

# Infrastructure: propping up the fundamentals

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Soon after joining the ministry of tourism in 2001, my first official visit was to the Buddhist Circuit of Bodhgaya, Rajgir and Nalanda in Bihar. We took the Rajdhani train from Delhi to Gaya and drove down from there. The national highway stretch was probably the worst in the world – the entire distance of 96 kilometres was full of large potholes. It was a bone-rattling nightmare – a journey that should have taken an-hour-and-a-half took us almost five hours. No wonder the Japanese and Southeast Asian tourists, who should have flocked to visit the Mecca of Buddhism, had been driven away. It took all our persuasive skills to get additional funds sanctioned to mend these roads and bring them up to international standards, but the agreement was only on the condition that the work would be directly executed by central agencies. The roads have since been done up, the integrated development of Bodhgaya, Rajgir and Nalanda implemented, and better conservation, preservation and lighting undertaken. Similarly, in Agra, in close proximity to India's most visited World Heritage Site – the Taj Mahal – we were welcomed by accumulated garbage, ugly hanging wires, a stinking cowshed, terrible commercial hoardings and touts attempting to fleece the foreign tourists. Since then, a project has been implemented to improve the quality of the roads and hoardings, relocate shops and increase parking space near the Taj.

These experiences confirmed our belief that any marketing of India without a simultaneous focus on infrastructure improvement would be a disaster. For essentially, a brand is what a brand does. The 'Incredible India' campaign could not be sustained if the quality of experience offered to tourists did not remain credible. In the long run, a branding campaign which does not match with the actual experience does damage to the destination rather than promote it. Infrastructure development and destination management, therefore, hold the key to India's sustained growth in the tourism sector.