

Emerging trends on Inland Water Transport



We have heard about the Ganga Nivas River cruise which starts at Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh and culminates at Dibrugarh in Assam, traversing for more than 3200 kms. This river cruise is the longest inland cruise in the world. Earlier this year, India's honourable Prime Minister inaugurated its maiden voyage on 13th January. Ganga Nivas cruise traverses through our national waterway giving glimpse of some of our iconic tourist destinations. However how many of you know about our national waterways. Hence this edition of Maritime musing is on National waterways No 1.



With a coastline of 7,500 km long and with 14,500 kms of navigable inland waterways our nation has an immense potential to tap an eco-friendly water based modal transport, which can complement rail and road-based cargo and passenger movement. Currently only 6% of our freight modal mix is from coastal and inland waterway transportation, whereas our neighbouring countries like Bangladesh and Thailand have over 12 percent

of water-based transport, emphasizing the scope for improvement in India. This transportation should also integrate with hinterland rail and road transportation. Similarly, the inland water transportation system, integrated with the coastal waters transportation, will provide unique transportation system in the country reducing both logistic cost and improving the carbon footprint. While getting integrated with rail and road transportation modes this will facilitate efficient supply chains benefiting both for industrial and public sector.

Transportation is also fundamental to sustainable development of any country. The dependence on rail and road for nearly 95% of logistics has a direct cost on environment due to the excessive use of fossil fuels. Water transportation with the addition of newer technologies is expected to be a panacea against environmental degradation caused by land-based transport.

It is also well-known that inland water transport is also a cheap mode of transportation compared with rail and road if there is an economics of scale. Maritime Vision Document 2030 is expecting Rs 3 lakh crore worth of investments in port projects, shipping, and inland waterways generating a great potential for employment of over 20 lakh individuals. Coastal and Inland transportation have a great share in this expectation and hence by creating an effective and enabling environment investment in these sectors will become attractive.

In 1986 Government of India established Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI) to harness the potential of inland water transport, and since then they have been working towards management and development of inland waterways. Further to this the government has also started the Jal Marg Vikash Project with a view to developing an integrated inland water transportation and associated infrastructure. This includes fairway development, dredging works, navigational aids, development of river terminals and revamping of existing facilities. With over 5,000 km of navigable inland waterways, the Inland Water Authority of India (IWAI) has declared 5 Waterways (NW1,2,3,4 and 5) as National waterways, covering a total 4,434 km of inland water with various routes. This includes the rivers Brahmaputra, Ganga, Krishna Godavari, backwaters of Kerala, and Brahmani Mahanadi river system along with East Coast Canal. Total 105 navigable rivers were declared as National Waterways in 2016 by the government by the National Waterways Act, 2016 of which only five waterways were recognized as National Waterways (NWs).

Under these National Waterways, many are operational for shipping, navigation, and cargo/passenger vessels. National Waterway-1 (Ganga-Bhagirathi-Hooghly river system from Allahabad to Haldia), National Waterway-2 (River Brahmaputra from Dhubri to Sadiya), National Waterway-3 (West Coast Canal from Kottapuram to Kollam) along with Udyogmandal and Champakaria Canals) have already been developed with fairways, jetties, navigational aids and terminals with mechanized equipment handling facilities for loading and unloading of cargo.

In India, almost half the population lives around the Ganges River belt. In terms of trade, 1/5th of all India's freight originates, and 1/3rd terminates in the states around the Ganges belt. Due to the congestion based

by the cities and space constraints, there is hardly any scope for land-based development in the region. Hence, river Ganga can play a pivotal role in generating growth prospects for sustainable economic development of the region. This will provide a cost efficient, economic, reliable, safe and environment friendly mode of transport. When developed for use by modern inland vessels operating on dependable fairway, it can reduce congestion and investment needs in rail and road infrastructure, promote greater complementarities in the riparian states, enhance intra-regional trade and through increased economies of scale, significantly reduce overall logistics costs for the benefit of the entire economy and India's global trade competitiveness.

Hence among the NWs under development, NW-1 hold immense significance as they will help movement of passenger and cargo from the nearest major port in Kolkata. The Allahabad-Haldia stretch (1620km) of Ganga-Bhagirathi-Hooghly River system was declared as NW-1 in the year 1986 and is a waterway of national significance passing through four (4) states of West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. It links the gateway ports of Haldia and Kolkata to Bhagalpur, Patna, Ghazipur, Varanasi and Allahabad, their industrial hinterland, and several other industrial hubs located along the Ganga basin. The Jal Marg Vikash Project (JMVP) on NW-1 is being implemented with the financial and technical support of the World Bank. The Project entails development of fairway with 3 meters depth between Varanasi and Haldia (Phase-I) covering 1280 km at an estimated cost of Rs. 5369 crores with target for completion in six years. This involves construction of a multimodal terminal at Varanasi, Sahib Ganj and a new navigation dock at Farakka with midway floating jetties and River management systems. Varanasi is completed, and Haldia and Sahibganj are in final stages of completion.

These waterways are being developed to leverage from EXIM trade with countries like Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar and Nepal. India has already signed Treaty with these countries to include Inland Waterways mode as a mode of Trade and Transit between the countries. It provides immense opportunities to private sector in areas like dredging, setting up MSMEs/SMEs in the catchment areas, river tourism etc.

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The Author
Rajesh Menon
Advisor at Nevoxel

(Rajesh is a Maritime Expert with nearly 25 years in Infrastructure and Maritime. He advises Maritime Organisations in Strategy and Capacity Building.)

