

# Hit the Road, and How



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The first phase of the ambitious Bharatmala Pariyojana (BMP) is four years late. According to Icra, the first phase is now likely to get completed by 2025-26, against the original schedule of 2021-22. Icra also cites delays in land acquisition as a major reason. But that part is hardly a revelation. It is also superficial.

In 2014, the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) had already realised that unavailability of land is a major impediment in executing road projects. In response, it enacted a policy of not awarding projects without acquiring 80% of the required land. In 2018, it made that policy more stringent, raising the requirement to 90% with contiguous stretches of at least 5 km. And, yet, the problem remains.

Given the centrality of BMP to 'Make in India' and India's economy, it's vital to understand what exactly the land acquisition problem is and what is causing it. Only then can we accelerate the remaining work and significantly reduce the final delay. To define the problem, it is necessary to look at the underlying numbers.

The nationwide rate of road-building is 40 km per day. But BMP contributes only 11 km per day. A total of 11 km a day across 200 or so projects that are in execution does seem quite slow. But how much faster can those projects really go? Today, a typical 30-50 km project takes three years, but can be completed in 18 months, even when it includes bridges and special structures. So, by solving the land acquisition problem, NHAI can double the BMP rate to 22 km per day and

reduce its delay from four years to two.

So how can NHAI speed up land acquisition? What are the difficulties and bottlenecks inside of the land acquisition process? What are the levers of change to alleviate those difficulties and bottlenecks?

Land acquisition is done in three stages:

► **Identification:** Identifying land and issuing public notices to acquire it. Even though this stage is largely procedural, based on data from the Bhoomi Rashi portal, it takes about 40 months to get done. It should be possible to complete this stage in less than a year just by enforcing deadlines — and not just creating them — because the work is by and large defined and administrative.

► **Negotiation:** This is the real bottleneck. It requires the Competent Authority for Land Acquisition (CALA), NHAI and multiple state and central bodies to conduct negotiations with many owners. Delays in some of those negotiations are inevitable, especially when owners are groups rather than individuals, and cooperation from state and local levels is required. But those delays are greatly exacerbated because of synchronisa-

tion challenges.

Synchronising the efforts of multiple resource groups is not easy when they are working on 3,000 stretches across 400-plus projects. Not only do individual stretches need to be completed in the shortest time possible, but they also need to be done in a way that you end up with 'complete' projects. For issuing the dates of appointment to contractors, it doesn't help to finish 40% stretches across 20 projects. The desired outcome is 80% stretches completely done across 10 projects.

► **Execution:** The same resource groups are also involved in resolving residual land acquisition issues for these projects. It is worth noting that completion of a project by itself does not bring much of a benefit. Projects are part of larger corridors. From the 'Make in India' and citizenry's perspectives, an entire corridor is what must be completed. Therefore, efforts must be synchronised towards completing not just projects but also entire corridors.

The solution to the synchronisation problem starts with changes at the ministry level. The ministry of road transport and highways (MoRTH) must rationalise due dates and set clear priorities for corridors. Without that, NHAI resources will stay spread thin. Also, more than 50% of projects get appointment dates in the last quarter of a fiscal year. Such a bow wave of work also contributes to de-synchronisation. So, the ministry must insist on a consistent monthly rate of appointments instead.

These changes at the ministry-level will provide NHAI an opportunity to focus its efforts and complete work in a steady manner. If it can systematically transmit that focus to the frontline, it can easily double the rate of land acquisition and complete BMP within the next two years. And, with just a few simple changes, provide a major boost to 'Make in India' and the economy.



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