India’s Bullet Train Project

Why in News?

Maharashtra Chief Minister has announced a ‘review’ of India’s Bullet Train Project.

What is happening?

- This announcement is sending out signals of uncertainty over the prestigious enterprise.
- From its inception, the National High Speed Rail Corporation Limited (NHSRCL), the body implementing the project, has been facing controversies.
- These controversies are over land acquisition in tribal-dominated areas, and cases filed by farmers in court.
- Even though the project is being funded by an 80% loan from Japan, there is fundamental opposition to the idea of a train corridor between Mumbai and Ahmedabad,.

What is some headway made by the project?

- The initial plan was to complete the land acquisition process by December 2018.
- However, this strategy was revised to link land acquisition to tender requirements.
- The implementing company now says it is on course to do a trial run between Surat and Bilimora in Gujarat in August 2022.
- It also says that it will open the full service to the public around December 2023.

How much land has been acquired?

- NHSRCL officials say they are hopeful of getting most of the land required for the project by the time tenders are finalised in mid-2020.
- The project needs land in Gujarat, Maharashtra, and a little in Dadra and Nagar Haveli.
- Of the total 1,380 hectares required, 705 hectares have already been acquired in Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Dadra and Nagar Haveli.

Why has land acquisition moved slowly in Maharashtra?

- **Problem** - Mainly because of problems in Palghar district, where the project requires 286 hectares.
- However, much of the past one year has been spent in holding parleys with the landowners, and many have agreed over the past few months.
- With the offer of various schemes like providing health facilities for villagers and other outreach programmes in addition to the compensation package, 31 out of the 286 hectares have been acquired.
- **Measurement surveys** - Of the 73 villages in which the project needs land, joint measurement surveys have been done in 65.
- Joint measurement surveys are considered a major breakthrough.
- This is so because they involve the landowner and the project engineers jointly measuring the land, physically on the ground.
- The company has appointed a manager just for issues related to Palghar.
- **In Gujarat**, the process was smoother after the High Court dismissed petitions by farmers by upholding the validity of the Land Acquisition Act as amended by the state government in 2016.

Can the new Maharashtra government scrap the project?

- Maharashtra is not investing any money per se in the project. Its equity is through land.
- Both Gujarat and Maharashtra own 25% each in the project, while the remaining 50% is owned by the Government of India.
- The state government can change the rules for land acquisition, as that is within its purview.
- However, the contract with Japan that the Centre has entered into, cannot be impacted.
- That said, a change in government may affect the priority that is accorded to the project in the state's scheme of things.
- When the Devendra Fadnavis was Chief Minister, the bullet train project was directly monitored by the CMO.
- Officials said that this helped a lot in land acquisition efforts - anything to do with the bullet train got priority treatment at every level.

Can the project change the alignment to avoid problem areas?

- While the government decides which places to link with a train corridor, the precise alignment is a technical reality that has been frozen after scientific surveys and measurements.
- It cannot be tampered with at will.

- The high-speed alignment needs to be as free of curves as possible.
- Any speed upwards of 300 kph requires a straight alignment.

How can the acquisition process be expedited?

- NHSRCL has adopted the strategy of land acquisition by consent.
- It hasn’t used the strategy of invoking the various laws that empower government agencies to acquire land for public purposes.
- The provisions of the central Land Acquisition Act, 2013, would have allowed the linear project to acquire land even without the consent of certain parties.
- If needed, the acquisition can be without the payment of compensation.
- But the company is not looking to invoke such provisions, officials said.

Source: The Indian Express

