

India's Inland Waterways

Why in news?

The Uttar Pradesh government's decision to leverage inland waterways to move export-bound cargo to international seaports seems a welcome step towards developing a multimodal transport system in the country.

What could be done better?

- The intention of Uttar Pradesh (a land-locked state) is to use the vast stretch of the river Ganga to carry goods directly to the Haldia port in West Bengal for shipments abroad.
- But the integration of the Varanasi-Haldia inland waterway with the existing roads and highways network would translate into a convenient and coherent cargo and passenger transportation system.
- More importantly, it might spur other states also to gainfully utilise their water transport potential, which is either not harnessed or is grossly underutilised at present.

What is India's potential inland waterways sector?

- India has a huge inland waterways network spanning nearly 15,000 km.
- This inland waterways network is in the form of rivers, rivulets, canals, backwaters, creeks, and other kinds of water bodies, which can be used for the movement of goods and passengers.

How is India using its inland waterways?

- The National Waterways Act, 2016, has identified as many as 111 navigable water courses and declared them "national inland waterways".
- Only about 25 of them have so far been developed into operable water channels and merely 13 are being used fully or partially for this purpose.
- The significant ones among them are
 1. Ganga-Bhagirathi-Hooghly track;
 2. Brahmaputra;
 3. Barak;
 4. The rivers in Goa;
 5. The backwaters in Kerala;
 6. The inland waters in the Godavari-Krishna deltaic area; and
 7. The water stretches in the Mumbai region.
- Most other commercially navigable waterways are largely unutilised despite the exigency of expanding the overall transport and logistics network to cater to the growing needs of the developing economy.

- Not more than 60 million tonnes of cargo is carried through these waterways annually.
- This compares rather poorly with countries like the US and China, and the European Union.

In the European Union, more than 20% of merchandise transportation is done through waterways.

- With the passing of the Inland Vessels Act in India in 2021, the situation might begin to look up.
- This is because this statute is aimed specifically at making the inland waterways of India a viable, convenient, and thriving mode of transportation for both freight and passengers.

What is the significance of the Inland water transportation?

- Inland water transportation, indisputably, is a relatively cost-effective, hassle-free, and environment-friendly mode of ferrying goods, especially bulk cargo such as coal, fly-ash, iron, and odd-sized consignments.
- A World Bank study has found that water transportation is about 30% cheaper than railways and 60% less expensive than roadways.
- Besides, the carbon emission is merely 32-36 g per tonne-km in the case of container vessels, against 51-91 g by road transport vehicles.
- Such gains make it a preferable mode of conveyance where the speed of delivery is not a significant issue.

How can these inland waterways be utilized?

- There are some prerequisites for the optimal utilisation of inland waterways.
- For one, these water courses would need to be regularly dredged to clear silt, weeds, and other obstructions.
- Besides, the network of terminal facilities and loading and unloading points would need to be augmented, though some work is said to be already underway on this front.
- On top of that, adequate water flows would need to be maintained in these streams at all times.
- Otherwise, the huge potential of this sector would remain poorly harnessed, as it is now.

Reference

1. [Business Standard | Smooth Flow](#)