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## The One Thing That Comes Before Road Safety

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There are two facts that most Indian people agree on easily. India has one of the largest road networks in the world, but severely lacks in proper infrastructure for it. India has been ranked 76th in the world in terms of road infrastructure. This fact really does speak for itself.

Roads transport people and goods and are responsible for sustaining industry and agriculture. But, above all, roads are where accidents happen. I have wondered how the Indian government expects to reduce the number of accidents without addressing the most obvious problems.

India's roads span 33 lakh km, comprising expressways, highways and unpaved rural roads. But you just have to look at the traffic and congestion everywhere in the country to know that these roads are not sufficient to meet the needs of the population. In relation to the population, the nation's roads are around 3km per 1000 people when the international average is around 7km per person.

What has the Indian government done? The Public Private Partnership (PPP) model has failed to work in the road sector in recent years. The government will now lower interest rates and use other policy instruments to attract private investors--in the last two years, 20 projects worth about Rs 27,000 crore (USD4.2 billion) found no takers. Until the economy improves, the government will award most projects via the Engineering, Procurement and Construction (EPC) route. The Road Ministry, according to reports, has decided to allow private developers "to take out their entire equity from a project after two years of start of toll collection." This move is expected to revive private interest in the sector and "unlock at least Rs 4,800 crore of private equity stuck at present in approximately 80 PPP highway projects."

I do think this is a move in the right direction. Also, this could encourage foreign investors to compete for a piece of the pie. Government officials have been pretty clear on the fact that foreign investors are currently not coming because they don't want to risk of delay in construction and thus compromise their investment recovery.

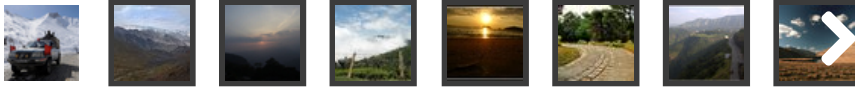
However, I believe that things are not moving fast enough. Road safety campaigns are numerous and I am the first to encourage and support them. Nevertheless, without building quality roads and infrastructure, how can we expect a whole system to change?

The first priority in road safety should be road infrastructure projects. When you compare China to India, situations have changed. India has now the largest road network in the world after the United States. If India wants to achieve its potential, road construction is the most ambitious but also the most necessary project.

Building and maintaining the road network is a priority for any government which is entrusted with the task of running the country. Will Nitin Gadkari's ambitious plans of achieving in five years what the previous government had not in 25 years bear fruit?



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