

Bullet train project, a boon for Maharashtra

The Mumbai-Ahmedabad high speed rail corridor offers many avenues for economic and civic development in the State

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Once again, Maharashtra CM Uddav Thackeray has raked up the issue of the Ahmedabad-Mumbai bullet train project. He sought to know how many new businesses the bullet train project would bring into Maharashtra, and whether the existing businesses in the State will get a boost because of it. His doubts and suspicions should be answered head on, with relevant data and analysis, as these queries have stemmed from the impression that the bullet train project benefits Gujarat more and is merely being 'dumped' on Maharashtra.

The general impression created by the media is that Ahmedabad-Mumbai high speed rail (HSR) corridor is to provide faster connectivity between Ahmedabad and Mumbai only. But there will be 12 stations in the corridor; four in Maharashtra (Mumbai BKC, Thane, Virar and Boisar) against the corridor length of 156 km in the State, and eight in Gujarat (Vapi, Bilmora, Surat, Bharuch, Vadodara, Anand, Ahmedabad and Sabarmati), against the corridor length of 348 km.

The number of stations were not chosen to favour either of the States, but based on traffic demand. Traffic studies indicated that less than 50 per cent of the traffic will comprise direct travel between Ahmedabad and Mumbai, and the rest will be between the other stations. Hence, this provides opportunity for both residential places and commercial establishments to proliferate along the corridors and the surrounding areas, rather than just concentrate on major cities.

Benefits incurred

Maharashtra's finances depend on Mumbai's finances, and the city is already saturated on all dimensions due to factors such as uncompetitive prices for real estate for official, industrial and res-

idential purposes. Suburban-train passengers' long daily travel-time already affects their work-life balance, and leaves no more physical space for additional growth. The HSR stretch of 156 km in Maharashtra towards the northern Mumbai would reduce travel time in that direction to one-fourth of what it is with the suburban and conventional rails today. It would also provide access to more physical space and thereby make the prices of real estate for official, industrial and residential purposes very competitive across the north of Mumbai.

Given the unimaginable cost of real estate in Mumbai, relocating office buildings and residential places 100-150 km away from city, even after accounting for the high cost of HSR travel, would still be economical. This is what is required for Mumbai, and Maharashtra, to sustain growth and remain in a developed state. When the HSR projects in the next phase between Mumbai and Pune, and Mumbai and Nagpur are planned and executed, a 'Maharashtra Capital Region' would emerge.

However, if the HSR does not come up by the expected time, Maharashtra would lose the golden opportunity to develop an economic region spreading across a few hundred km in the northern, southern and eastern directions.

The HSR project brings in benefits along the alignment and the surrounding areas for a radius of about 100 km, as the people who reside there also get access to HSR travel. It is too peevish to 'guesstimate' which State gets more benefit by assessing only one HSR stretch.

Project feasibility

As per the various feasibility studies that have been conducted so far on HSR in India, the origin-destination points and the stops in between that would entail an HSR in terms of passenger demand don't belong to the same State, whether it is the under construc-



Timely execution The corridor must come up with minimum hassles to pave way for the next set of projects PAUL NORONHA

tion Ahmedabad-Mumbai corridor or the Delhi-Chandigarh-Amritsar, Delhi-Jaipur-

Ahmedabad, and Hyderabad-Vijayawada-Chennai-Tirupati-Bengaluru corridors. Even the stops for an HSR are decided based on the travel demand, as too many or too few stops in one stretch will not serve the very purpose of faster travel for more people in that area.

The first HSR project needs to be executed on time and with minimum hassles, to pave way for next set of HSR projects, and it is the responsibility of the governments involved not to put hurdles on the same.

Perhaps the Shiv Sena was upset with the BJP earlier, when it raked up the issue of land acquisition for the HSR project. The Right of Way (RoW) required for the HSR is only 3.2 hectares per km against a 9.3 hectares per km for a six-lane expressway. Since 95 per cent of the HSR is being developed as an elevated corridor, the land is acquired for pliers, access roads, stations and depots. Unlike an expressway, the land is not divided, which is a boon for the inhabitants in and around the corridor.

From the angle of holistic transport infrastructure development, acquiring land for HSR is a better bet than acquiring land for an expressway for any State government.

Financial stake

Then comes the financial burden for Maharashtra in the HSR project. Out of the total estimated cost of ₹1,10,000 crore, Japan provides financial support to the tune of ₹88,000 crore, and the rest is shared between the Union government and the two State governments equally. The Maharashtra government may have to shell out about ₹5,500 over a construction period of five years for the HSR project, as would Gujarat.

Holistically looking, this amount is a stake for the governments in the project and not a burden. When the project is commissioned and the debt is repaid, the project belongs to the equity-holders — Union government and the State governments of Gujarat and Maharashtra.

Even if the Maharashtra government does not contribute towards its equity, the Union government may move ahead with

the project by allocating the required ₹5,500 crore additionally for the first HSR project. But then, the Maharashtra government will not hold any stake in the project.

Apart from not contributing to the project, the Maharashtra government may put up hurdles by not cooperating with National High Speed Rail Corporation Ltd, the implementing agency for the project, either in land acquisition or in shifting utilities or other activities which badly require the cooperation of the Maharashtra government. That would bring a bad name the Maharashtra government as it will be viewed by the people of the State as stalling the opportunity to have the first HSR for them.

Political parties should challenge each other only politically, and not stall developmental projects. That would neither augur well for the development of the State nor for the party which rules there. The antagonistic stand towards developmental projects will hardly give any benefit in the short term, let alone in the long term, for any political party.

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