

## A HUGE, COSTLY MISTAKE

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

A river project which remained a pipe dream for more than three decades after it was first mooted may now become a reality. Last month, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and the Centre signed a tripartite agreement to transfer “surplus” water from the Ken basin in M.P. to the “deficit” Betwa basin in U.P. The Ken-Betwa project is part of the national river linking project which proposes to connect 14 Himalayan and 16 peninsular rivers with 30 canals and 3,000 reservoirs in order to irrigate 87 million hectares of land. It has the status of a national project, as the Centre will contribute 90% of the cost. It is India’s first river linking project and will take eight years to complete.

First mooted in the 1980s, the Ken-Betwa project was taken up seriously only during former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee’s regime. Since then, former Union Water Resources Minister Uma Bharti has been the torch-bearer of the project. The project, the government says, will enhance the irrigation potential of the water-starved Bundelkhand region in U.P. and M.P., facilitate groundwater recharge and reduce the occurrence of floods. According to the Memorandum of Agreement signed, the to-be-built Daudhan dam is expected to irrigate nearly 6,00,000 hectares in four districts in M.P. and 2,51,000 hectares in four districts in U.P. and provide drinking water supply to 41 lakh people in M.P. and 21 lakh in U.P.

However, the excitement of planners and politicians about this project, which costs 37,611 crore (2018 figure), is reportedly missing on the ground. The people of the region who are going to be affected by the project seem resigned to their fate. In public hearings held in the past, they were divided on political lines and also worried about the loss of the ecosystem and displacement.

The project was on the drawing board for years mainly due to environmental concerns. Of the 12,500 hectares of land to get submerged by the project, more than 9,000 ha are categorised as forest land. The submergence area includes a critically important section of the Panna Tiger Reserve. The Reserve is considered as a shining example of conservation after it successfully improved the tiger and vulture populations. Echoing the concerns of environmentalists, Congress president Sonia Gandhi wrote to Union Environment Minister Prakash Javadekar asking him not to implement the project. She said “around 40% of the area of the tiger reserve will be irretrievably damaged” if the project is implemented. Also, the project may destroy about 7.2 lakh trees. South Asia Network on Dams, River and People convener Himanshu Thakkar fears that this will affect rainfall in the already parched region.

The claims of Ken having surplus water may be unrealistic as the river is not perennial — in the past sometimes, it has slowed to a trickle. Another difficulty will be that the Ken flows 60-70 feet lower than the Betwa and at least 30% of the 103 MW power generated will be used for pumping the water up. The Union Ministry and the National Water Development Agency, which is entrusted with the project, have some issues to sort out. These include getting clearance from the Central Empowered Committee of the Supreme Court, which had raised concerns about the project. The cost-benefits calculations of the project also don’t take into consideration the environmental and social impacts. Thus, the benefits do not seem certain and are far outweighed by the costs on the environment.

It is surprising that alternatives such as water-conservation and water-harvesting methods without building a dam haven’t been seriously considered in the region. Large-scale solutions such as this are not always viable and the best. Given the serious doubts about the benefits of the project and the monumental toll that it would have on the ecosystem, including on carefully

preserved wildlife, the Ken-Betwa project seems like a huge, costly mistake.

Sunny Sebastian is a former Vice-Chancellor and member, Rajasthan State Board for Wildlife

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To reassure Indian Muslims, the PM needs to state that the govt. will not conduct an exercise like NRC

**END**

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