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{ KEN-BETWA RIVER LINKING }

# Vexed project looms over poll arena

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**PANNA/CHHATTARPUR:** At the forest entry gate to the Panna Tiger Reserve in Trikiya, the lone forest guard, Hukam Singh, stands stoutly, preventing "outsiders" from going to Daudhan village, where work on the first dam under Ken-Betwa river inter-linking project, envisaged two decades ago, is set to start in a few months. Villagers are protesting the project, over compensation for relocation, and this resulted in the state government cancelling the launch of the project by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on October 4, officials said.

"We are not against the project. We just want better compensation," said Mahesh Kumar Adivasi, a school teacher, who has five acres of agriculture land within Panna Tiger Reserve buffer area, like thousands of tribals living in small muddy homes in and around

the reserve. "We live like crocodiles in a lake," he added, metaphorically referring to their tough life and said their protest started in August this year to ensure better lives for their children. The central government, along with the Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh governments, is implementing the ₹44,605 crore river-interlinking project, the country's biggest, to benefit 13 districts of Bundelkhand—six in Madhya Pradesh and seven in Uttar Pradesh. The MP government has decided to pay compensation of ₹15 lakh for every voter in a family (with husband and wife considered as one voter). Those living in the 21 villages that are to be relocated will also get ₹80,000 as compensation for their home and will have to pay ₹5.5 lakh if the government builds a house for them. "The money is grossly inadequate," said Gauri Shankar Pathak of Jagdamba, another village that is to be relocated. "We will lose our land which has been feeding us for generations."

## Ken-Betwa ambition

The then National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government in



Environmentalists said the Ken-Betwa river inter-linking project will submerge 40% of the Panna Tiger Reserve. HT ARCHIVE

2003 decided to transfer water from the surplus Ken river to the water deficient Betwa (both rivers in Bundelkhand) through the construction of a series of dams and canals, so as to provide sufficient drinking and irrigation water to the rain shadow region of Bundelkhand. The project was in limbo for 10 years of the United Progressive Alliance's rule between 2004 and May 2014. The project was revived by the Modi government in August 2014.

In the first phase, the Daudhan Dam is proposed on Ken with a canal flowing through Chhatarpur, Tikamgarh and Jhansi districts and irrigating 630,000 hectares of land every year, that will link the two rivers. In the second phase, a dam, Lower Orr, and two barrages, one each at Bina and Kotha Barrage, will be constructed. The project will also help generate 34 million kilowatts of hydropower, according to the detailed project report.

In December 2021, the Union Cabinet approved the Ken-Betwa Link Project with an aim to boost "socio-economic prosperity" of the backward region of Bundelkhand by providing irrigation to 1.062 million hectares and drinking water to 6.3 million people, to reduce migration. Its cost was estimated at ₹44,605 crore and it was to be completed in eight years, according to the Cabinet approval. The project received environment clearance in 2016 and forest clearance in October this year from the environment ministry, paving the way for the work to start.

The Ken-Betwa interlinking is the first project to be taken up as part of the National Water Linking

Project, under which the ministry of Jal Shakti has identified 16 links in peninsular rivers component and 14 links in Himalayan ones for inter basin transfer. As of December 2022, the National Water Development Agency has received 49 link proposals from 10 states, out of which pre-feasibility reports of 39 link projects and detailed project reports of six link projects have been completed and sent to states concerned, according to information shared in Parliament.

## Pros and Cons

Environmentalists have said that the project will submerge 40% of the Panna Tiger Reserve, home to several species of critically endangered vultures, the gharial and other species such as leopards and sloth bears. Of the total 9,000 hectares likely to be submerged, 6,000 hectares are part of the tiger reserve. "Panna will lose its best forest to Ken-Betwa and survival of tigers in remaining area will be difficult," said a retired Indian Forest Service official of Madhya Pradesh cadre, who asked not to be named. The MP forest department has proposed providing additional land for the reserve but the official quoted above said it will take decades to develop a forest there.

Joanna Van Gruisen, whose husband Raghu Chandawat worked on the revival of tiger population in Panna from next to nothing in 2008 to 41 currently, said: "The drying Ken river will not help Bundelkhand in any way. Thousands of small water bodies and rivulets will be lost for ever. 40% of Panna tiger reserve will be under water. Tigers and other wildlife will lose their home per-

manently. It is a waste of money."

However, the government estimates that the project, once completed, will provide irrigation facilities to over a million hectares of farmland every year, and drinking water facility to six million people in Bundelkhand. "The project will improve ground water levels and we plan to provide around the clock tap drinking water to every home in Bundelkhand. It will also help to reduce migration and develop Bundelkhand," said M S Kushwaha, the officer in-charge of the project in Madhya Pradesh.

Gyanendra Tiwari, who has been working with villagers for the past two decades in Panna, said life in Bundelkhand is dependent on rain water. "Lack of irrigation and drinking water have been a bane here," he said, adding that poor local employment avenues now cause migration for eight to 10 months in a year as compared to seasonal migration (four to five months) may be two decades ago.

At Gudyana village, about 30 km from Panna town, Dhir Adivasi, 45, has just returned from Mumbai for Diwali after eight months. Almost every adult male in this village migrates for work as marginal agriculture land holdings (less than five acres) with no irrigation facility do not provide a reliable source of income, even though the village got piped drinking water through the Union government's Jal Jeevan Mission in 2022.

"Labour contractors come and take us for work to different places. We get a better wage than what we get here working in a stone quarry. We are also able to send some money back home," said Adivasi, whose father died last year due to silicosis, the ailment he got while working at a stone quarry for two decades. Deepender Yadav, who works at a construction site in Mehrauli, Delhi, said whatever local employment is here is provided on caste lines.

About 25 km north, in Gond tribal dominated Malki village at the foothills of Vindhya, next to the Panna tiger reserve, there are just two men, less than 55 years of age, in the village of 80 families. "Everyone else has gone for work to other places after sowing the winter crop," said Sodobha Bai, who sells wood collected from forest every day in Panna town to feed

her family of four. She, like many other women sitting around an elevated cement platform under a Neem tree, want a pond or a borewell in their agriculture field for irrigation so that they don't have to rely on rains for crop success. "Saheb talab banya do (Sir get the pond made)," urged Ram Kali, 70.

They know a pond can change their lives as it did for Govind Mandal of neighbouring Udki village, in whose farm a 20 square feet pond was dug in 2014 under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. Before the pond was dug, Mandal was a rickshaw puller in Panna and his son worked as a labourer in Bhopal. "The pond helped me irrigate my five acres of land and farm production improved. I stopped pulling a rickshaw in Panna in 2016 and my son also came back to village in 2018 as we earned enough," Mandal, an exception in high migration zone of Bundelkhand, said.

## Aspirational project

Mandal is confident that the project can positively impact lives of people. "I am in forest area and therefore, ground water is good. In other places, the ponds go dry for almost five to six summer months. The project could improve irrigation in drier places," he said.

Tiwari, like many other migrant workers, hopes that Ken-Betwa project will check migration and help agriculture to improve lives in Bundelkhand, considered a backward area in MP. "The project will not end migration as many now like the city lifestyle. But it can improve agriculture productivity and reduce distress migration due to frequent droughts," said Arun Kumar, a Panna-based journalist who has covered Bundelkhand for almost three decades. The National Institute of Disaster Management considers Bundelkhand as one of the country's most drought prone areas along with Vidarbha in Maharashtra.

Chhatarpur-based social activist Ravindra Vyas said: "The Ken-Betwa project is not an electoral issue like previous assembly elections as not even a stone has moved even 20 years after the project was envisaged. Elections are being fought on caste lines, not on development issues," he said.



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# NGT notice to Punjab over water pollution

**IIT-Mandi Study:  
Agricultural  
Runoff Behind It**

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File photo for representational purpose

IIT-Mandi study refers to Punjab as 'cancer capital of India'

**Chandigarh:** Expressing concern over the findings of a study conducted by Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Mandi, which uncovered water pollution in Punjab due to agricultural runoff, the National Green Tribunal (NGT) has issued notices to different departments of Punjab — Punjab Pollution Control Board (PPCB), departments of water supply and sanitation and agriculture and farmers welfare. The Central Pollution Control Board and IIT-Mandi have also been impleaded parties in the case.

The PPCB has been directed to file a report in response to facts disclosed in the study, including the issue of heavy metals, radioactive substances, pesticides and chemical pollutants found in the groundwater of the concerned area in sample testing within six weeks.

The tribunal had taken suo motu notice of a TOI news report 'Agricultural Runoff Causing Groundwa-

ter Pollution in Punjab, Making Drinking Water Unsafe, Reveals Study'. The study highlighted an increase in demand for groundwater, local farmers exploiting groundwater from deeper geological strata which have heavy metals and a few are radioactive, having serious health impacts. Such incidents relating to the decline in water quality are mainly in the southwestern region of Punjab.

The study stated that Punjab, once celebrated as the "bread bowl of India", is now referred to as the "cancer capital of India", reflecting the dire consequences of water pollution and its impact on human health. It called for immediate action by the authorities concerned to investigate the quality of groundwater for drinking and irrigation purposes.

The PPCB sought time to examine the report and file its reply before the tribunal.

It submitted that Punjab groundwater is being monitored regularly by the department of water supply and sanitation to supply drinking water to the people. It added that the data related to usage of groundwater from deeper geological strata, which is allegedly used by the farmers, might be available with the department of agriculture and farmers welfare, hence both departments would be in a better position to provide insights into the matters raised in the study.

It was noted that the board is actively monitoring groundwater quality at 46 different locations. However, the tribunal observed that while the PPCB claims to be monitoring groundwater quality at various locations, they were unable to provide the current water quality status.

The case is scheduled for its next hearing on January 18, 2024.