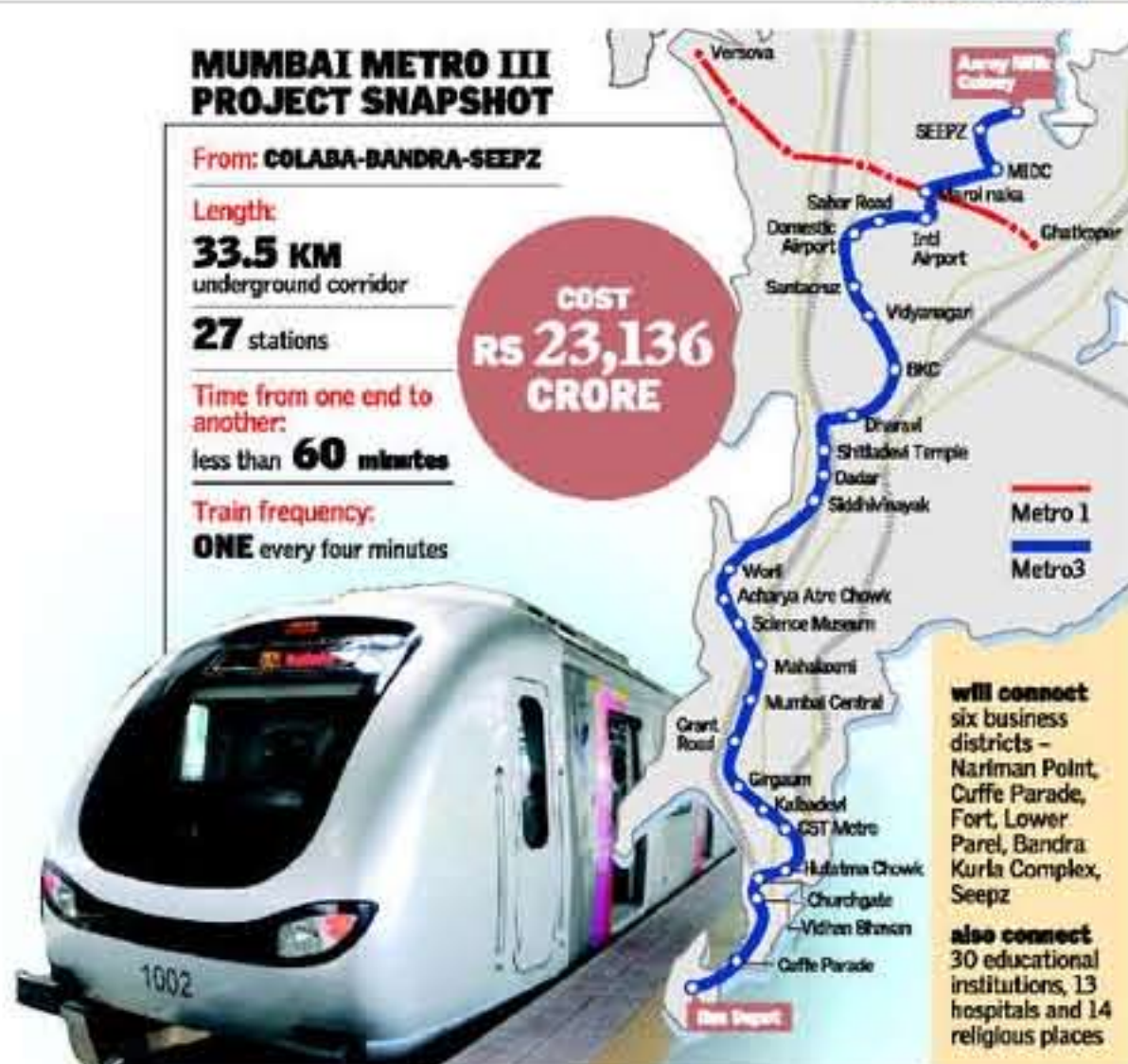


Mumbai Metro on track



SATISH NANDGAONKAR

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The 33.5-km-long Colaba-Bandra-Seepz Mumbai Metro III is the showpiece project of the Devendra Fadnavis government and intrinsic to the transformation of Mumbai into an International Finance Centre. Mr Fadnavis had stayed the construction of a car shed at Aarey Milk Colony after environmentalists, and political parties such as the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena objected to the chopping of trees.

An expert committee that surveyed several locations has suggested an alternative land at Kanjurmarg. However, **Ashwini Bhide**, Managing Director of Mumbai Metro Rail Corporation Ltd, tells **Satish Nandgaonkar** that there is no alternative to the Rs 23,000-crore rail project.

Have the controversies around the project and complexities bogged you down?

No, I have handled several projects, not of this size, but of similar complexities. Milan Road-Over-Bridge was a Rs 80-crore project, just a fraction of this. But it had more complexities – a mosque had to be shifted, a marble market had to be removed, it was the only East-West connectivity and traffic was high. But we addressed the problems.

What is the status of the Aarey Colony car shed?

The expert committee suggested an alternative location at Kanjurmarg for the depot and a smaller plot at Aarey for 16 stabling lines. The government is yet to take a decision on the report. The Kanjurmarg plot is government land, but it is under litigation. If the Kanjurmarg plot is not feasible, the committee has recommended a double-decker depot at Aarey with minimum cutting of trees.

Will the car shed controversy delay the project?

We have completed a lot of paperwork and have to get permissions from various agencies, and departments, including archives, sports, revenue, public works department, the BMC, Airport Authority of India, Bureau of Security, the Railway Board and the Mumbai police. We have acquired 83 per cent of the land required for the project.

We are now working on getting the remaining 17 per cent of land from the BMC. There are 45 land parcels in this 17 per cent, some for temporary use, some for permanent use. We have completed the utility mapping, and traffic diversion plan.

The Slum Rehabilitation Authority has handed over 500 tenements to house some of the Project Affected People.

Unlike previous projects I have undertaken, I have witnessed a sea change — all the multiple agencies involved in the project are co-operating very well for this project.

What are the challenges of the project, considering you are virtually going to cut open half of Mumbai's belly?

The advantage in Mumbai Metro III is that the tunnel boring machine will work 25 metres below surface. Utilities like telephone lines, electric cables are in first six metres below surface and will not be disturbed for the entire project by the tunnel work. However, utilities will be disturbed when we are building the metro stations, which are approximately one kilometre apart.

So every one kilometre, we will have to cut open a rectangular box, 280 metres by 27 metres in size. We will have to go down the cut area, and lay slabs for the stations. So only in this patch we will have to either divert these utility lines or support them with ducts when we complete the slabs. We have already prepared a traffic diversion plan through alternative roads where these stations are located.

In this project, there would be technological and geological challenges because of tunnelling. We will be tunnelling through a complete hard rock and because it is hard rock, the tunnel will be very safe. But tunnelling machines cannot work at very high speed, you might need more spare parts. We have anticipated such challenges, and prepared the tender documents.

At what stage is the relief and rehabilitation of the Project Affected People?

There are 2,400 project affected families, of which 1,600 are slum dwellers. We will give them free houses and provide them post-rehabilitation facilities at Kurla and Chakala. We have already got 500 SRA tenements. We have involved NGOs like SPARC and ICICI Foundation to ensure that we impart skill development programmes to people and set up self-help groups for women.

But, people in Girgaum and Kalbadevi are opposing the project? Has a solution been found to their objections?

Eight hundred families in Girgaum, Kalbadevi, Grant Road and Worli Naka are not slum dwellers; they are either tenants or sub tenants on private property. So PAP policy is not applicable to them. Ninety per cent said they want new houses and in the vicinity of the same area. Our relief and rehabilitation team as well as a consultant is in dialogue with them.

We are ready to give them temporary or even rented accommodation and are working on alternatives. We are telling people that do not look at this project as threat, but as an opportunity. I cannot claim a solution has been found, but it will soon emerge.

Is there a trust deficit?

People's experiences with transit accommodation have not been very good, and that's why they are apprehensive. But people have to believe in agencies like MMRDA. We are talking about smart cities, but if a smart city is not liveable, whatever cosmetic changes you make won't help. Projects like the Eastern Freeway and Sahar Road have benefitted people.

But, whatever road projects we implement, a growing city like Mumbai, which is a nerve centre of financial activity, they are not going to be adequate. There is no alternative to a metro like mass transit project.

Today, we have 75 per cent of the population travelling by public transport, but at what cost, and in what conditions do they have to travel. Isn't it our society's responsibility to give better facility to ourselves? Despite the constraints, we can undertake such a project. The more we delay, it will gradually become nearly impossible

When do you anticipate the project to be completed?

We expect it to start in 2016. Civil work will be completed in three-and-a-half to four years