

INDIA RIVERS WEEK 2022

Rivers as transport waterways in India: Bane or boon?

Navigation in rivers, lakes and other water bodies has been around since centuries. It was used for transport of goods and people and provided a continuum with the marine navigation at many places. In the Ganga basin, such navigation was possible till Prayagraj, Kanpur and Delhi.

Ganga and several other rivers were declared as National Waterways (NWs) from the 1980s onwards. However, right after the formation of the NDA government in 2014, at the Ganga Manthan meeting, the government declared its intentions to promote navigation in Ganga and other rivers. In March 2016, the Government of India launched a massive and ambitious program to convert rivers of India into national inland waterways with the passage of a bill by the parliament to convert 111 rivers across the country into National Waterways. The aim - to develop these rivers into large navigational and transport channels. This is much larger in its extent, impact and scale as compared to traditional navigation.

This means that rivers will be used to transport large commercial vessels, barges (500 to 3000 tons capacity), container ships and cruise vessels. In addition to the National Waterways, which are to be regulated and managed by central authorities, several other inland waterways are also being planned under the control of state governments.

Claims of waterways being a cheap and environment-friendly means of transport are plenty, but serious questions remain about the cost-effectiveness of these waterways. They are also likely to have massive adverse impacts on the environment, ecology and local communities, especially fishing communities. The waterways probably represent the single largest intervention and threat to our rivers after large dams. Moreover, the plans for these waterways indicate that they are designed to cater to large commercial and corporate users. The needs of smaller users and local populations may end up being completely bypassed or even adversely impacted.

There is therefore a need to look at the waterways comprehensively and understand, assess and contest their serious impacts. It is important to explore if Indian rivers can be used for navigation, and if so, in safe and sustainable ways, without damaging the riverine ecology and local livelihoods. It is necessary to prioritize the needs of local river dependent communities, in decisions

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that are made in a free and apriori informed way. This decision-making process must also have an independent scientific overview.

In order to bring together broad and wide-ranging discourse on the various dimensions of converting the rivers as waterways in the country, India Rivers Week 2022 shall explore the theme 'Rivers as transport waterways in India: bane or boon?' over five different online sessions to be held on 26th and 27th November 2022.

A brief view of the 5 sessions:

1. **OVERVIEW OF INDIAN INLAND WATERWAYS**: This session will cover the basic contours of the National Waterways programme: which waterways are being developed on priority basis, the claims, reality, costs, benefits, and broad impacts of the waterways. We will explore the traditional use of rivers as waterways and their current status. The session will also cover transboundary connectivity through Inland Waterways on rivers which flow across and / or along borders with our neighboring countries, including Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan.
2. **VIABILITY OF INDIAN WATERWAYS**: This session will examine issues related to economic, hydrologic, environmental, social viability of Indian Inland Waterways, and comparisons and aspirations to develop waterways as those of U.S, Europe, China etc. It will test the claims of waterways being cheap and competitive, going into details of factors that influence viability, and look at specific cases of proposed / existing NWs and their associated infrastructure such as the Multi-Modal Inland Terminals.
3. **IMPACTS OF INDIAN WATERWAYS**: This session will focus on the environmental and livelihoods impacts of Inland Waterways. Interventions required for waterways have severe impacts on river systems, destroying their integrity, disrupting river hydrology, morphology and river dynamics, damaging habitats, and more. These interventions include dredging, construction of dams, locks and gates, river ports, etc.; movement of large barges on rivers; handling of cargo such as coal, fly ash, iron ore, hazardous cargo and their spillage in water. All of these and the resultant noise, turbidity, leakage of lubricants and oil etc. have many adverse environmental impacts. Many of the concerned river stretches are polluted, and dredging to maintain the adequate depth also releases the pollutants settled in the rivers.

Environmental impacts include adverse impacts on fish, and spills into livelihoods impacts for fisherfolk. These are aggravated by tearing of nets due to barge movements and restriction on fishers from accessing large parts of rivers. This session will also discuss social impacts including impacts on small-boat operators due to focus on large players; impacts, displacement due to land acquisition and impacts on communities due to bank

erosion.

4. **GOVERNANCE OF INDIAN WATERWAYS:** This session shall deal with the Legal, Regulatory and Governance Issues regarding the Inland Waterways. This will cover the inadequacy as well as dilution of legal regime on assessment of impacts, and the need for legally binding Environmental Safeguards, impact assessments and other regulatory protocols. It will examine the role of institutions such as MoEF&CC, National Green Tribunal, IWAI, and private commercial players, and host a critical review of the environmental studies and impact assessments proposed and done by IWAI. Attempt shall be made to compare and contrast the governance models followed by few other countries.
5. **RIVERS AS WATERWAYS IN INDIA: BANE OR BOON?:** This closing session will include a summary of discussions in the first four sessions mentioned above. The session shall conclude with a discussion on how waterways can serve the real needs of our communities, without compromising the ecological integrity of our rivers. It will also examine current steps rolled out by the government with claims of meeting needs of smaller users, whether these constitute sincere efforts or only lip service, and what more needs to be done to ensure that focus is on smaller players, needs of local communities, interest of riparian and fisher communities.

India Rivers Week 2022 will bring together river protection activists, activists from areas where waterways are being developed, representatives of local affected communities, representatives of movements, fish-workers, decision makers, officials, researchers, academics, scientists, lawyers, administrators, policy makers, etc, all working on a range of issues related with the inland waterways. All sessions will be a mix of lead / overview presentations, panel discussions with panelists drawn from all the above, as well as participant questions, comments and discussions.

The India Rivers Week 2022 programme is conceptualised by the Organizing Committee of India Rivers Forum (IRF) along with Manthan Adhyayan Kendra.

India Rivers Forum (IRF) is an active network of organizations & individuals who have dedicated themselves to work for the rejuvenation & restoration of rivers. India Rivers Week (IRW) & India Rivers Day (IRD) are annual events conducted by IRF, focused on pressing issues concerning our rivers.

See more on the IRF website: www.indiariversforum.org

Manthan Adhyayan Kendra is an independent centre studying and monitoring the inland waterways programme in India for the last seven years.

See more on Manthan's website: <https://www.manthan-india.org>

You can read more about the Inland Waterways and various issues related to the waterways program with the links below.

- [Strategic status report on Inland Waterways - Manthan Adhyayan Kendra](#)
 - [Grand plans - Many questions | Manthan Adhyayan Kendra](#)
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To stay updated with announcements on India Rivers Week 2022, fill this quick form with your name and email: https://bit.ly/IRW22_interestform