INTERVIEW

Even as grid-connected solar power capacity is rapidly getting added, little is appreciated about the intricacies and challenges in integrating this intermittent source of energy to the power grid. Hartek Group is a specialist in setting up power evacuation infrastructure for solar power plants. In this exclusive exchange, we have **Hartek Singh** discussing his company's area of excellence, and how he views business opportunities in the solar power space, in the years to come.

Connecting solar power to the grid is a challenge

— **Hartek Singh**, CMD,
Hartek Group

We understand that creating T&D infrastructure for solar PV plants involves many more technicalities than conventional power plants. Tell us more.

Since solar power is intermittent in nature, the design and engineering of solar projects have to be very robust. Considering that any breakdown can cause huge generation losses, all equipments should be of world-class quality. Equal care should be taken to optimise the efficiency of equipments through regular maintenance. In fact, uniform guidelines should be in place for all solar projects. Developers of mega solar plants need to have a strong project management team to cater to the needs of the end consumers and add value.

When it comes to connecting solar power to the grid, matching speed with quality is a real challenge. Another big challenge involving solar projects is the tighter deadline. It takes four-five months to execute a solar project as against 18-24 months that a conventional power plant takes. So, the deadline pressure calls for an eye for detail and coordinated teamwork to avoid last-minute glitches that can delay a project.

Given that Hartek Group has created a niche in the field of solar T&D contracting, tell us about the overall expertise that the group possesses.

The Hartek Group operates through five strategic business units—Power Systems, Rooftop Solar, Power Distribution Products, Fuel Services and Value-Added Services. Our integrated business model has helped us add immense value to the power sector value chain and increase our client base.

Our flagship company, Hartek Power Pvt Ltd, is one of India's fastest

growing EPC firms with expertise in executing high-voltage substation turnkey projects and connecting solar power to the grid. Held in high esteem for timely execution of projects and high quality standards, Hartek Power provides complete EPC solutions to the industry, independent power producers and utilities. Besides having executed more than 150 high-voltage and extra high-voltage substations and transmission lines, Hartek Power has commissioned substations for about 600 mw worth of solar projects.

Do you face manpower-related challenges, especially technically-skilled, in the field of solar T&D contracting?

Yes, technical manpower can be a challenge for companies which do not lay due emphasis on training and skill development programmes. It's all about training your people. Irrespective of the industry you are in, people continue to be your greatest assets. Building great teams is the key to success. Empowering your workforce by bringing out the best in them through delegation of responsibility can go a long way in creating a great work culture.

Solar tariffs are rapidly falling. Assuming that project developers would try and keep the project cost optimum for better RoI, does this put pressure on T&D contractors?

It is a win-win situation for everyone, but EPC companies must manage their costs better by emphasising on project design and project management techniques. When it comes to partnering with independent power producers, we at Hartek Group are very selective in our approach. We partner with them pre-bid, work on innovative designs, focus on optimised engineering and coordinate our efforts so as to ensure that we execute every project to the best of our ability. We have successfully retained and consolidated our client base on account of our uncompromising quality standards and unflinching commitment to timely execution. A customer-centric, problem-solving approach can work wonders.

In your recollection, what is the most technically-challenging solar T&D project that Hartek Group has commissioned so far? Tell us about the challenges and how they were surmounted.

Having connected 600 mw of solar power to the grid, we have experienced that every project comes with its own set of challenges. It is very difficult to pinpoint any one project that was particularly challenging. While doing a 50-mw project in Andhra Pradesh last year, we were well aware that synchronising substations of solar projects spread over a huge area would require special expertise. But we managed it quite well through coordinated teamwork. In whatever project we do, our focus remains on highest quality, optimised design and timely completion.

Hartek Group has recently announced its entry in the rooftop solar space. Tell us about the scope of your activities that you will be offering in this segment.

Hartek Solar Pvt Ltd, our newly formed rooftop solar business vertical, will develop and provide complete rooftop solutions, right from installation of solar panels and inverters to supply, design, engineering and commissioning. The company is firming up its foothold by coming up with innovative solutions and attractive business models to capitalise on emerging trends. While our immediate focus is on commercial and industrial categories, we will also tap the residential market by offering customised solutions based on electricity usage and availability of space.

We also understand that this industry is hugely dynamic and ever changing, for the entire roof top solar to be competitive, we need to ensure that consumers take advantage of net metering and the policies are enforced in all the states.

Overall how do you see prospects for Hartek Group in the field of solar power?

We bagged 1,025-mw solar grid EPC orders in 2016-17, a phenomenal increase of 733 per cent as compared to our order size in the previous year. These orders include 30 substation projects of up to 220kV spread across 10 states. The most prestigious project bagged by us this year is a 100-mw order of 220kV class in Telangana. But we would continue to be selective about our orders. We will take up an order only when we are sure about delivering it in time with no compromise on quality whatsoever.

We are aggressively eyeing business opportunities in states with vast solar potential like Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh. We are also focusing on consolidating our position in South Indian states like Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Karnataka, which offer immense business opportunities in the form of bigger projects, as well as traditionally well-performing states like Rajasthan. ■