

## **Salem-Chennai Expressway**

### **Why in news?**

Recently Swaraj India Party leader Yogendra Yadav, who came on a fact finding mission on the Salem-Chennai Corridor project, was detained by the Tiruvannamalai police.

### **How was the Project conceived?**

- The project which claims to be part of the Bharatmala Pariyojana of finds no mention in the list of Phase 1 projects cleared on October 2017, by the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs as part of the Phase 1 Bharatmala scheme.
- Neither did the proposal find mention in any of the publicly-available policy documents prior to February 2018
- Recently sourced documents revealed that this Rs.10,000 crore project may have been officially conceived and cleared in just 6 days.

### **What is the project about?**

- The project aims to develop a six/eight-lane Greenfield highway connecting Chennai and Salem.
- The highway is for a total distance of 277.3 km.
- A major portion of the corridor runs through the Tiruvannamalai district and will destroy both agricultural land and forest areas.



- It also passes through Kancheepuram, Krishnagiri, Dharmapuri and Salem districts.
- This was part of the Central government's scheme to develop economic corridors, inter corridors, feeder corridors and national corridors to improve the efficiency of freight movements in India under 'Bharatmala Pariyojana'.

### **What are the concerns?**

- This project to be carried out by NHAI is facing stiff opposition from farmers and environment activists in Tiruvannamalai district.
- Several lands in Cheyyar and Vandavasi will bear the maximum damage.
- At least 600 to 750 agricultural wells that are being used now will be

affected.

- Not alone farmlands, a part of the project stretch passes through five Reserve Forests (RF) in Tiruvannamalai.
- In fact, an official source said that one of the RFs - Ravandavadi RF in Chengam Forest Range- has thick forest area.
- The corridor will only facilitate mining and transportation of iron ore from Kavuthi and Vedyappan Hills in Tiruvannamalai and Kanjamalai in Salem
- The project has revived the opposition that was registered against iron ore mining in Kavuthi and Vedyappan Hills during 2003, 2009 and 2014.

### **What the Feasibility Report says?**

- National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) had appointed M/S Feedback Infra Private Limited for providing the required consultancy services for preparation of Detailed Project Report.
- Feedback Infra Private Limited is a World-Bank-blacklisted consultant.
- The draft feasibility report prepared concluded that the project is 'socially feasible'.
- According to the Detailed Project Report (DPR), it is expected to reduce the transportation cost of vehicles by 15 to 20 per cent.
- It also stated that the traffic forecast recommends for immediate development of six/eight lane divided carriageway from Chennai-Salem.
- The expressway intends to connect special economic zones and industrial areas along the Chennai- Salem route.
- Apart from manufacturing sector, agro and allied sector will get a boost as perishable items can be transported faster.

### **What are the loopholes in the report?**

- The project feasibility report of the proposed Chennai-Salem highway contains plagiarized content.
- Irrelevant information is provided in the report to fill pages for essential chapters.
- The report provides a single line stating that the consultations have been undertaken.
- However there is no proof or further details provided about the public consultations and the minutes of such meetings.

### **What should be the course of action?**

- If simple fact-finding missions make the local bureaucracy nervous, it convinces people that there is much more to it than that meets the eye.
- Reliable, scientific and data-based information must be put out in the public

domain, if the project is as important as it is made out to be.

- Such a deep fact finding investigation should be done by an independent party.
- Only a team from outside, a larger fact-finding team that includes retired judges will be able to move freely along the length of the project.
- Organizations from inside and outside the State will have to collaborate.

**Source: The Hindu, New India Express**

