Reviving Inland waterways

Why in news?

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India revives its inland waterways for freight movement with a shipment of 16 containers owned by PepsiCo reaching the new multi-modal terminal at Varanasi.

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What is the background?

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- The push to revive the country's waterways as viable commercial freight corridors is one among the big-ticket infrastructure initiatives of the government.
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- Rivers and canals were traditionally used in pre-modern India to transport humans and materials, and to carry out trading activity.
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- Inland waterways started to decline with the advent of widespread road and rail networks.
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- Long, slow voyages began to be considered incompatible with the faster pace of doing business.
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- Also, presence of silt deposits led to channels becoming increasingly shallow and the commerce dried up in the traditional docks and ports.
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- Hence to realise the maximum potential of this sector, the Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI) was established in 1986.
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- Five waterways were identified by IWAI, but the investment in them remained inadequate.
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- Between 1986 and 2014, India spent only Rs 1,456 crore on its inland waterways.
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- In comparison, China invested Rs 1,09,000 crore from 2005-10, and Germany

pumped in Rs 77,000 crore in its waterways in 2016 alone.
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- However, India increased its investments to Rs 1,605 crore in this sector from 2014-18.
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- The National Waterways Act, 2016 merged existing Acts to make a law to notify 106 National Waterways, including the existing five.
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What is the potential?

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- India has 14,500 km of navigable waterways in rivers, canals, backwaters, creeks, etc.
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- About 55 million tonnes of cargo moves on waterways, but the activity is largely restricted to –
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1. The Ganga-Bhagirathi-Hooghly system
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2. The Brahmaputra
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3. The Barak river
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4. The rivers in Goa
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5. The backwaters of Kerala
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6. Inland waterways in Mumbai
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7. The delta regions of the Godavari and Krishna.
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- Overall, waterways account for just about 3% of all freight movement in India, and the mode remains grossly underutilised.
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- However, the same amount of energy can move several times more cargo (by weight) by water than it can move via rail or by road.

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What are the constraints?

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- There are multiple constraints in transporting men and materials perennially on inland waterway corridors.
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- Periodic dredging is required to clear the silt that comes with the monsoon, so that adequate depth is maintained.
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- Both fixed and floating terminals are needed at multiple points along the waterways.
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- Many rivers are becoming progressively drier and many of those that retain adequate volumes are spanned by low bridges that would hinder passage of larger vessels.
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What are the measures taken?

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- The Jalmarg Vikas Project receives financial assistance from the World Bank to upgrade navigability on National Waterway 1 from Varanasi to Haldia, a distance of 1,380 km.
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- The project seeks to develop a fairway of 3-metre depth in phases, at an estimated cost of Rs 5,369 crore.
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- The project is intended to be completed by 2023.
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- There are plans to develop three multimodal terminals along National Waterway 1.
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- Apart from the one in Varanasi, being built for Rs 169.59 crore, there is one planned in Sahibganj in Jharkhand, and the third in Haldia.
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- It also involves building a Farakka navigation lock for Rs 359 crore, to be completed by June 2019.
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- The government has also tapped the National Clean Energy Fund and the Central Road Fund for the initiative, and has borrowed from the market by issuing government bonds.
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- Along with that, two barges carrying 1,233 tonnes of fly ash were recently flagged off on river Ganga (National Waterway-1) from Kahalgaon power plant in Bihar.
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- The barges will travel 2,085 km across multiple waterways to reach Pandu Inland Port in Assam.
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- This could make our waterways establish themselves as possible for cargo transportation and make compete with other sectors.
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- The journey also marks one of the longest hauls in waterways sector movement in India.
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- The government called it a critical integrated movement through three waterways such as NW1 on the Ganga, the Indo-Bangladesh Protocol (IBP) route, and NW2 on the Brahmaputra.
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- Also since August 2016, pilot movements have been carried out on various stretches of NW1.
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- More than 15 voyages have been completed, including integrated movements through multiple waterways.
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- The present journey is part of an effort by the government to resurrect the Ganga as a significant transportation artery.
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- The terminal has been designed mainly for construction material, food grains, cement, and fertilisers.
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- Thus the PepsiCo cargo shows that a commercial shipment can use Inland waterways as a viable, working route for transportation.
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Source: The Indian Express

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