

RailTel is a Mini Ratna PSU working towards turning India into a modern, connected nation - its optic fibre network, spanning more than 50,000 km, covers so many towns and cities that it encompasses 70 per cent of India's population. It is one of the few telecom companies to be in the black. And it enjoys exclusive right of way (RoW) along the railway tracks.

As Chairman and Managing Director, Puneet Chawla lists his plans to upgrade the network and adds that already having an Infrastructure Provider-1 licence, he plans to get into building towers for mobile networks because very soon, long term evolution, or LTE, proliferation will be happening.

"5G trials have begun in the country. So, for that we will require more towers. We have exclusive RoW along the railway tracks. Exclusive RoW means that only RailTel is allowed to lay fibre and to construct towers. We want to contribute to overall national telecom development. Recently, the Ministry of Railways has given us the mandate to execute safety-related signalling works on Indian Railways. We are going to replace the old signalling systems with what is called Electronic Interlocking in which, at the click of a mouse, you are able to change the track and lower the signal for the train," he says.

RailTel has been assigned another signalling project - European Train Control Systems Level-2. The beauty of this system, says Chawla, is that if a train is moving and the signal turns red, the system will automatically apply the brakes and the train will come to a halt before the red signal. Similarly, if there is a yellow signal, which means you have to go at a restricted speed, the system will apply the brakes the moment the train reaches the specified speed. Chawla says this entire system will work on the backbone of LTE and optical fibre.

This pilot project will be conducted on four sections of the Railways: North Central Railway, East Coast Railway, South Central Railway and Central Railway. The project, which he calls a "game changer", will cost about Rs 1,800 crore. RailTel has already invited tenders, with a mandate to complete the project in 18 months.

Another noteworthy RailTel project for improving the efficiency and transparency of the Railways' working is E-Office implementation on Indian Railways. This will usher in the era of paperless working for the national carrier. RailTel is also focusing on completing the BharatNet Project in Gujarat (erstwhile National Optical Fibre Network) of the Department of Telecommunications, which includes the creation of an optic fibre cable network and connecting all districts right down to the gram panchayat level.

A much talked about RailTel project is its Railway Station Wi-Fi project. With a vision of turning railway stations into a platform for digital inclusion, RailTel has started providing free Wi-Fi at Indian Railway stations across the country. Till date, RailTel has provided High Speed Wi-Fi at 1,600 stations across India. This includes Wi-Fi at 415 A, A1 category stations, associating Google as the technology partner for radio access, while using the RailTel backbone for broadband connectivity and Wi-Fi at 200 stations with the support of the Universal Service Obligation Fund of the Government of India. Recently, RailTel has roped in Tata Trust for providing Wi-Fi at the remaining 4,791 B, C, D and E category stations across the country. Of the total 6,441 stations (excluding the halt stations) of Indian Railways, 5,000 stations are rural stations. With this surge in infrastructure creation, Chawla believes that the digital divide between urban and rural India is shrinking. In rural areas, people will soon have access to high speed broadband.

The list of projects continues. RailTel is providing CCTVs on trains and at stations, which will go a long way in enhancing the security of passengers in trains and on railway premises.

The only downside is that part of the RailTel network is now quite old and needs capacity upgradation. Similarly, the MPLS platform needs to be upgraded to at least 100 GB so that the corporation can deliver to customers who require large bandwidth, such as Google and Amazon.

Chawla is also pleased with the progress so far on the Digital India project. A very large number of gram panchayats have Citizen Service Centres where various digital services are being offered; the number of internet users has gone up and two fifths of the rural population is using the internet.

“Digital India is not being implemented in isolation. There is the Make in India, the Skill India programme, the Start Up India programme – there is a confluence of all these four Mission Mode programmes of the Government of India. The impact is quite visible. The digital divide is now between voice and data. Village people have voice, but not data. So, with Wi-Fi services being extended to gram panchayats, to villages and to railway stations, the divide is being bridged,” he says.

After graduating from Punjab Engineering College, Chandigarh, in 1984, Chawla joined

Semiconductor Complex Limited, where he worked on 3/5-micron technology. During his stint with the company, he took the Engineering Services Examination in 1985 and became an officer of the Indian Railway Service of Signal Engineers (IRSSE). His first posting was in Dhanbad as an Assistant Divisional Signal & Telecom Engineer. He then worked on a Railway electrification project in Ambala. Later, he worked with Northern Railway in Delhi as Deputy Chief Engineer in Delhi area for about seven years, during which time he was involved in re-signalling large parts of the Delhi area to accommodate more trains and make the yards more flexible. He was also instrumental in commissioning the signalling system at Delhi Main Station, which found its way into the Guinness Book as the World's Biggest Route Relay Interlocking System.

“Later, while working in the Northern Railway headquarters, I was instrumental in making the specifications of the first GSMR systems to be implemented in Indian Railways and floated tenders in 2003-04,” he says.

One of his more memorable assignments was when he was Chief Project Manager, Indian Railway Projects Management Unit, from 2010 to 2016. He was responsible for the path-breaking project of Modernization of Signalling and Telecommunications from Ghaziabad to Kanpur on optical fibre backbone. This meant installing Automatic Signalling in this section, ensuring better safety and efficient working including Centralised Traffic Control (CTC), which means operating signals and points (from where the train changes track) for stations from a central location.

During the course of his career, Chawla has worked on many prestigious assignments in many parts of the country. He particularly recalls his work at Ajmer, Rajasthan as the Divisional Railway Manager (DRM), a period that included altering the basic configuration of the Ajmer and adjoining stations. “Today, the Ajmer Shatabdi goes up till Daurai. It is now New Delhi-Daurai-New Delhi Shatabdi Express. Adjoining stations on both sides of Ajmer, that is, Madar and Daurai were developed as satellite stations. This reduces the congestion at Ajmer station and on the roads in front of the station. So, all these steps were taken together and Ajmer really benefitted because we developed a second entry to the station along with the above two satellite stations on either side. Imagine if, in Delhi, there was only the New Delhi station – without Nizamuddin and without Sarai Rohilla - what would happen to Connaught Place?”

Chawla's plans for Ajmer went beyond improving the functioning of the division. The point was to improve the experience of the millions who visited the town for the Ajmer Sharif Dargah or the famous Pushkar Fair. Chawla not only decongested the Ajmer station but also focused on

cleaning it up, making it one of the cleanest stations of India.

When he was appointed to the Railway Board in New Delhi as Executive Director of Safety, he bore the immense responsibility with perfection. But he attributes his success to his team. “Alone you cannot do anything,” he notes. “You can have a broad framework, but implementation and execution have to be done by the team. So, your team has to be really motivated. The key to making a team effective is to decentralise authority. Give people freedom, within the prescribed framework, to deal with various issues and let them do what they think is best. When they do well, reward them.”

The reward may be small, he adds, but the point is that the employees should be recognised for whatever good work they have done. Another area of management that he focuses on is to ensure that promotions are given on time to avoid people becoming demotivated.

After a busy day in the office, Chawla has evening tea with his wife, a professor in Delhi University, followed by a long walk. Since his mother lives with them, he makes a point of spending time with her too. Neither of his children lives in India. His son works for Amazon in the US and his daughter studies management in Dubai.

For relaxation at weekends, it's Amitabh Bachchan's movies, listening to old songs and reading. The reading habit in him dates back to his childhood when he used to zip through novels and comics. His favourite was the Tintin series. “At that time, Tintin was very popular. Now children read on their gadgets and on Kindle. But I still like the feel of a hardcover book in my hands,” he says.

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