

Experts urge govt to set up institution to govern water transport



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KATHMANDU, June 29: Experts on water resources Thursday called for establishing of an institution to govern water transport in Nepal to develop navigation as an alternative mode of transport here.

Speaking at a national policy dialogue on ‘Promoting Navigational Usage of Inland Waterways in Ganga and Brahmaputra Basins’ organized by South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics and Environment (SAWTEE) in Kathmandu, they said such an institution could look into the viability and prospects of inland waterways for transboundary connectivity.

Ajay Dixit, the executive director of the Institute for Social and Environmental Transition (ISET-Nepal), said domination of political economy of automobile and surface transport in Nepal had stunted development of alternative modes of transport. Dixit said commercial navigation may be possible in the lower stretches of large rivers. “But it would require massive river engineering, be it constructing embankments or canalizing the river,” he added.

Dwarika Nath Dhungel, an expert on water resources, said that some attempts had been made two decades ago to develop a multi-modal transport system to connect the hilly areas. But impetus on road construction had diverted the focus to developing only surface transport, he said, adding that a study was needed to gauge how complementary water transport would be to surface transport, especially in terms of long-haul transport.

According to Madhav Belbase, joint secretary at the Water and Energy Commission Secretariat, Nepal's water resources is dependent on rain during the four months of monsoon. "If we were to consider commercial navigation, then maintaining of the depth and the channel would be crucial. So without constructing dams, we cannot expect to develop a waterway," he said.

Rajan Sharma, an expert on transport logistics and former president of Nepal Freight Forwarders Association, said water transport was considered to be the cheapest form of transport but cost of insurance and liabilities coverage, and of cargo handling at harbors added to the cost of trading. "Considering the cost of transporting cargos through river for landlocked countries like Nepal, the cost of freight movement depends on the transit providing country as well," he said.

Posh Raj Pandey, the chairman of SAWTEE, urged policy-makers to take advantage of India's aggressive push into inland waterways by developing navigation within Nepal so that Nepal could be ready to access the high seas through the waterways.

Dikshya Singh, a research officer at SAWTEE, said a comprehensive feasibility study of the rivers to assess navigability, the upgrading of existing traditional boating services at the rivers, and identifying the possibility of multi-modal transport system internally would be the first steps that should be taken to develop water navigational services in Nepal.