

‘Despite Covid impact we are trying to do something on the Ahmedabad-Mumbai high-speed rail by 2023’

The Rs 1 lakh crore Ahmedabad-Mumbai high-speed rail project is a prestigious one. The National High-Speed Rail Corporation Ltd managing director Achal Khare explained its challenges to Dipak Kumar Dash:

■ **Where does the project now stand?**

We have got 95% land in Gujarat and out of 351km falling in the state, contract for 325km has been awarded. The project is now fully into the construction phase. All the remaining civil packages in the Gujarat portion will be awarded during the current calendar year. In Maharashtra, 24% land has been acquired. But this is very scattered and we can't even take up work on 10-15km.

■ **What is the challenge in Maharashtra?**

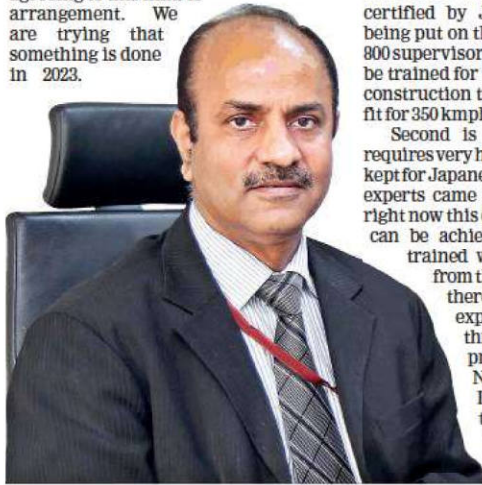
In Palghar, we were quite successful. We had carried out joint measurement surveys in 71 out of 73 villages. It shows that people are largely not against the project. We completed 450 sale deeds in Maharashtra, all on consent, and in only Palghar we have done 220 such sale deeds. But we need to have 1,200 sale deeds. People are ready to give the land, the major issue is their land records.

There are plots, around 500, where land ownership is not clear. There are plots where 150 or 200 names are entered in the records. They call it 'gola plot'. There is no readymade solution to this. In Gujarat also, we had issues of plots where there were 20 owners of a plot. We discussed it with the Gujarat govern-

ment and they extended all help to resolve ownership issues. We could settle issues there quite well. But in Palghar, in many cases the real owners and persons in possession of land are different.

■ **Will Covid affect the deadline?**

The Covid impact will be there. But we are trying to do something by December 2023 or early 2024. We have aligned the contractor also on this thinking that let's try and achieve something in one section for the trial purpose. I am in talks with the Japanese side. We have not been able to concretise all this. But they are agreeing to this kind of arrangement. We are trying that something is done in 2023.



If not fully, our attempt is let's partially fulfil the dream.

■ **Is technology transfer from Japan happening?**

Let me start with areas where we had nothing. Metro and railways have ballastless tracks and these are fit for 80, 90 or 100 kmph. But the tracks that Japanese are making are fit for 350 kmph train speed. So, with a lot of discussion, last year they agreed to open this area to Indian contractors. This is a major achievement. Every supervisor and the workers of the contractor will be trained first and certified by Japanese experts before being put on the job. We have estimated 800 supervisors and workers will have to be trained for this. This will help us get construction track technology, which is fit for 350 kmph.

Second is steel fabrication which requires very high skill. Initially, this was kept for Japanese players. A committee of experts came up with the finding that right now this does not exist in India, but can be achieved. To ensure that the trained workforce doesn't deviate from the standard while doing it, there will be two international experts at the welding facility throughout the fabrication process at the workshop. Now, this package is open to Indian players. After doing this project, the fabrication quality in India will improve significantly.

Another area was the quality of steel. They were insisting on Japanese quality. We took their standards and shared it with big manufacturers. It took us about a year and they confirmed that they will be able to produce quality steel of Japanese standard. So, all steel is going to be manufactured in India.

■ **Will the first project make us self-reliant in high-speed rail?**

Yes, we can do civil works, steel fabrication and track ourselves. Only in two areas we would need some hand holding; one of them is rolling stock. We have estimated 24 train sets and six will be done here. Because most of the material is not manufactured in India, the six will be brought in complete knockdown condition, but assembled and tested here. So, even assembling and testing will require an investment of about Rs 300 crore by Indian manufacturers. We estimate if there is demand of around 100-150 in a year, probably setting up of a factory in India will be viable.

Another area is signalling and telecom. Japanese are using gas-filled cables. If a small crack happens, the gas will start leaking and there is a cable monitoring system that will tell that there is a problem at a particular point. So, you can replace that before it causes a failure. That is why their reliability is so high. In India we are not manufacturing gas-filled cables. Signalling and telecom is an area where we will need some hand holding whether it's Japanese or European technology.

Q&A