Our immediate priority is promoting SAARC Tourism Summit in Aurangabad, to be held in October, and launch of the Visit Maharashtra 2017 campaign. In 2018, we will also be celebrating 200 years of discovery of the World Heritage Ajanta Caves."

We are planning to sign agreements with the five States - Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Gujarat, Telangana and Goa - with whom we share borders for joint promotion in the tourism sector. MTDC is also actively promoting different types of tourism, like wildlife, beach, medical, rural and heli-tourism as well as MICE.

The State is promoting tourism through various initiatives, like formation of district tourism promotion committees, development of special tourism districts or zones and tourism growth corridors. Many of MTDC's initiatives, like Bed & Breakfast scheme and Mahabrahman, are meeting rising demand for more accommodation. Besides, they help in boosting the local economy and providing clean and affordable accommodation and food for tourists.

Where does Maharashtra stand with regard to attracting tourists?

Our steady growth showcases that Maharashtra has been doing better each passing year and is progressively becoming an ideal tourist destination. The State is steadily becoming a favourite and most preferred travel destination across domestic and international platforms. It is the best performing State, ranking second for foreign tourist arrivals (43.9 lakh) and fourth in domestic tourist arrivals (9.4 crore) in 2014. The State has seen growth of 12.2 per cent in domestic tourist arrivals and 11.9 per cent in foreign tourist arrivals compared to previous year's growth.

How is the ambitious new tourism policy being rolled out on the ground?

The Maharashtra Tourism Policy, 2016 is expected to generate 10 lakh new jobs and will focus on promoting private investments and accelerating implementation of projects through public-private partnership (PPP) model. With the help of new initiatives, we are trying to generate more employment opportunities in this sector. There will be an increased focus on mega and MSME tourism units. We are also leveraging on the State's and the Centre's skill development schemes. For instance, we are facilitating the Central government's Hunar Se Rojgar Tak programme in Maharashtra. MTDC has joined hands with hospitality institutes, like IIM-Mumbai, to carry out various hospitality courses of six to eight weeks' duration. In another such initiative, training has also been provided to SSC-pass youths, like drivers and tour guides, to make them employable in the tourism sector.

What plans are on the anvil to provide a thrust to PPP initiatives?

The new tourism policy goes a long way in attracting private investments in the tourism sector. The policy provides Stamp Duty and Luxury Tax exemption to private investors, and their VAT (Value-Added Tax) is also reimbursed. MTDC's upcoming ambitious project, the Sea World, in Sindhudurg district is taking shape through the PPP model. Besides, MTDC is helping out private entrepreneurs by giving their projects the status of a mega project.

Are there any plans to privatise your tourism properties?

Yes, we do have plans of privatising tourism properties. Of our 73 properties, 20 are being run by MTDC, and the remaining 53 are being leased out and run by private players.

What are your priorities for further boosting growth of tourism?

We are focusing on building stronger infrastructure so that visitors get a satisfying and memorable experience, catering to the future tourist inflows. We are also expanding our footprint on the global tourism map through tie-ups, road shows and promotional activities. Our immediate priority is promoting SAARC Tourism Summit in Aurangabad, to be held on October 15, 2017, and launch of the Visit Maharashtra 2017 campaign. These two are very important prospects for tourism development.