

CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THE REASONS FOR THE UNDERUTILIZATION OF COASTAL SHIPPING IN INDIA

The Burdened Transportation System and the Need for Coastal Shipping

India's transportation system, particularly its road and rail networks, is struggling to keep pace with the nation's rapid growth. A burgeoning population and significant increase in freight movement have placed immense stress on these traditional methods of transportation. Highway congestion is a major concern, leading to:

Reduced Safety and Security: Traffic jams create a chaotic environment, increasing the risk of accidents and endangering people, goods, and vehicles.

Unreliable and Unpredictable Services: Delays caused by congestion disrupt schedules and make it difficult to plan transportation effectively.

Inefficient Operations: Congestion at ports and on roads leads to bottlenecks at terminals and hinders intermodal operations.

Economic Losses: Reduced travel speeds due to congestion translate to losses for transport operators, which are often passed on to consumers through higher prices.

The problem extends beyond traffic jams. Many ports, terminals, and intermodal facilities are situated near populated areas. This proximity often means:

Deteriorating Infrastructure: Aging bridges and limited connecting roads force heavy trucks onto local streets, causing significant wear and tear.

Increased Pollution: The additional traffic on local roads contributes to noise and air pollution, negatively impacting the health and well-being of nearby communities.

While rail offers a more substantial and growing service alternative, its limitations are significant:

High Infrastructure Costs: Expanding rail infrastructure is expensive, hindering its ability to fully replace road transportation for freight movement.

Network Capacity Constraints: The existing rail network already struggles to handle current freight volumes, limiting its potential to absorb additional traffic.

Coastal Shipping: An Underutilized Solution

Coastal shipping presents a compelling solution to address the aforementioned issues and significantly increase the capacity for freight movement across India. It offers several advantages over land-based transportation:

Reduced Congestion: Coastal shipping diverts freight away from congested roads and railways, alleviating pressure on these vital transportation arteries.

Enhanced Safety: Maritime transport boasts a strong safety record, offering a safer alternative for moving large quantities of goods.

Environmental Benefits: Coastal shipping has a lower carbon footprint compared to road transport, contributing to a cleaner environment.

Cost-Effectiveness: In many cases, coastal shipping can be a more cost-effective way to move goods over long distances.

Despite these advantages, coastal shipping in India remains an underutilized sector. This underdevelopment is partly due to a lack of attention from both the government and industry stakeholders.

A Multifaceted Challenge: Examining the Root Causes

India's struggle with underutilized coastal shipping is not a new phenomenon. Issues plaguing the sector have been documented for decades, dating back to reports from committees like the Rail Sea Coordination (Lokpur) Committee Report of 1957. A concerning trend has emerged: subsequent committees and studies established to address coastal shipping challenges often reiterate the same problems with minimal variation.

The complexities involved in revitalizing coastal shipping extend beyond the purview of a single ministry. Effective solutions require coordinated efforts from various government bodies, including:

Ministry of Shipping and DG Shipping

State Governments/Maritime Boards

Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gases

Ministry of Railways

Ministry of Road, Transport, and Highways

Ministry of Finance

The current fragmented approach hinders progress. India needs a more holistic strategy. Ideally, a dedicated, unified ministry with a clear mandate to create a multimodal transportation network aligned with national development goals should be established. This ministry could oversee the transformation of existing ministries into departments focused on building essential infrastructure and delivering efficient transportation services.

By comprehensively understanding the challenges and fostering a collaborative approach, India can unlock the immense potential of coastal shipping and create a more robust, efficient, and sustainable transportation system for the nation.