GS-III: The fight over Mumbai’s Aarey Colony

News

Aarey Colony

The Aarey Milk Colony was envisioned by Dara N Khurody, the less famous colleague of Verghese Kurien. The two shared Ramon Magsaysay Award for their work in 1963. The Colony was established in 1949 and was inaugurated by then Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in 1951.

Why under siege?

- The felling of trees is aimed at creating space for the construction of a Mumbai Metro train shed, is being opposed by environmentalists as well as local residents.
- This has sparked campaigns and protests all across the country.
- The Aarey forest is very close to the Sanjay Gandhi National Park. The activists argue that the Aarey forest is part of the same vegetation cover.

Where do things stand in the Aarey Milk Colony tree-felling case matter?

- This means that while the Mumbai Metro Rail Corporation Limited (MMRCL) cannot cut any more trees at the site of the proposed car shed, it can go ahead with construction activity related to the project.
- The court directed that everyone arrested for protesting the felling of the trees should be released.

What is the core issue?

- The site is on the bank of the Mithi River, with several channels and tributaries flowing into it and construction for the “polluting industry” could flood Mumbai.
- The court accepted the letter of litigant as PIL and set up the special Bench.
- The petitioners had questioned the propriety and legality of the BMC Tree Authority’s permission for the tree-felling, and asked for Aarey to be declared a flood plain and a forest.
- Activists argue that Aarey is an extension of Sanjay Gandhi National Park, and that the car shed would pave the way for greater commercial exploitation of the area.

Why does Metro want the car shed here?

MMRCL argues that this land belongs to the state - it is with the Dairy Development Department — and therefore, the long, messy, and expensive process of acquisition can be avoided, with zero additional cost to citizens.

Aarey is located 800 metres from SEEPZ, the last station on the 33.5-km Colaba-SEEPZ line the optimum distance from where operations can be serviced swiftly.

How will this affect Aarey environment?

The proposed car shed will house washing, maintenance, and repair works facilities. A railway car shed is a “Red Category” industry, which causes the highest level of pollution. Activists say activities at the shed will generate oil, grease, and electrical waste, besides hazardous materials such as acid and paints. Also, construction of the depot will increase exploitation of ground water resources, they say.

What is the argument about the environmental cost of the project?

- According to a report the area is home to 86 species of butterfly, 90 species of spider, 46 species of reptiles, 34 species of wildflower, and nine leopards.
- As per the BMC’s tree census, there about 4.5 lakh trees in Aarey, which is described as Mumbai’s green lung.
- Activists says the Aarey depot plot is the sole surviving natural floodplain of the Mithi, whose reclamation through construction and felling of trees would lead to greater inundation during the monsoon.

Arguments for the Project

- The proposed car shed will be set up on only 33 hectares, which is barely 2% of the 1,278 hectares of the green belt.
- Also, the trees that were felled over the weekend stood on only 17% of the land earmarked for the car shed.
- The MMRCL has said that 60% of the trees are non-native and exotic, and can be replaced by native species.
- The MMRCL has argued that the Metro will bring enormous environmental benefits by reducing the overall carbon footprint.