Coal fields in Jharia

Why in news?

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Continuous underground fires in the coalfields of Jharia, Jharkhand, have led to steps being planned to move train operations out and rehabilitate residents.

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What has been the problem in Jharia over the years?

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- Unsafe and illegal mining has led to fires in coal deposits under the surface of the Jharia coalfields in Jharkhand's Dhanbad district, which span over 160 square kilometres.
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- They now pose a risk to the population living on the surface, could lead to cave-ins and gas spills and are threats to rail transport.
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- While the first subterranean blaze was noticed in 1916 and various reports and studies have sounded the alarm over the years, authorities began seeking a comprehensive solution only in the early 2000s.
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- Most of the affected mines date back before Independence and nationalisation (private owners ran collieries earlier), when the thrust was on production and profit, with little regard for safety.
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What is the extent of the problem?

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- When the coal mines were nationalised in 1971, at least 70 mining areas within Jharia were on fire.
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- The problem later spread to seven more mining zones.
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- The number of affected areas has reduced to about 67, as around 10 fires have been extinguished using different methods.
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- Rail routes, including the key Dhanbad-Chandrapura line that is currently in focus, fall in the affected region.
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- One arterial route, Dhanbad-Patherdih line, was closed down in 2007.
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- The Adra (West Bengal)-Gomoh line is functional, but on a slightly diverted route.
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- The Jharia Rehabilitation and Development Authority (JRDA, formed by the Centre) has now been asked to look into the possibility of putting prefabricated structures at the resettlement site to increase the number of houses as quickly as possible.
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Why is the Dhanbad-Chandrapura line important?

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- Unlike a couple of the other affected rail lines, the nearly 41-km Dhanbad-Chandrapura line is used by 37 pairs of daily train services, which include express, mail and passenger trains.
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- If the rail line is shut, it could lead to revenue losses close to Rs 2,500 crore. Besides, creating a new diversion alone is expected to cost around Rs 3,000 crore.
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Source: Indian Express

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