

■ GURDEEP SINGH

5,000 Covid-19 cases weren't enough to kill our work ethic

NTPC withstood the Covid-19 crisis rather well. Its **CMD Gurdeep Singh** tells **Anupam Chatterjee** about the experience of ensuring there was no let-up in supplies during the difficult months of the pandemic and the company's plan for a greener portfolio in the future, as part of its efforts to cut carbon emissions

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Your company delivered uninterrupted power to all parts of the country at a time everything else had come to a halt. Could you share your experience of leading the country's largest power generator through this turbulent period?

While electricity has become an essential part of our lives, its importance grew further during the Covid-19 period, critical as it was for continuation of emergency services and lifesaving operations. Electricity supply along with Internet services was also key to keeping business, school and office establishments functional as most people were working from home at that time. This placed on us additional responsibility to ensure there were no breakdowns. I must say that the work done at the power stations to keep up the generation levels was commendable. It is something that needs to be acknowledged and applauded.

We took all necessary measures to meet the grid demand while complying with the protocols laid down by the government of India, state governments and the local authorities, with the situation being reviewed on a daily basis. We maintained constant communication and dialogue with all the stakeholders. We also took proactive measures to safeguard the health of our employees and their families.

Significantly, despite adherence to

Covid-19 guidelines, there were about 5,000 Covid-19 cases at our establishments, with the patients including employees, dependents and vendors. While this posed a serious challenge, our operations continued as before. In fact, we have recorded generation growth of nearly 4% as compared to last year.

As a responsible organisation, we extended all support to government agencies during the difficult months, supplying food items to the needy and providing medical equipment and facilities to the local authorities.

Has Covid-19 hampered your capital expenditure plans for FY21? Could you reveal the size of your capex in the ongoing fiscal and the main areas you have spent on?

Our capital expenditure was impacted in the first few months of Covid-19, when the lockdown was in force. With the easing of curbs by the government, our capital works picked up momentum. They are in full swing now.

So, while capex was low in the first quarter, we have almost undone what we lost, having achieved 70% of the capex target for FY21. I am confident we will achieve the target by the end of the fiscal.

In what reflects on its resilience, NTPC added 1,799 MW of commercial capacity even during the crisis months. The major areas of capex in FY21 are renewable energy projects, thermal plants, expenditure on environmental compliance and coal mining.

NTPC's board approved recently share buyback of up to ₹2,275 crore. Could you throw some light on your capital restructuring plans?

The buyback was undertaken under extant DIPAM guidelines and keeping the market situation in mind. Due to reduction in the equity base, it has helped improve the return on equity, thereby increasing shareholders' value in the long term.

NTPC plans to have a production capacity of 1,30,000 MW by 2032, with 30% of this being from non-thermal sources. What makes you optimistic about the future of renewable energy?

Renewable energy has acquired critical importance in the total energy space across the globe. The cost of solar power has been declining dramatically, and it has become the cheapest option available on a



WE ARE ACTIVELY PURSUING THE GREEN HYDROGEN PORTFOLIO, WHICH ALIGNS WELL WITH NTPC'S RENEWABLE GROWTH PLANS

standalone basis. The government's push for green energy, stringent environmental norms, availability of cheap finance options for renewable projects, coupled with growing energy demand in the country, will keep the renewable sector growing rapidly in the future.

How do you plan to increase coal production from your captive mines? What else is the company considering to cut coal imports?

At present, we have three captive mines, namely Pakri Barwadih, Dulanga and Talaipalli, under operation. Production from these stood at 11.15 MT in the last fiscal, which was an increase of 52.5% over the previous year. Two more mines are being readied and we hope to start operating them soon.

A separate mining subsidiary, NTPC Mining Limited (NML), has been incorporated to speed up mining activity. We are at an advanced stage of transferring the Pakri Barwadih mine to the NML. By 2030, we aim to meet 40% of our coal requirements from captive mines. As for imports, NTPC has not placed any new contracts in recent times, with its total coal requirements being met from domestic sources and captive mines.

NTPC has signed an MoU with Siemens for the production of green hydrogen from the company's renewable energy plants and the use of the fuel in transportation. Could you share your plans on futuristic energy sources?

We are actively pursuing the green hydrogen portfolio which aligns well with NTPC's large renewable growth plans. We are working with various entities including Siemens to take forward that agenda.

We have launched a pilot project for the production of green methanol at one of our sites. We are also working on green hydrogen-based mobility and green ammonia. We hope that these initiatives will grant us a significant share of the emerging hydrogen economy.

OUR CAPITAL EXPENDITURE WAS IMPACTED IN THE FIRST FEW MONTHS OF THE COVID CRISIS. BUT WE HAVE ALMOST UNDONE WHAT WE LOST AND REACHED 70% OF FY21 CAPEX TARGET. I AM CONFIDENT WE WILL ACHIEVE THE TARGET