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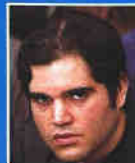
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THE DEFINITIVE RANKING OF INDIA'S LARGEST COMPANIES

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IN CONVERSATION

Indus Towers is an independently managed company that offers passive infrastructure services to telecom operators and other wireless service providers, such as broadband service providers. Incorporated in November 2007, Indus Towers Limited has been promoted as a joint venture between entities of the Bharti Group, including Bharti Infratel and Vodafone Idea Limited, to render passive infrastructure services to telecom service providers. *BW Businessworld* discusses the company's contribution to smart cities in a chat with **Bimal Dayal**, CEO, Indus Towers

'WE WILL GO DIESEL FREE BY 2021,' SAYS INDUS TOWERS CEO

Q: How do you rate the progress of the smart city mission?

I will go back in time to when it all started - but before we go there, I would like to bring up a little bit about a larger opportunity which we as a country, are experiencing. A trend that we are all experiencing, namely data search around consumption, is I would say, a huge opportunity. You probably see this as a global phenomenon. Now there are newer and newer things which people and nations are doing with data and all associated and allied stuff that we hear of on one side and artificial intelligence (AI) and Internet of Things (IoT) on the other, which are pretty much (data) storing techniques. All of this is a huge opportunity.

Most corporates are impacted (by these trends) in one way or the other and have things like digital transformation as their prime project. So, there is an old organisation and most organisations are coming into or morphing into newer organisations due to the impact of this digital transformation. Similarly, nations are being impacted. Nobody wants to remain aloof in this race.

Q: In which areas are we falling behind and in which spheres are we ahead?

India, with its younger generation demographics, has a huge opportunity and when the Ministry of Urban Development's (MoUD's) smart city input came in three or four years back, a great framework was provided. Besides the framework of digital transformation in these cities, there were concepts like being sustainable and digitally-enabled in whatever the city does. Subsequently, there was more enablement and more cities were nominated and so on and so forth.

The race started from there. Review mechanisms were put in place. Now, three years down the road, there is a reasonable amount of en-



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tropy within the municipalities to make it happen. There are a whole lot of people who are putting in their mind and effort to make this thing happen. I think what we are putting up is a replicable model, which is being showcased to the other cities. I think this is how the mission becomes a larger and bigger success as well. I don't think we should be judging the success or failure of this mission or be critical at this moment, because it is a huge juggernaut running in a particular direction.

Q: What has Indus Tower's journey been like in this environment?

We started fairly early and started to look at what could be a mutually participative win-win kind of situation with the municipalities. Any model which has a large-scale capex upfront has an inherent problem of recovery over a period of time, if the whole thing cranks in. Else, the whole thing

becomes a very, very risky issue. We said well, here is our model in which we have revenues here and now. We could actually give revenues to the municipalities and take what they have from them and make it work as well. And this PPP model has pretty much worked well so far. It has been received very well by the municipalities too.

Let me elaborate what is there for everyone. From the perspective of the municipality, they don't have to spend any money. What they get are digitally-enabled locations. The moment they enable this, the revenues and businesses of municipalities go up. We also give them money per location. The citizen services, which are actually a very positive spinoff of digital enablement, is a big plus for the municipalities. Future smart services will require this framework. So they are actually getting ready for the next set of services. And in our case, we also try and enable things like smart LEDs, smart sensors and other stuff.

From the Indus perspective, we do what we are best at. We bring connectivity and healthy competition among all the players, for we do not monopolise these locations either. And, we enable a business model that is sustainable for the municipalities. It has gained very good traction and ground for us and you probably saw this around NDMC.

Q: Would you like to talk of some key projects in key cities where you have worked?

Once again, NDMC is a long association. If you look at NDMC, it is a perfect showcase for the country. The quality of the projects, if you have seen the command centre, is a true demonstration of end-to-end principles. It is not piecemeal, which means lights are hanging on one side and WiFi on the other, or the poles are on the other sides or sensors on the

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other. Everything is visible and integrated and pretty much underground infrastructure. We hope to expand this. Next you will see Rudra and we will furnish those details to you too. There are multiple other cities where we are engaged with this model.

Q: How do you plan to reach out to tier-2 cities like Kanpur, Lucknow, Aligarh, etc?

We are not differentiating between cities or demonstrating lack of appetite for any city. In the end, this is our business, irrespective of location. Look at it from one more dimension. What is going to happen in the future? You will see technology upgrade. You will see 5Gs coming in and so on and so forth. The race for 5G is already on.

Do we believe that the Kanpurs or other cities in India for that matter, will be lagging behind both in terms of technology rollout or data consumption? I don't believe so. If that be the case, then our business fits in those cities as well. We will be very keenly rolling it out in the cities that you have mentioned as well. Wherever the municipal bodies are engaging with us, we are certainly going forward. Whenever it is slightly on the drawing board phase, we are respecting the time taken by the municipalities.

Q: What has the financial year been like in terms of smart cities?

This is a new line of business and we have certainly begun making an impact. We can't share the numbers or the percentage or the growth target. But we are very happy, not only in terms of what we did, but with the way the market pull is with these services.

Q: What will be the innovation in reaching out to cities like Aligarh?

We are actually at this moment opened up for the larger cities. But should any city like Aligarh reach out to us, we will be very happy to look at it from our Noida Office. And if there is, let's say Dehradun as well, our circle teams are enabling such corridors rather than calling them smart cities.

We are absolutely open for business when it comes to smart cities. We respect the time taken by municipalities to process. Secondly, wherever we are engaged, we are doing it wholeheartedly. Apart from providing the digital infrastructure, we are also uplifting the cities by educating them. You have WiFi, government portals – a lot of great work has been done by everyone – now how do we make the end user aware of these portals?

Q: Besides Smart Cities and Digital India, how can Indus

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be a part of other government projects, like healthcare for instance?

If you look at Indus, we are actively into passive telecom infrastructure. We have an area of operation. Second, our contribution goes back to society through our CSR initiatives. There is a huge mobilisation which we end up doing. So, whatever be the government priorities, I think one arm of Indus is aligned in that direction. We are also actively into disaster management activities.

Q: Improving communication is

the biggest part of communication. So, how do you keep the environment green and not hamper the environment?

You see, long before any such laws came in, Indus took up the case as its core value. What we started to do was look at what initiatives Indus will take to make sure we remain green and clean too. We started first with some of the green cities and then we realised that we have a large geographically separate population of towers. Measuring green cities may not be a better idea. We started measuring ourselves on the basis of portfolios. Currently, at more than 66,000 of our sites, we do not fill diesel and all this has happened because we have put in initiatives on our own to make sure that sites don't go down and there is enough storage and other solutions.

We have reduced (power) consumption by retiring air conditioners. So, a lot of technological intervention has gone into making this portfolio green. Our future commitment is to go diesel-free by 2021 and we are working on initiatives towards it. That is a leadership statement or leadership position.

Q: Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Coming back to smart cities – we are at a critical point in this journey. As I said, we can only grow and make this thing very big. If whatever initiatives we take are not sustainable, they would not fructify in the future. Anything that we do, we do according to the MoUD. Indus is very clear and determined to take part (in the development of smart cities) city-wise, district-wise, municipality wise. Our offices are there to engage (with the cities). We are engaged as well. **BW**