate Editor Kaushik Deka about his ministry's achievements and challenges.

Here is the full text of the interview.

Q. What are the big achievements of the two urban ministries over the last three years?

A. I can humbly say that exceeding the efforts and targets of the 10-year UPA Government in just three years for recasting the country's urban landscape through introduction of much desired "Bottom Up" planning, approval of huge scale of investments for improving urban infrastructure, promotion of a spirit of competition among state and city governments, area and outcome based approach in formulation and approval of projects in place of ad hoc 'project based' approach, decentralization of project formulation and appraisal and convergence in implementation of new urban missions have been the major achievements of NDA Government in urban sector over the last three years.

We have succeeded in ushering in "Bottom up" planning reversing the Delhi-driven "Top down" approach by ensuring participation of state and city governments, citizens and other stakeholders in designing and launch of new urban missions. This is paying huge dividends as could be seen in the speed and scale of approval of investments.

Both the urban ministries have so far approved an investment of over Rs 4 lakh crore for improving urban infrastructure since the launch of new urban missions. This include Rs 1.38 lakh crore under smart city plans of 60 cities, Rs 0.78 lakh crore under Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT), Rs 0.66 lakh crore under Swachh Bharat Mission (Urban), Rs 0.45 lakh crore under new metro projects and Rs 1.04 lakh crore investments for building affordable houses under Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (Urban).

This scale of investments approved is about four times that was approved during the 10 years of UPA. To give a few illustrations, we have already approved construction of 18.75 lakh affordable houses for urban poor as against only 13.80 lakh houses sanctioned by the UPA government in 10 years.

Planning and execution in urban sector all these years were marked by ad hocism and delayed approvals in Delhi resulting in sub-optimal resource use and outcomes due to which only 50 per cent of JNNURM projects could be completed by March 2014 when it was wound up by the UPA Government. To put an end to this, we have approved States' Annual Action Plans (SAAPs) for all states and UTs for the entire five-year period of Atal Mission, good three years in advance so that state and city governments could execute them well in time.

As a result of the new paradigm shift introduced by this government, there is a major churning happening at the level of urban local bodies, setting off the process of urban renaissance in the country. This augurs well for urban India, the key engine of economic growth.

Q. What are the top three priorities of the government for the urban sector and how are you going about them?

A. Urban governance reforms, enhancing resource base of city Governments and ensuring inclusive and sustainable urban development are the focus of NDA Government to make a difference to the urban sector. After a decade of implementation of urban reforms under JNNURM, in consultation with the states and UTs, we have now zeroed in on five transformative Reforms-moving away from "Verify and Approve" mode to "Trust, Approve, Verify" approach in respect of according birth and death certificates, mutation and construction permissions that account for about 80 per cent of transactions between citizens and city governments.

Other reforms include enacting Land Titling Laws to give statute-based rights to end uncertainty, credit ratings that impact a wide range of governance and financial management functions, value capture financing to capture a portion of increase in asset value to finance infrastructure projects and professionalization of municipal cadre to improve urban planning and execution capacities.

To enhance the resource base of city governments, NDA Government has already committed a huge central assistance of about Rs 1.25 lakh crore which is over three times that of the previous UPA Government. This includes Rs 50,000 crore under Atal Mission, Rs 48,000 crore under Smart City Mission, Rs 14,643 crore under Swachh Bharat Mission (Urban) and Rs 500 crore under HRIDAY. Fifty per cent equity contribution for new metro projects is additional to this.

More important is that the Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has approved central assistance in the range of Rs 1 lakh to Rs 2.40 lakh per each affordable house to be built under PMAY (Urban). Under this, central assistance of Rs 30,000 crore has already been approved for over 18 lakh houses and this would steeply increase further as more and more projects get approved. Under 14th Finance Commission recommendations, over Rs 87,000 crore is being provided directly to city governments as against only Rs 27,000 crore under 13th finance commission. In addition, city governments are being encouraged and incentivized to ensure proper collection of taxes and user charges to meet the rising investment needs.

Inclusive urban development is all about ensuring equitable use of urban spaces. Roads can't be for car owning class only. So, we are focusing on promoting reliable public transport, non-motorised transportation, provision of green and public spaces and affordable housing under various new urban missions. Green construction and efficient use of power and water are also being accorded to make urban development sustainable.

Q. How is Smart City Mission shaping up? Private investment is critical for revenue generation for this mission. What is the progress?

A. I am indeed happy that this important mission is on course. After selecting 98 mission cities, smart city plans of 60 cities, selected for financing through three rounds of competition, have been approved. These plans are being converted into projects for awarding for execution. About 70 projects worth about Rs 2,000 crore have already been executed. By June 25, marking the second anniversary of the launch of this mission, we are confident that projects worth Rs 30,000 would be under execution or awarded for execution. This is pretty good work given the challenges involved. I am happy that state and city governments are rising to the task under this mission, which acts as a lighthouse for others to follow. Of the total investment so far approved for 60 mission cities, after central and state support and resources that accrue from convergence with other missions, about Rs 30,000 crore investment is to come from private sector and I have reasons to believe that this would happen.

Q. What are the plans for cities not included in Smart City Mission given the fact that many Indian cities are on the verge of collapse?

A. Cities were selected for inclusion in smart city mission after a thorough scrutiny of existing managerial, technical and financial capabilities of all the statutory urban local bodies so that they can handle the challenges of the mission. It means they are the most qualified to meet the challenges. This mission, therefore, is meant to act as a lighthouse for others to emulate. Concurrently, infrastructure deficit and capabilities of other cities are being upgraded under different new missions.

Several states have announced smart city development plans for those not covered under this mission. When the results of the smart city mission are visible on ground and when required capacities improve, I expect other cities as well to adopt smart city planning and execution. This is of course a long drawn process since all cities and towns can't be made smart in one go. A certain beginning has been made and this has begun well.

Q. What is the report card of projects such as AMRUT, HRIDAY and JNNURM?

A. AMRUT was launched on June 25, 2015. In these two years, we have ensured that states and cities undertook a thorough assessment of the infrastructure deficits of all kind for preparing city-wise Service Level Improvement Plans (SLIPs), which are then aggregated in to State Annual Action Plans (SAAPs). I am happy to inform you that SAAPs of all 36 States and UTs have been approved for the entire five year mission period with a total project investment of Rs 77,780 crore. Projects worth over Rs 10,000 crore are already under execution and all the project investments approved for the first two years would take off very soon. Major outcome of this Mission so far has been that we now have detailed action plans for all the 500 mission cities that account for about 70 per cent of country's urban population. This is the first time that we have such clear action plans for cities in our country.

Atal Mission aims at ensuring water taps to over two crore urban households in mission cities for universal coverage followed by substantial improvement in sewerage networks, septage management, drainage networks, non-motorised transport and green and public spaces. Basic infrastructure development in a focused manner is the aim of this mission.

Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana (HRIDAY), though a pilot initiative with an outlay of Rs 500 crore being entirely supported by the Centre, is an exciting initiative being implemented in 12 cities with rich legacy of precious heritage. Projects for all the mission cities have been approved and are in advanced stage of execution and will be completed during this year. I have seen some of the projects being implemented and they are coming up well.

We have engaged "City Anchors" who are experts in heritage conservation and management for drawing up plans for development of heritage related infrastructure in sync with the overall cultural and heritage ambience of mission cities. On completion of the ongoing projects, these 12 mission cities will acquire a distinct new look with enhanced access to the heritage sites and augmented presentation. This will surely result in increased in tourist footprints.

JNNURM launched by the UPA Government and it was initially to be implemented till 2012. But after extension UPA wound it up in March 2014. As I said earlier, this mission resulted in sub-optimal outcomes in terms of completion of projects and intended outcomes. Based on the experiences of this mission, we have gone for a paradigm shift in the design and implementation of new urban missions that I touched upon earlier. I will soon set up an Expert Committee for a thorough review of the implementation of this mission and what went wrong so that it could provide useful guidance to states and cities to do and deliver better.

Q. You have recently announced clean and the dirty cities of the country. What will be the efforts to clean dirty ones and make clean ones cleaner?

A. Sanitation rankings are primarily meant to make the state and city Governments know where they stand on the much-desired cleanliness in urban areas and also in relation to others. It's not meant for naming and shaming but to introspect on how we are addressing the issue of hygiene. Going by the debate generated every time such ranks are announced, I am happy that it is having a positive impact.

Cities found not so clean as of now need to focus on door-to-door collection, segregation and transportation of municipal solid waste while relatively clean ones should concentrate on processing of such waste. I am happy that construction of toilets is going on well in urban areas and its time we focus on waste processing to tap the hidden wealth. Concurrently, behavioral change is necessary to ensure that toilets built are used and cities and towns becoming Open Defecation Free remain so.

Q. Can you explain the Livability Index that your ministry has proposed for cities?

A. A decent living is what every urban resident aspires and particularly, the poor and marginalized. Urbanization is driven by the needs of education, employment, enhanced medical care, entertainment and economic opportunities. Quality of life finally hinges on to what extent these aspirations are met in the cities and towns. We want to measure the quality of life in our cities so that cities could get to know what are the deficiencies and what interventions need to be taken up.

Keeping in view the urban conditions and requirements in our context in view, we have come out with a detailed Matrix to assess the Livability Index of our cities and towns, for the first time, based on institutional, social, economic and physical infrastructure available. This has been again in consultation with states and cities.

We will launch this assessments next month and to begin with 140 cities including 53 cities with population of one million and above will be assessed. This again is a part of our efforts to promote a spirit of healthy competition among our cities.

Q. What are the things that your ministries could have achieved but could not during the last three years?

A. Our objective for the first three years was to set off a process of urban renaissance based on the learning of the past and I think we have done reasonably well in this regard going by the enthusiasm and response on the part of state and city governments. Now our focus will be on reforms that I mentioned earlier and particularly, empowering mayors and municipal chairpersons with longer tenures to enable accountability in urban governance. It is unfortunate that in most states, the tenure of mayors and municipal chairpersons is just one year, which is ridiculous.

Q. How do you visualise the impact of Real Estate (Regulation and Development) Act, 2016 on cleaning the mess in the important real estate sector?

A. RERA is one of the far-reaching, consumer-friendly legislation made a reality by the NDA Government bringing to an end an eight-year wait. While it seeks to make consumer the king, it, in effect, is a game changer by clearly defining the rights and obligations of both the buyers and developers and enabling the growth of the sector in an eco-system that promotes consumer confidence, which again is critical for flow of investments. Real estate sector, over the years has acquired certain notoriety due to lop sided agreements, lack of accountability and transparency. RERA seeks to end this once for all. We have held extensive consultations with both the consumer and developer bodies. I am happy that both the stakeholders have widely welcomed the final legislation. Given the impetus being given to construction sector through various incentives and concessions and the need for affordable housing, RERA would positively impact the sector for the benefit of all.

Q. Are you happy with budget allocations for the two urban ministries?

A. As I elaborated earlier, NDA Government led by Prime Minister Modi has committed substantially higher scale of assistance to cities and towns under new urban missions. Budget allocation is proportionate to the absorption capacities of state and city governments. After two years of execution of new urban missions launched by us, budget allocations would certainly increase. I have already brought this to the notice of final..