Shimla-Mataur Highway

Why in news?

The Shimla-Mataur highway was declared unviable by the central government.

Where is the Shimla-Mataur highway?

- The Shimla-Mataur highway is one of Himachal Pradesh's primary national highways set for four-laning.
- It runs northwest from Shimla for around 223 kilometres.
- It passes through the districts of Solan, Bilaspur and Hamirpur before ending at the Mataur junction in Kangra district.

Why is it important?

- The highway **directly connects** the state capital Shimla to Kangra, the state's most populated district.
- Kangra is home to Himachal's second capital Dharamshala.
- Kangra, Bilaspur and Hamirpur in lower Himachal, primarily connected to Shimla via this highway.
- The highway facilitates **indirect linking** of Shimla with parts of Mandi, Kullu, Una and Chamba districts.
- In effect, it connects Shimla with 9 out of 12 districts in the state.
- It's important for **religious tourism** too, since it provides connectivity to major pilgrimage centres in lower Himachal.

What is the history of the road-widening project?

- In 2016, Union minister for road transport and highways announced that the highway would be four-laned.
- In addition, the NHAI was to build tunnels and bridges along the route and bypass some towns, to reduce the distance and travel-time.
- The road was to be widened in five different 'packages', or sections.
- The NHAI hired M/s Inter Continental Consultants and Technocrats, New Delhi, to prepare detailed project reports (DPRs) for this.
- Delays in the DPR process caused the High Court of Himachal Pradesh to intervene in the matter in 2017.
- In 2019, the HC directed NHAI and other agencies involved to ensure expeditious completion of works.

What is the status of the road-widening project?

- In his 2020 budget speech, Chief Minister Jai Ram Thakur mentioned the highway as a priority project for the state.
- The final DPR is now complete.
- The land acquisition process is underway.
- However, no construction/excavation work has begun yet.

When was it declared unviable?

- In July 2020, the Union ministry of road transport and highways wrote to NHAI regarding the unviability of 2,887 kms of highways in India.
- This included the Shimla-Mataur highway.
- The NHAI asked the ministry to transfer the development, maintenance and repair of the road to the state public works department.
- According to an NHAI official, the projected cost is Rs 10,000 crore.
- Of this, Rs 7,000 crore is the project cost and Rs 3,000 crore the land acquisition cost.
- The financial crisis caused by the Covid pandemic was one of the factors behind the project being declared unviable.

Is the four-laning cancelled?

- The ministry asked the NHAI to continue to repair, develop and maintain the road instead of handing it to the state.
- But, the state is committed towards the four-laning of this highway.
- It is raising this matter with the Centre regularly.

Source: The Indian Express

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