

CAMPAIGN TO DEFEND NATURE AND PEOPLE

98140 01836 

Chair: Professor Jagmohan Singh

 jagmohan08@gmail.com

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Condemn the violation of the rights of project-affected people of Ken-Betwa Interlinking

Cancel the project which will only benefit the political-contractor lobby, compensate the people, and implement decentralized alternatives to make Bundelkhand water-secure, and also protect nature and livelihoods

As the Chita Andolan of people protesting against their displacement by the Ken-Betwa river interlinking project enters its 12th day, Campaign to Defend Nature and People (CDNP) expresses its solidarity with them. *We condemn the interlinked illegalities and injustices that the Ken-Betwa project has become. This is evident in the clearance given to a project that is devoid of rationale, through a deeply flawed process, and its implementation through illegal coercive displacement.*

The Ken-Betwa Link Project, approved by the Union Cabinet in December 2021, just before the Uttar Pradesh elections, aims to transfer so-called “surplus” water from the Ken river basin to Betwa river basin to provide drinking water to 6.2 million people and irrigate 1.062 million hectares in “water-deficient” areas of Bundelkhand spread across Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. The main part of the first phase of the project is the Daudhan dam, which will collect “surplus” water from the Ken River and send it through a 221-kilometre canal to the Betwa basin. The Daudhan dam itself will displace 5,288 families in Chhatarpur and 1,400 families in Panna districts of Madhya Pradesh. The whole project is expected to cost around INR 45,000 crore, and will drown portions of the Panna National Park and Tiger Reserve, a crucial habitat for tigers.

Imaginary surplus water and iniquitous distribution

The concept of “surplus” and “deficit” basins has no credibility. The concept of a “surplus” basin is based on a narrow focus on water for certain human needs in part of these basins rather than the comprehensive assessment of the functions and services provided by the so called “surplus.” For example, the “surplus” water in a basin is often the driver of sediment movement through river systems, and maintaining sediment dynamics is crucial for the ecological and water quality integrity of rivers. Also, the paradigm of “surplus” and “deficit” basins is based on the premise of an unvarying climate and its associated river flow in both so-called “surplus” and “deficit” basins. However, many parts of India are undergoing changes in the monsoon regime and are expected to undergo even more changes in the coming decades due to complex effects of warming atmosphere and oceans, impacts of aerosols and land-cover change. Furthermore, the temporal and spatial distribution of rainfall has become more variable. The so-called “surplus” basins may in fact face severe water stress due to shifts in the

distribution of rainfall. Short-term accelerated flows may be seen in rivers, which cannot be the basis for decisions with major hydrological implications. Serious doubts have been expressed that in drought years, the actual availability of water will be less than the projected flows of Ken and Betwa in various studies for the project. Moreover, the flow data of Ken and Betwa is not available in the public domain on the flimsy plea of national security, ostensibly since the rivers are tributaries of the Ganga, which flows into Bangladesh.

The project is in fact going to lead to more iniquitous distribution of irrigation water within the Ken and Betwa basins. In 2019, the Central Empowered Committee (CEC) appointed by the Supreme Court said in its report that the commitment of the entire water available from the river Ken, through the Ken-Betwa Link Project Phase I (KBLP I) to develop the Ken Lower Basin and the Upper Betwa basin is bound to deprive the farmers in the Upper Ken Basin/catchment area from going in even for minor irrigation projects. The project will actually facilitate export of water from drought-prone Bundelkhand, according to the report of the former Collector of Panna. The second phase of the KBLP, which involves construction of the Lower Orr Dam, the Kotha barrage and the Bina complex multipurpose project, will cater to districts beyond Bundelkhand, such as Shivpuri, Vidisha, Raisen and Bhopal districts of Madhya Pradesh. We can reasonably apprehend that water will eventually find its way to industries in these districts.

The CEC let the cat out of the irrigation engineering establishment's bag when it noted in its report that the earlier Betwa Lower Basin irrigation project had been "over-designed" in such a way as to use up all the available water of the Betwa basin in lower Betwa without leaving anything for upper Betwa. *To compensate for this, the inter-linking project was now being proposed, where water from the Ken river is essentially substituting for the water of the Betwa.*

Mockery of environment, forest and wildlife clearance processes

The project involves the diversion of 6017 ha of forest land, the destruction of wildlife habitat in the Critical Tiger Habitat (CTH) of the Panna National Park and Tiger Reserve which has a population of 79 tigers, as well as change in the flow of water and construction within the Ken Gharial Sanctuary which falls under the administrative control of Panna Tiger Reserve. The project will result in the total loss of wildlife habitat of 10,500 ha due to submergence and fragmentation, including 46 lakh trees as estimated by the Forest Advisory Committee in 2017. The Stage I Forest Clearance had mandated a fresh tree census, which was never done. The dam will submerge roughly 70 percent of the core area of the Tiger Reserve, including critical tiger breeding zones and habitat for the critically endangered white-rumped and long-billed vultures. The project is also proposing to build a 78 MW power plant inside the Tiger Reserve in direct violation of Forest Clearance conditions.

Construction of the Daudhan dam will lead to the flow of silt ceasing as it will settle down in the reservoir. This will adversely impact the Gharial Sanctuary downstream of the dam. Moreover, there is no allocation of water in the project design to be released downstream of the Bariyarpur Weir where the Sanctuary is located. The dam will isolate the upstream aquatic fauna of the Panna National Park and this will impact the breeding habitats of aquatic life forms both upstream and downstream.

At every step—from the clearance of the Expert Appraisal Committee of MoEFCC or the approval of the Forest Advisory Committee, or the approval given by the Madhya Pradesh State Wildlife Board—the process was flawed and was vitiated by manipulations. Experts at every stage voiced grave concerns, which were set aside.

- The Central Empowered Committee (CEC), appointed by the Supreme Court, in effect had said that the Wildlife Clearance by the Standing Committee of the National Board for Wild Life (SC-NBWL), was against the Wild Life (Protection) Act (WPA), 1972. *Hence, it is clearly an illegal project.*
- *The SC-NBWL had ignored the critical findings of its own expert committee:* (a) no developmental project should destroy the ecology of remnant fragile ecosystems and an important tiger habitat in the country. It would be best to avoid these projects in such wilderness areas with protected area status. (b) the interlinking proposal may not be the best possible option for addressing the livelihood and development of the region using water resources from the Ken river.
- To substitute for the loss of 10,500 ha of wildlife habitat in Panna Tiger Reserve, it was proposed to integrate it with three other Wildlife Sanctuaries. *The SC-NBWL later cleared additional diversions in the very landscapes meant to 'offset' Ken-Betwa's damage.* In 2023, the Veerangana Durgavati Wildlife Sanctuary in Madhya Pradesh was notified as a tiger reserve, yet in January 2026, the SC-NBWL approved the use of about 272 hectares of forest land inside this new reserve for an irrigation dam.
- The CEC had noted, "The mitigative measure suggested by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) and the SC-NBWL do not address the loss of the special and unique ecosystem of gorges, rocky cliffs and riverine flora and fauna on either bank of the river Ken. *The wildlife including micro flora and fauna which have evolved in this ecosystem will, on commissioning of the project, perish forever.*"
- The CEC had noted that *the impact of the project on the downstream Gharial Sanctuary and the vulture nesting sites had not been examined by the SC-NBWL* and no mitigative measures had been proposed.

In Centre for Environment Law, WWF-I v. Union of India (IA No. 100 in WP(C) No. 337 of 1995), *the Supreme Court had held that our approach should be ecocentric and not anthropocentric, and we must apply the "species best interest standard" as all species have equal rights to exist on earth.*

Violations of law and due process, suppression of democratic rights and civil liberties, and human rights violations

As in all such mega-projects, the burden of displacement and livelihood loss falls disproportionately on Adivasis and other most vulnerable communities. The Gond and Kol adivasis of Daudhan village in Chhatarpur's Bijawar tehsil have lived on this land for generations, depending entirely on farming, river and forest produce. Over 6600 Gond and Kol adivasis face displacement by the Daudhan dam. Ten villages will be completely submerged, and 24 villages in all face displacement, of which 14 are being incorporated in the Panna Tiger Reserve in order to compensate for the loss of core area in the Reserve. Therefore, 10 villages are being resettled under the Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013, and 14 villages are being resettled under the Wild Life Protection Act.

There has been a lack of transparency in informing the villagers about the project and its impact and in working out their compensation. The consent of the Gram Sabha, which is required as per the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act (RFCTLARR), 2013, in Adivasi villages, was not obtained. No Gram Sabhas were ever held in the project-affected villages, no social impact assessment reports were placed before the public.

Those displaced are supposed to be given the option of a one-time rehabilitation grant of Rs.6.5 lakh and an urban plot, or Rs.7 lakh and a rural plot, or a meagre Rs.12.5 lakh if no plot is taken. In practice, it has been all-cash compensation. Additional compensation for trees, orchards, structures like sheds and huts, wells and tube wells, work out to a mere Rs.2 lakh; and compensation for acquired houses as per the land acquisition law. There is no compensation for lost access to the forest, which gives them food and cash income from non-timber forest produce like mahua flowers and tendu leaves. For many in these communities, this is their second displacement — the first was for the Panna Tiger Reserve.

The Forest Rights Act, if implemented, would have recorded the rights of the Adivasi and other traditional forest-dwelling communities, and Community Forest Resource rights would have enabled the Gram Sabha to decide if their forest land should be diverted or not. But the FRA has not been implemented, and even the resettlement of villages located inside the Panna Tiger Reserve is not being carried out under FRA provisions.

The local communities' demand is that their centuries-old villages should not be destroyed, as they hold deep social and cultural significance. They demand full compliance with the RFCTLARR Act, 2013, if displacement is unavoidable. They want all affected and displaced villages belonging to Adivasi communities to be rehabilitated in a manner that preserves their culture and traditional way of life. They demand land in lieu of land and village in lieu of village, so that they can continue their socio-cultural practices and dignified livelihoods.

Angered by discrepancies and alleged corruption in compensation surveys, in April 2026, in the Chita Andolan, around 7,000 women from Adivasi and other communities lay on mock funeral pyres to signal that displacement is a kind of death. This was accompanied by the Jal Andolan and Mitti Andolan, where protesters waded into rivers with ropes around their necks or buried themselves in mud. *Satyagraha*, including sit-ins, demonstrations, road blockades and gheraos of the Collector's office continued apace.

The movement was called off when the Government assured protesters their concerns would be looked into, but also declared Section 163 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS), 2023 which would make people's assemblies unlawful. *This was followed by outright repression, when false charges were filed against movement leaders of the Jai Kisan Sangathan and many were jailed. Unlawful evictions from houses, demolitions of houses and schools without notice and electricity disconnections followed.* All of these are in violation of the RFCTLARR Act, 2013, Section 21 of which requires the District Collector to issue public notice and give affected individuals between 30 days and 6 months to file individual claims and objections. Section 38(1) prohibits the State from taking full possession of land unless all compensation, rehabilitation and resettlement entitlements have been paid in full. The Chita Andolan and fast-unto-death have resumed in July with the slogan, "Give us justice, or kill us."

Alternatives to the Ken-Betwa Link Project

Alternatives to meet the specific objectives of the interlinking project were never considered, thereby violating the basic tenet of Environmental Impact Assessment.

- There were already 182 irrigation projects in Ken basin and 348 irrigation projects in Betwa basin before KBLP was planned. The efficiency of these projects could have been improved. A clear example in this regard is the existing Bariyarpur barrage. It is designed, with its 59.34 km canal and 960.6 km-long distribution system, to irrigate a command area of 2,29,360 ha. However, the irrigation data shows that it has been able to irrigate only

about one-third of this. The region receives more than 1,100 mm of rainfall annually, and there are many examples in the country where village communities with less than half of this rainfall have been able to create water security by harvesting local water through watershed development and demand management.

- With thousands of Chandela and Bundela period tanks built between the 9th and 14th centuries spread all over Bundelkhand, but unfortunately in disuse today, there is a strong case to focus on their rejuvenation for the region's water security rather than promote a costly and long-gestation megaproject with highly uncertain results.
- Tanks, check dams, farm ponds and watershed systems built over centuries have deteriorated due to neglect in Bundelkhand. But some successful tank restoration and farm pond schemes are already in operation in the Bundelkhand region. The traditional Haveli system of earthen bunding raises groundwater levels. All these can be upscaled over the entire region with suitable government support and schemes.
- Along with the above, demand management and equitable access to water can make Bundelkhand water secure.

Our demands

As the foregoing analysis clearly brings out, the Ken-Betwa Interlinking Project is social, economic, cultural and environmental injustice to already vulnerable citizens, and ecological injustice to non-human life forms. The loss of over 10,000 hectares of protected area and 46 lakh trees is a loss of vital ecological services and valuable carbon sinks in the midst of a climate emergency. Again, as said above, viable, decentralised, cheaper and nature- and people-centric options exist to make Bundelkhand water secure at a much faster pace than the destructive Ken-Betwa Interlinking Project. We therefore demand that:

- Union Cabinet approval for the project be immediately withdrawn.
- People who have been displaced and their homes and villages demolished be resettled, their villages rebuilt and they be appropriately compensated by the State Government.
- All cases filed against people for exercising their democratic right to protect their villages and land be immediately withdrawn.
- A fast-track investigation into corruption and malpractices in compensation and rehabilitation be initiated by the State Governments and action be taken against officials who ordered illegal evictions, demolitions and power shut-offs.
- Damage to land, water and forest caused by the project be reversed and environmental restoration be undertaken by the State Governments.
- Efforts be made to revitalise the already existing irrigation infrastructure, and traditional tanks, farm ponds and watersheds, and also shift to demand management and equitable water distribution.

Issued by



Rajesh Ramakrishnan
Convener