

# THE KEN-BETWA PROJECT REFLECTS THE ILL-CONCEIVED RATIONALE BEHIND RIVER-LINKING

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Development, and EIA

The dried-up bed of Betwa river on the outskirts of Bhopal. | Photo Credit: [File photo/PTI](#)

On a mid-March morning in 2008, as our convoy of cars entered the Panna Tiger Reserve in Madhya Pradesh, I could see wheat crops on either side of a mostly kutchra road in various states of readiness. Signs of a waning winter and waiting spring were all around me in the forest vegetation. The flame of the forest was already brightly in bloom. But the southwest monsoon, the previous year, had been 30% below normal in this region of Bundelkhand (which straddles Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh), and the depleted Ken River reflected the shortfall.

I was part of an expert committee on the Interlinking of Rivers (ILR) programme, constituted by the Union Ministry of Water Resources in 2005-06, on my way to talk to the people of Daudhan village in Chhatarpur district, through which the Ken River flows. ILR envisaged 30 river links both in the Himalayas and peninsular India, an ambitious project that was first conceptualised in the 1980s as part of the National Perspective Plan by the irrigation ministry to link rivers with 'surplus water' to those with 'deficit water'. The detailed scheme, made public in 2002, included the Ken-Betwa Link Project that proposed to link the Ken River that flows through Panna in Madhya Pradesh, and the Betwa River that runs through central Madhya Pradesh and southern Uttar Pradesh. The rationale was to augment water in the Betwa by linking it with the Ken, which, it was claimed, has surplus water. The proposal picked up momentum in the early 2000s, and was finally given environment clearance in 2017.

## Spirited opposition

I did not anticipate the storm of spirited opposition that hit us from the people of Daudhan village, which is located close to the proposed Greater Gangau Dam site, the main dam that would facilitate the proposed Ken-Betwa Link Project through a 230 km long canal. Ten villages, including Daudhan, were expected to be submerged, with over 10,000 people displaced.

No one expected the people of Daudhan to know about our visit. But they did, and the atmosphere at the meeting was charged. An elderly woman, Dadi, made it abundantly clear that they wouldn't leave their village, come what may. Everyone at the meeting was vehemently opposed to the project.

A memorandum in Hindi, submitted by the people of Daudhan village, read thus: "The whole village is against displacement to another place. We have clean water, air, forests and land for agriculture, which won't be available to us at a new place. All of us want basic facilities like electricity, roads, schools and health facilities, so we can enjoy a basic standard of living. So, instead of displacing us, kindly help us get these basic facilities." We received about a dozen memorandums during the visit.

Cut to 13 years later. On March 22, 2021, Prime Minister Narendra Modi presided over the signing of a memorandum of agreement between the chief ministers of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, which talks about the water distribution between the two States. The current cost of the Ken-Betwa project is 38,000 crore, and the contours of the ecological destruction that the project will wreak are clearer now: 9,000 ha of submergence, most of it in the Panna Tiger Reserve. This would include the felling of 23 lakh trees with a girth of 20 cm or more. The key

wildlife species that will be affected include tigers, endangered vultures, mahseer fish, and gharials in the Ken Gharial Sanctuary.

The primary question, however, is this. Even after all this unbelievable destruction in the Bundelkhand region, will the project help the people? As early as 2005-8, Panna's district magistrate wrote a series of letters to the Planning Commission and the principal secretary of water resources in Madhya Pradesh and he concluded: "Ken Betwa Project is [a] disaster for Ken Basin People, there is NO surplus water in Ken Basin". The claim by the National Water Development Agency (NWDA), formed in the 1980s to study the proposed ILR, is that the Ken has surplus water; but these hydrological figures have never passed independent scrutiny.

There are bottlenecks to the project's clearance. NWDA applied for forest clearance in 2015 but the Stage I forest clearance accorded in May 2017 stipulates several conditions that would imply a fundamental restructuring of the project. The conditions include that the proposed 78 MW power house shall not be constructed in the forest area and that no building material is to be taken from the forest, among others.

### **Unique ecosystem**

Then, the wildlife clearance recommended by the standing committee of the National Board of Wildlife in a meeting in 2016 has also been challenged by the central empowered committee (CEC) of the Supreme Court in a scathing report of August 2019. The CEC concluded that the standing committee had not examined the "Impact of the project on the downstream Gharial Sanctuary and the vulture nesting sites", and has "not taken into account the decision of this Hon'ble court... wherein it is held that our approach should be eco-centric and not anthropocentric".

The CEC report notes "the loss of the special and unique ecosystem of gorges, rocky cliffs and riverine flora and fauna on either [bank] of the River Ken." It adds: "The wildlife including micro flora and fauna which have evolved in this ecosystem will, on commissioning of the project, perish forever... Most of the important geological sites are going to be affected either by submergence upstream of the proposed dam or would dry up when the full flow of [the] river is arrested by the proposed dam. No amount of mitigative measures can create this kind of unique ecosystem which has evolved over millions of years to reach the present level of biodiversity." Indeed, during a 2017 visit, I was mesmerised by the beauty of the Ken River downstream of Panna Tiger Reserve; it is rightly likened to a mini Grand Canyon and Niagara Falls.

A challenge to the environmental clearance given to the Ken-Betwa project is pending before the National Green Tribunal. The environmental impact assessment of the project, based on which the project was given environmental clearance in 2017, was shamefully shoddy: there is little in it about the biodiversity that will be destroyed. A number of official agencies, including the Forest Advisory Committee within the environment ministry, have noted factual errors and inadequacies in the assessment.

### **Huge manipulation**

The recommendation of environmental clearance for the project by the expert appraisal committee of the environment ministry in 2016 was a huge exercise in manipulation. In fact, there has been opposition, manipulation, non-transparency and compromised decision making at every step of the project. The project has to get a final forest clearance, and even here, there could be legal challenges. The entire process exemplifies how a development project should not be undertaken.

At the heart of India's river linking project is a 'surplus-deficit' claim. But a scientific case for such a claim can be made only with an exhaustive assessment of all available options of water resource development in any basin or sub-basin, including rainwater harvesting, groundwater recharge, watershed development, protecting wetlands, forests, soil moisture, optimising existing storage infrastructure, sustainable cropping patterns, demand-side management, reuse and recycling of sewage, and so on. No such assessment has been made for any basin or sub-basin in India. The equating of floods with surplus and drought with deficit is also fundamentally flawed because these could be seasonal phenomena.

In fact, there is general acceptance of the fact that groundwater is, and has been, at least for the last four decades, India's water lifeline. The focus of our water resources policy, plans, projects and practices, therefore, should be about nurturing this lifeline. This would include identifying and protecting existing groundwater recharge mechanisms, enhancing recharge where feasible, installing artificial recharge where possible and necessary, and also regulating groundwater use at aquifer level.

One thing is clear. River linking projects are not going to help us save this lifeline.

*The writer is the coordinator of the South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers & People.*

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