**Rashmi Das** **SESSION 5 (09.01.2021)**

Who is the Editor of an infrastructure monthly magazine which is very well rated in the industry. While expressing her views on the infrastructure sector in West Bengal expressed that

In recent times West Bengal has been a big beneficiary of all central government infrastructure projects. As Rs102 trillion is earmarked as infrastructure expenditure for the country for the next five years; and half of that will go to the eastern part of India and Northeast. This is the first time that any Prime Minister has earmarked such a huge budget for Eastern India.

West Bengal should be very proactive in terms of expediting clearances. Unfortunately, the experience has been very bad. While substantiating her statement with certain examples she expressed her frustration for people here in Delhi, including those in big companies and public sector companies, who are doing a lot of work in the infrastructure sector.

She deliberated about the Clean Energy Push initiative . As the entire Energy Basket is under scrutiny and have to create certain different mixes in the Energy Basket. So natural gas, which is supposed to be a healthier fuel, is supposed to go in the Energy Basket from the present 6.2% to 15%. By 2030 the pipeline strength all over India is expected to go from 16,000 km to 27,000 km. Now there is a pipeline which GAIL is laying from Phulpur to Kolkata. Kolkata is the termination point. It passes through Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand and then to West Bengal. All the stretches have been done; and some 538 km of the pipeline has been welded down underground. Only the stretch from Durgapur to Kolkata has been hamstrung for a long time - As the land acquisition is not happening.

Bengal state government agencies stalled land acquisition for the GAIL pipeline project. The pipeline was to go over the land of Kolkata Port Trust and Bandel Thermal Plant, they sat over clarences for six months. This is highly unacceptable.

She further added that The central government projects can benefit West Bengal in a massive fashion. The Regional Connectivity Scheme (RCS) - the Udan Projects of Government of India - has got many flight destinations to many places in Assam, in Jharkhand, and in Orissa. SAIL (Steel Authority of India Limited) has entered into an agreement with Airports Authority of India (AAI), whereby they are giving their airports to AAI to run them. So again, West Bengal is going to be a beneficiary. Burnpur is going to have an airport and Bokaro will start flight connectivity to Kolkata. So, all this brings economic activity. There was an airport in Coochbehar which has been shut down because Airports Authority of India did not renew the lease and that is because there was not a single flight to that place. The State Government has to ensure economic activity. Only then can such infrastructure be set up or renewed. If there is no economic activity happening then airports are not going to function. That generation of economic activity is the responsibility of the State Government

The Union Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs passed this project at the cost of Rs 12,000 crores. Now what has been happening because of this administrative politics of the present West Bengal Government is that all these other States are getting impacted. To ascertain growth and The administrative culture in West Bengal has to change. Otherwise many infrastructure projects are going to get derailed; and it will have an impact not only for the people of Bengal but also for people of those States through which these pipelines are passing. The pipeline infrastructure is one thing where West Bengal has to stop playing politics.

Recently NITI Aayog has come up with a report on exports. West Bengal is hardly there on the Export Map of India. Some 70% of India's exports is accounted for by five states (Maharashtra Gujarat, Karnataka, Tamil, Nadu, Telangana). All of them are coastal states. But West Bengal, although a coastal state, is very low on that list. This Report is a must-read because it earmarks performance on several parameters, it calls these parameters, policy pillars.

Basically West Bengal does not have an export policy. It is not a contributor to India's exports at all. That is a point of big concern because if you see West Bengal Debt profile is worrisome. As per 2020-21 expenditure budget figures, the state paid more than Rs 81,000 crore in debt servicing, of which Rs 30,000 crore plus went on interest payments on the debt. Unless you have earnings how are you going to service that debt? This is from the West Bengal Government's budget documents. So generation of economic activity and exports, and cooperating with the Center in the rollout of infrastructure projects are very important.

There are several other important projects in the Oil and Gas Sector in Bengal recently. ONGC has won blocks in the bids for the latest open acreage licensing policy (OALP). ONGC has won the Bengal – Purnea basin block under OALP. This will generate big gains for the state as exploration is supposed to commence soon. Setting an example of clean fuel when we talk about Sustainable Development Goals. Kolkata is one of the few cities where CNG is yet to reach. Most of the cities have a well-functioning CNG Network. None of these infrastructure projects can take off unless you have a dedicated corridor through which the pipeline can go. Hopefully the new government which comes in will have administrative capabilities to handle this - not play politics - and iron out these deficiencies which are there in the system. And that will benefit the people of Bengal. It will put West Bengal on the investment map.

Alongside, pipelines under central projects are in progress. GAIL is executing the 2655 km Jagdishpur – Haldia – Bokaro – Dhamra pipeline. This is part of PM Urja Ganga project. So, in the oil and gas sector, West Bengal is awash with projects from Central Schemes.

A lot of activity is happening in the road sector. Road projects which have been awarded in Bengal are more than Rs12,000 crore.

West Bengal is the beneficiary of several water projects of the Central Government. The Sunderbans waterways is a result of the Jal Marg Vikas Project for inland waterways. The Rupnarayan Rivers has been made operational for vessels. The 10-year Namami Gange Yojana which began in 2016-17 is a project of forestry interventions for clean Ganga and impacts many districts.

West Bengal is home to so many top engineering colleges. Unfortunately, it does not have an Electronics Manufacturing Hub. It should have been the country’s top electronics manufacturing hub. Make in India is leading states to make policies in this regard. The Yogi government in UP has announced an ambitious electronic manufacturing policy 2020. It is targeting Rs 40,000 crore in investment and 4 lakh jobs over 5 years. A nodal agency under the IT department will be responsible for the implementation of the policy. The state government in UP envisages to create world-class infrastructure in the form of Centers of Excellence (CoEs) to promote research, innovation and entrepreneurship in the Electronic System Design and Manufacturing (ESDM) industry. To address the regional imbalance within the state of UP, 50 per cent land subsidy on prevailing sector rates will be provided to investors for setting up manufacturing units in Bundelkhand and Purvanchal regions. The land subsidy in Madhyanchal and Paschimanchal regions will be 25 per cent. Under the policy, the state government will focus on establishing three electronic manufacturing clusters focusing on mobile manufacturing, consumer durables, telecom, IT hardware, medical equipment and defense. Under the new policy, the investors will be eligible for capital subsidy of 15 per cent. For units investing more than Rs 1,000 crore, there is an additional capital subsidy of 10 per cent. Apart from that, an interest subsidy of 5 per cent will also be offered on loans taken from scheduled banks and financial institutions, along with exemptions in stamp duty, land subsidy, patent cost reimbursement and electricity duty exemption. The policy will also be allowing refurbished plant and machinery up to 40 per cent of the fixed capital investment (FCI). West Bengal has the potential to attract Investors from many high growth sectors, it has the required Human resource, it has to have the ambition to attract investment. Attractive Investment Destination has been identified by the Niti Ayog Report as a vital Policy Pillar. This has to be set right and a sharp focus has to be there on specifics.

Like many I am hopeful too that the new government which will come in will give and do a lot of work on that in future times!