

COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

In an era defined by unprecedented technological advancements and global connectivity, one would hope that humanity has learned to resolve conflicts through dialogue and understanding. Yet, the world today remains marred by wars, political tensions, terrorism, and social unrest.

Peace is not merely the absence of war; it is a state of social harmony, justice, and mutual respect. The consequences of conflict extend far beyond the battlefield. Millions are displaced as refugees, economies crumble under the weight of war expenses, education and healthcare systems collapse, and generations grow up knowing nothing but fear and insecurity.

Achieving peace requires more than treaties or cease-fires; it demands a collective shift in perspective and action. Dialogue, diplomacy, and cultural exchange must be prioritized over aggression and confrontation.

Education plays a crucial role in fostering peace, as it equips individuals with critical thinking, tolerance, and the ability to resolve disputes without violence.

The role of international organizations, such as the United Nations, is indispensable in mediating disputes and holding parties accountable to global norms.

Economic stability and equitable development are equally vital for sustainable peace. Poverty, inequality, and lack of opportunity often act as catalysts for unrest and extremism.

New Year, New Momentum: Modi's 2025 Reforms Power India's Next Leap

PIYUSH GOYAL



The New Year brings renewed confidence and optimism to India's commerce and industry landscape. Decisive steps taken in 2025 are poised to accelerate trade and investment, expand global market access for small businesses and startups, create employment, and further Prime Minister Narendra Modi's mission of promoting ease of living for every citizen.

A major initiative of the Modi government has been to promote startups. Today, India has over 2 lakh government-recognized startups. As the PM said on the 10th anniversary of Startup India, our startups are providing solutions to various problems and helping Indian economy become resilient and self-reliant.

Support for startups is a part of the Modi government's wider strategy of accelerating economic growth to create jobs and improve the lives of every citizen, particularly the poor.

2025 was a landmark year in the transformative journey that India has been on since 2014 under the decisive leadership of Prime Minister Modi. Through bold decisions and game-changing reforms, our government has reshaped the business environment while ensuring that every policy contributes to improving the lives of citizens, especially the poorest of the poor.

India is now the focus of global attention and recognized as a reliable and trusted partner. India's total exports rose by 6 per cent to a record USD 825.25 billion in 2024-25, maintaining growth momentum despite global uncertainty. To further support exporters, the government announced a Rs 25,060 crore Export Promotion Mission.

Jan Vishwas and Ease of Doing Business The Repealing and Amendment Act, 2025 eliminated 71 obsolete statutes, some dating

back to 1886. Under the Jan Vishwas initiative, the Modi government has removed criminal provisions for numerous minor offences. These reforms enhance governance, promote ease of doing business, and ensure India's legal framework keeps pace with a modern economy.

During last year's Monsoon Session of Parliament, five landmark bills related to shipping and ports were passed. These laws simplify documentation, ease dispute resolution, and significantly reduce logistics costs. On the commerce front, the Directorate General of Foreign Trade has proactively supported exporters through transparent, facilitative policies that enhance ease of doing business.

These initiatives are unshackling the entrepreneurial spirit of our traders, small businessmen and startups, who can now focus on their work instead of worrying about tedious compliance requirements and fear of imprisonment for some small violation.

FTAs and 'Local for Global' A guiding principle of India's trade and investment strategy has been to champion local entrepreneurs, particularly small businesses, start-ups, farmers, and artisans; and empower them to succeed globally. In pursuit of this vision, India concluded three Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) last year, providing Indian goods duty-free access to the developed markets of the UK, New Zealand, and Oman.

The FTAs are also part of the reform process. Earlier, the UPA government had recklessly signed deals with countries that competed with India globally, ignoring national interest. The Modi government has correctly prioritised FTAs with developed countries and signed win-win deals.

These FTAs will accelerate job creation, boost investment, and unlock transformative opportunities for small businesses, students,

women, farmers, and youth across India. Each agreement was negotiated after extensive stakeholder consultations, ensuring balanced outcomes and genuine win-win engagement with the developed world.

Safeguarding India's Interests In addition to these agreements, the FTA with the European Free Trade Association comprising Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein, which was signed in 2024, has been operationalised. A common theme across all FTAs is protection of India's agriculture and dairy sectors, including in agreements with major global dairy exporters such as New Zealand and Australia.

Through these trade agreements, Indian exports benefit from immediate or rapid tariff elimination, while India's own market opening remains calibrated and gradual. New Zealand has committed \$USD 20 billion in foreign direct investment over the next 15 years, reflecting the innovative investment-linked provisions pioneered in India's FTA with the EFTA countries. This investment will support agriculture, dairy, MSMEs, education, sports, and youth development, ensuring broad-based and inclusive growth.

India: A Global Investment Destination Over the past 11 financial years up to 2024-25, India attracted USD 748 billion in foreign direct investment-around two-and-a-half times the USD 308 billion received during the preceding 11 years.

This is significant given that the Modi government inherited a mismanaged economy once labelled as one of the world's 'Fragile Five.' During the UPA era, repeated economic setbacks had led developed countries to disengage from trade talks with India. Through focused, corruption-free governance, bold reforms and fiscal discipline, PM Modi restored confidence in the Indian economy, elevating India's stature as a preferred destination for trade and investment.

Reforms to help the poor. India closed

2025 on a high note, becoming the world's fourth-largest economy by overtaking Japan, and is firmly on track to surpass Germany. Importantly, unlike the UPA era, economic gains have reached the poorest, particularly in rural India.

To increase the benefits for workers, the Modi government has undertaken historic labour reforms, merging 29 fragmented laws into four modern codes. The focus is on fair wages, timely payments, social security and safety. They will also ensure greater female participation in the workforce.

Every Indian citizen has gained from the GST reforms that have created a clean two-slab structure. This will ease the burden on households, MSMEs, farmers and labour-intensive sectors.

The Road Ahead The year 2025 was one of bridge-building: between domestic enterprise and global demand; between policy reform and digital empowerment; and between emerging small businesses and international markets.

There is much more excitement ahead. A panel led by Niti Aayog member Rajiv Gauba is studying a wide spectrum of reforms. This will further accelerate PM Modi's Reform Express. As India moves forward, it has a clear vision to build a Viksit Bharat through competitive trade, innovative industry, and a resilient economy that is confident and self-reliant. The success of India's exporters, manufacturers, farmers, and service providers is the success of the nation itself.

India is not just preparing for the future. It is shaping it. With decisive leadership, bold reforms, and a clear global strategy, the country's ambition is backed by action. As India trades, builds, innovates and engages with the world, it does so on its own terms as strong, self-reliant, and trusted country.

(The author is the Union Minister for Commerce and Industry)

Building at Scale, Delivering with Certainty

How Integrated Governance is Redefining India's Infrastructure Trajectory

VINAYAK PAI

Over the last decade, India's infrastructure landscape has undergone a structural transformation-one that extends well beyond asset creation to the very architecture of governance and delivery. What distinguishes this phase from earlier cycles is not only the scale of investment or the pace of execution, but the emergence of a coherent, outcome-driven system that aligns policy intent, federal cooperation, and on-ground implementation.

Today, India is decisively transitioning to a platform-based governance model-one that treats infrastructure as an integrated national system rather than a collection of standalone projects.

Scale Enabled by Systems, Not Silos

The expansion of the National Highway network-from approximately 91,000 km in 2014 to over 1.46 lakh km in 2024-is a visible manifestation of this shift. Equally significant is the increase in construction velocity, from around 12

km per day to over 34 km per day.

This acceleration is often cited as a technical achievement. In reality, it is about synchronising aspects of projects seamlessly. It reflects a system where constraints are anticipated and timely resolution is empowered.

From a public policy perspective, faster delivery directly translates into earlier socio-economic returns-connecting hinterlands to markets, enabling access to healthcare and education, and strengthening disaster response and national resilience. It also plays a key role in industrial growth by reducing logistic cost.

Institutionalising Accountability: From Review to Resolution

A defining feature of this decade has been the institutionalisation of time-bound accountability. The introduction of PRAGATI (Pro-Active Governance and Timely Implementation) marked a critical inflection point in how complex, inter-ministerial projects are governed.

The most important policy signal here is cultural: delays are no longer normalised, and ownership is clearly assigned. As a result, large and technically challenging projects-once vulnerable to prolonged inertia-are now progressing with predictability and discipline.

Another critical shift has been the strengthening of cooperative federalism in infrastructure delivery. Regular, structured engagement between the Centre and States has transformed the execution environment, particularly for projects that cut across jurisdictions. This model respects constitutional roles while ensuring alignment on national priorities. States are no longer passive recipients of centrally sponsored projects, but active partners in planning, execution, and outcome management. The result is faster consensus-building, reduced litigation, and smoother implementation on the ground.

From an industry standpoint, this predictability significantly lowers execution risk. From a policy standpoint, it reinforces trust in India's federal delivery capacity.

Multi-Modal Planning: From Assets to Networks

India's infrastructure strategy is also evolving from connectivity to competitiveness. Roads are increasingly planned not as endpoints, but as enablers within a broader logistics and mobility ecosystem.

The integration of highways with rail, ports, airports, and urban transport-supported by national planning frameworks such as GatiShakti-is beginning to address one of India's long-standing structural challenges: high logistics costs.

For policymakers, this shift underscores an important lesson: infrastructure efficiency is not determined by asset quality alone, but by inter-asset coordination. Integrated planning

reduces duplication, optimises public capital, and improves the utilisation of national assets.

The Confidence Dividend for Investment and Industry

Clear policy intent, faster decision cycles, and visible execution momentum have reshaped investor perceptions. Infrastructure in India is increasingly viewed as a stable, long-term investment opportunity supported by institutional continuity and administrative resolve.

For the EPC industry, this environment enables deeper investment in technology, mechanisation, safety systems, and skill development. It allows companies to plan for scale with confidence, rather than hedge for uncertainty.

Policy Priorities for the Next Phase

As India enters the next phase of infrastructure expansion, the policy focus must shift from volume to value. Key priorities include:

High focus on front end planning and quality DPRs

Lifecycle-based project planning, incorporating sustainability and resilience from early design to operation

Digital governance and data integration to further compress decision timelines

Capacity building at State and local levels to sustain execution quality using technology

Risk-sharing frameworks that balance speed with financial prudence

Skill development across life cycle.

India's infrastructure journey is no longer constrained by intent or capability. The task ahead is to deepen these systems, protect institutional continuity, and ensure that infrastructure continues to serve as a foundation for inclusive, competitive, and resilient growth.

(The author is Chairman of Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) Maharashtra and Chairman of the National committee of Roads & Highways.)

Crisis of Environmental Governance in the Himalayas

The fragile Himalayan ecosystem has once again been placed at the intersection of aggressive infrastructure expansion and environmental protection. The recent issuance of show-cause notices by the National Green Tribunal (NGT) to the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) and its contractor, M/s Gawar Mandi Highways Private Ltd, for illegal and unscientific muck dumping along the Beas River near Mandi, Himachal Pradesh, is not merely a project-specific dispute. It exposes deeper structural weaknesses in India's environmental governance framework, particularly in ecologically sensitive hill states. This illustrates how infrastructure-led development, when pursued without scientific planning and regulatory accountability, becomes environmentally destructive and constitutionally impermissible.

The controversy originated from a letter petition filed by residents of a housing colony in Sauli Khad, Mandi, alleging unscientific and unauthorised dumping of construction debris during the four-laning of the Mandi-Pathankot highway. Recognising the gravity of the allegations, the NGT exercised its suo motu jurisdiction and constituted a joint expert committee to investigate the matter.

The committee's findings revealed widespread violations. Large quantities of muck had been dumped along the banks of the Beas River, into Sauli Khad and Ropa Nullah which is a tributary of the Beas river, and at non-designated dumping sites. These activities were carried out without protective measures such as retaining walls, geo-

textiles, slope management, or drainage safeguards.

In a monsoon-prone and seismically active Himalayan region, such practices pose severe risks. Unscientific dumping can obstruct river courses, increase flood vulnerability, destabilise slopes, trigger landslides, and cause long-term sedimentation and ecological degradation. Taking serious note of these findings, NGT Chairperson Justice Prakash Shrivastava issued show-cause notices to NHAI and the contractor, questioning why exemplary environmental compensation should not be imposed. The Tribunal further directed the submission of time-bound remediation and restoration plans with clearly identified budgets and implementing agencies, signalling a shift from symbolic compliance to enforceable accountability.

The Beas River case is not an anomaly. It forms part of a recurring pattern of environmental violations across Himalayan states, revealing chronic failures in monitoring, enforcement, and institutional coordination.

In Shimla, the NGT intervened in the widening of NH-5 following landslides allegedly caused by slope destabilisation and improper debris disposal. The Himachal Pradesh High Court has addressed similar concerns in cases involving muck dumping into the Bhakra Dam reservoir, where sedimentation severely reduced fish production, directly affecting the livelihoods of thousands of fishermen families.

Public warnings by former Shimla Deputy Mayor have highlighted that despite the Disaster Management Act, 2005 being in force, illegal muck dumping contin-

ues unabated, intensifying flood and landslide risks. These repeated judicial and administrative interventions collectively demonstrate that environmental degradation in hill infrastructure projects stems not from legal vacuum but from weak enforcement and administrative apathy.

Illegal muck dumping strikes at the core of India's environmental regulatory framework. Under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986, dumping construction debris into rivers and natural drainage channels constitutes pollution prohibited under Section 7, with penal under Section 15. Such actions degrade water quality, aquatic ecosystems, and surrounding habitats.

At the local level, municipal by-laws, such as the Dharamshala Municipal Corporation (Control and Regulation of Muck Dumping) Bye-Laws, 2019, prohibit dumping at non-designated sites and mandate prior permission, verification of dumping locations, scientific stabilisation, and penalties for violations. Non-compliance reflects not mere procedural lapses but wilful disregard for environmental safeguards.

Further, highway projects in hill regions require comprehensive Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs), including detailed muck management plans. The failure to implement these plans exposes deficiencies in EIA quality, post-clearance monitoring, and enforcement by regulatory authorities, undermining the credibility of environmental clearance processes.

Beyond mere statutory violations, unregulated muck dumping strikes at the very foundation of Indian

environmental jurisprudence by breaching its core doctrinal principles. The Polluter Pays Principle mandates that those responsible for environmental harm must bear the full financial burden of prevention, remediation, and ecological restoration; accordingly, the NGT's issuance of show-cause notices for exemplary environmental compensation reaffirms that project proponents such as the NHAI cannot escape liability by shifting blame to private contractors, as environmental responsibility under Indian law is absolute and non-delegable. Equally, the Precautionary Principle assumes heightened significance in ecologically fragile regions like the Himalayas, where even limited human interference can trigger irreversible consequences, and where the absence of complete scientific certainty cannot be invoked to justify environmentally hazardous activities, the onus squarely rests on project authorities to demonstrate environmental safety rather than on affected communities to establish harm post facto. Complementing these doctrines is the principle of Sustainable Development, which recognises that while infrastructure projects may serve legitimate public purposes, they cannot lawfully proceed by undermining ecological stability; expedient practices such as dumping construction debris into river systems impose enduring environmental and social costs that far outweigh any short-term developmental gains. Taken together, these principles establish a regime of strict liability, rendering project authorities accountable for environmental damage irrespective of intent, negligence, or contractual

delegation.

The case highlights the institutional importance of the NGT as a specialised environmental adjudicatory body. Unlike conventional courts, the Tribunal combines adjudicatory, regulatory, and remedial powers. The NGT can take suo motu or letter-based cognisance, constitute expert committees, impose environmental compensation, and direct restoration and preventive measures. Its criticism of NHAI's repeated absence during hearings reflects judicial intolerance towards administrative apathy in matters involving environmental risk and public safety. The Tribunal's approach underscores that environmental compliance by public authorities is not discretionary but legally enforceable.

Courts across the Himalayan region have consistently intervened in similar cases. In the Luhri Hydroelectric Project, the Himachal Pradesh High Court ordered a probe into rock cracks and illegal dumping, acknowledging the link between unscientific construction and geological instability. In Chamba, the Court directed disciplinary action against officials for failing to prevent dumping in forest areas, marking a shift towards personal accountability. The Uttarakhand High Court has similarly halted debris dumping near the Laxmi Narayan Temple complex, recognizing that environmental degradation also threatens cultural heritage and constitutional rights under Articles 21 and 25. These interventions collectively establish that unscientific muck dumping is not a minor regulatory lapse but a grave environmental and constitutional violation.

The narrative of development versus environment is a false and dangerous binary. Article 21 of the Constitution, as interpreted by the Supreme Court, includes the right to a clean and healthy environment. Environmental safeguards are therefore substantive constitutional guarantees, not procedural obstacles. Ironically, environmentally reckless construction undermines infrastructure itself. Landslides, floods, and slope failures repeatedly damage roads and bridges, endangering lives and public investment. Following environmental laws does not slow down or block development; rather, it is essential for ensuring that development is stable, lawful, and long-lasting. Sustainable development is possible only when environmental compliance is treated as a foundational requirement rather than a procedural obstacle.

The Beas River case clearly highlights how repeated and unchecked infrastructure activities, when not properly regulated, gradually cause serious and long-term environmental damage in the Himalayan region. It exposes systemic governance failures while reaffirming the role of judicial institutions in enforcing ecological accountability.

The NGT's intervention reinforces that environmental governance is a constitutional mandate grounded in Articles 21, 48A, and 51A(g). Whether this action leads to lasting reform depends on institutional compliance, scientific planning at the project design stage, and sustained judicial vigilance.

For now, the message is unequivocal. Development at the cost of ecology is neither lawful nor sustainable and the Himalayas can no longer afford such neglect.