

70 years of Independence

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HARNESSING INLAND WATERWAYS FOR GREENER ECONOMY AND INCLUSIVE GROWTH



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A sound and efficient transport infrastructure is the key to boosting economic growth and in turn, to alleviating poverty and promoting sustainable development. Inland water transport system ensures both, by way of providing access, mobility and connectivity and generating employment at the grassroots with lesser environmental footprint and cost.

In our civilization, rivers have played a crucial role as a mode of transport in carrying people and goods. Even in the present era, many countries depend heavily on inland water transport, especially for large and bulky cargo.

India is a land of rivers. It has 7500-km long coastline with approximately 14,500 kms of navigable waterways. This offers a huge potential for developing a cheaper and greener mode of transport. But only a very small percentage of trade is currently being carried out through these waterways and coastlines. Coastal shipping accounts for only 6 % and inland water transport for about 0.4% of trade.

Nearly 60 % of goods today travel by congested roads 25 % by rail networks. This slows down the movement of cargo, adds to uncertainties, increases the costs of trade, and leaves deep environmental footprints. It has been found that logistics costs in India account for about 18 percent of the country's GDP, which is much higher than China, USA, UK and many other countries. This makes Indian goods costlier and hence less competitive. As per World Bank analysis, the cost of transport of one tonne of freight over a km by road is Rs 2.28, by rail Rs 1.41

and Rs 1.19 for waterways. So logistics costs in the country can be brought down considerably by transporting more and more goods by waterways.

In this era of energy crisis, waterways have been found to be a fuel efficient, environment friendly and cost effective mode of transport, besides having the capacity to ease pressure on rail and road sectors. Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI), which came up in October 1986, acts as the nodal agency for optimum utilization of the vast untapped potential of our inland waterways.

The National Waterways Act, 2016, was an important watershed in the direction of developing the untapped potential of our inland waterways. Under the Act, 111 inland waterways across twenty four states have been declared as National Waterways (NWs). IWAI will be taking up projects for developing these waterways as environment friendly and sustainable modes of transport.

The first of such projects is the World Bank aided Jal Vikas Marg project on River Ganga, or the National Waterways 1. The objective of the project is to develop the stretch of river between Allahabad and Haldia to make it navigable for vessels with 1,500-2,000 tonne dead weight capacity. This is close to the carrying capacity of a goods train. For this, the project will develop a navigational channel of 2.2 to 3.0 meters depth and 35- 45 metre width. Multi-modal terminals are being constructed at Varanasi, Haldia, and Sahibganj, besides a Navigational Lock at Farakka. Modern systems of river information, training and conservancy works, night navigation facilities, and other modern facilities like channel marking, navigational lock, etc. are being developed to for efficient and safe movement of vessels. Phase-I of the project covers the Haldia—Varanasi stretch of the river. Once operational, the waterway will form part of a larger multi-modal transport network having linkage with the Eastern Dedicated Rail Freight Corridor and also with the area's existing network of highways. The cargo from the Gangetic states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh now takes circuitous land routes to reach the sea ports of Mumbai in Maharashtra and Kandla in Gujarat. The development of NW1 will help these states to send some of their freight to the Kolkata-Haldia complex, thus making the movement of freight more reliable with less logistical costs.

A joint venture is afoot with Thompson Design Group, Boston (USA) and Infrastructure Architecture Lab of Massachusetts Institute of Technology, to identify the best locations for construction of 18 ferry terminals in six cities, namely, Allahabad, Varanasi, Patna, Munger, Kolkata and Haldia on NW1. The feasibility study takes into account the capacity of freight and passenger movements of each city with a view to integrating these terminals with the existing transportation networks and facilities of each city.

The NW1 has the future of emerging as the leading logistical artery for the entire northern India, which passes through one of India's most densely populated areas and resource-rich regions, and generates an estimated 40 percent of India's traded goods. The region's teeming markets also attract goods from other parts of the country. The network of a water- road-rail link will help the

region's industries and manufacturing units to have a seamless flow of goods to markets in India and abroad. Further, it will also give wider market access to the farmers of this agriculturally-rich Gangetic plain.

Since the river Ganga occupies a special place in the social, cultural and environmental milieu of our country, the Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI) follows the principles of 'working with nature' to protect the river's diverse fauna and aquatic biodiversity. For this, minimum dredging is being undertaken for passage of large barges carrying up to 2,000 tonnes of cargo. In places where large shoals and islands exist, temporary structures of natural materials like bamboo are only used to channelize the water. IWAI is also ensuring that water traffic does not impact the two aquatic wildlife sanctuaries that fall along this stretch of the river -- the Kashi Turtle Sanctuary at Varanasi and the Vikramshila Dolphin Sanctuary at Bhagalpur.

IWAI is in the process of developing thirty seven more NWs in the next three years. Ro-Ro transportation has started between Dhubri and Hatsingamari and slipway facilities are being constructed at Pandu on River Brahmaputra, or NW-2. Normal development works are ongoing on NW-3. The development of NW-4 (Kakinada- Puducherry Canal along with Krishna & Godavari Rivers), NW- 5 (East Coast Canal with Brahmani & Mahanadi Delta), NW-16 (Barak), NW-37 (Gandak), NW-40 (Ghagra) and NW-58 (Kosi) also are in progress.

While developing the waterways, the legal framework governing inland waterways vessels is also being revamped. A new Bill is on the anvil to amend the century old inland Vessels Act, 1917, in keeping with needs of the modern inland water transport and the required legal framework. The 2017 Bill addresses the existing lacunae regarding variation of standards of inland vessels across the states. As per the Draft Bill, Central Government would be the nodal authority to stipulate uniformly applicable standards and measures for safe navigation of inland Vessels.

Once fully operational, the integrated system of water-road and rail network will herald a new era of inclusive growth and green economy in India.

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Views expressed in the article are author's personal.

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