

Ken Betwa Link Project

Illegal and unnecessary; far better, cheaper and faster alternatives exist for water security of Bundelkhand region; a vanity project at huge public cost

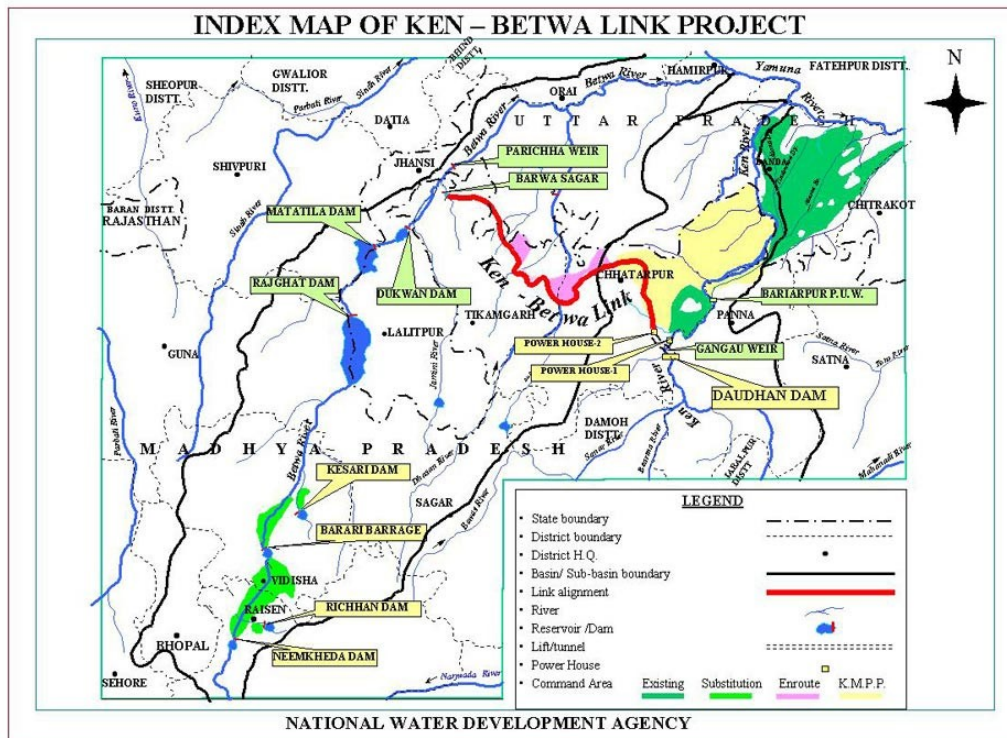
Forum for Policy Dialogue on Water Conflicts in India

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1. Salient Features of the Project

Plan is to construct a high dam (77m) with a reservoir (90 sq km) on the River Ken at its confluence with River Shyamri, within the Core zone of Panna National Park & Tiger Reserve at a place called Daudhan. **Basic purpose of the project is to transfer impounded water from presumably surplus R Ken to deficit R Betwa through a 220 km long canal** (see Figure 1). **There shall be no irrigation from this canal although villagers within 1 km on either side of the canal might be provided some drinking water.**

Figure 1: Map of Ken-Betwa Link Project



It was first planned in 1980s at a total cost of some Rs 10,000 crores which has now escalated to more than Rs 44,000 crores. The recent Union Budget of 1 Feb 2022 has allocated a total of Rs 44,650 crores for the project.

It is basically a 'substitution' project by which transfer of water from Ken to Betwa is meant to facilitate construction of 4 dams (Kesari, Barari, Ricchan and Neemkheda) in upper Betwa

region (Map 1) in Raisen and Vidisha districts away from the Bundelkhand region. So in effect the Bundelkhand region would be a net loser of its water resources. It is a lie that the project is primarily meant to harvest water for the Bundelkhand region. Nor is the project meant to benefit wildlife especially Tiger in the Panna Tiger Reserve (PTR) for if implemented the dam reservoir shall bifurcate the PTR and drown perhaps the best tiger habitat in the park.

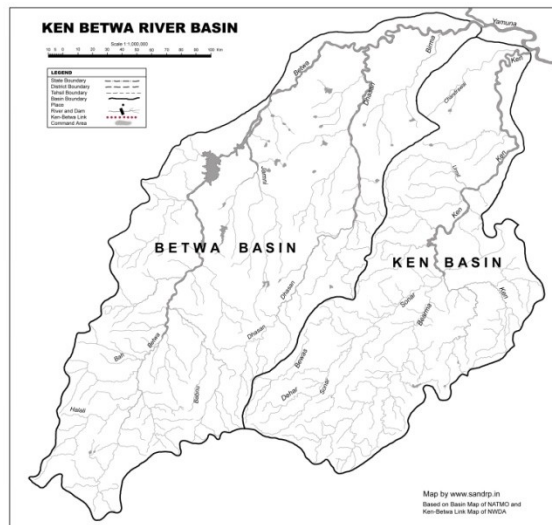
2. Ponderables about the Rivers Ken and Betwa and their relative locations

River Ken and Betwa are two adjoining rivers (see map 1), both tributary of Yamuna and run parallel to one another. They have almost same geology and soil, similar climate, rainfall (850mm at 90% assurance) and ground water resources. River Ken lies almost entirely in the Bundelkhand region while the upper catchment of Betwa is not in Bundelkhand but lies in Bhopal, Raisen and Vidisha districts.

Tanks

Both basins have significant water-resources in tanks, many dating from the period of Chandela and Bundela dynasties which are being neglected and falling into disuse.

Figure 2: Ken Betwa River Basins



As is evident from the map (Map 2) above that Ken is a smaller river basin than Betwa. Then how can river Ken has surplus water to lend to Betwa? This fundamental, commonsense question has never been satisfactorily answered other than by simply saying that since Ken basin is still under-developed and Betwa is over-developed in terms of dams and canals so water can be extracted from the Ken system for Betwa. So, is river Ken (and people dependent on it) being punished for still being relatively pristine and unregulated?

3. Key problems with the Ken Betwa Link Project

- The EIA report prepared for the project was atrociously deficient and carried wrong data. So, environment clearance (EC) for the project was initially denied but later given. The same, EC is presently under challenge at the NGT and is pending.
- One of the key requirements of EIA and environment clearance process is to appraise 'alternatives' including 'no project' option. This was never done.
- The conditions mentioned in stage 1 of the Forest Clearance (FC) for the project have still not been completed in terms of identification of revenue land in lieu of loss of forest land to reservoir. So final FC for the project is pending.
- Wildlife Clearance given to the project by the standing committee of the National Board of Wildlife (NBWL) was controversial to say the least and this has been challenged at the Supreme Court (SC) where the legal challenge is still pending.
- The Central Empowered Committee (CEC) of the Supreme Court (SC) has after due deliberations and a site visit submitted its Report to the Supreme Court on 30 August 2019 and upheld all the contention of the petitioners. Supreme Court is still to decide in the matter.

4. What has the Central Empowered Committee (CEC) of Supreme Court said in its Report to the Supreme Court on 30 August 2019

Findings of CEC:

- *“Approval of SC (standing committee), NBWL (National Board for Wildlife) for diversion of 6017 ha of wildlife habitat for implementation of the Ken-Betwa Link Project Phase I has not been proved to be necessary for improvement and better management of the wildlife therein as provided in Section 35 (6) of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972”*

The finding, as above, by the CEC highlights that the wildlife clearance by the standing committee of NBWL was in the teeth of the Wildlife Protection Act 1972 and hence was illegal.

- *“impact of the project on the downstream Ghariyal Sanctuary and the vulture nesting sites have not been examined by the standing committee of NBWL and no mitigative measures in this regard are forth coming in the recommendation of the standing committee of NBWL”*

So, the very fact that the wildlife clearance accorded to the project by Standing Committee of NBWL is not permissible by law should have been considered as a sufficient and determining factor against the project as proposed and the project should have been thus rejected by the Cabinet Committee headed by the Prime Minister.

- *the large block of 6017 ha of forest land involved in diversion to non-forest use is part of the National Park and core critical tiger habitat of Panna Tiger Reserve and will result in total loss of wildlife habitat of 10500 ha on account of submergence and fragmentation;*
- *the forest land involved in submergence is a unique ecosystem of morphological significance with unique and rich biodiversity in the region and which ecosystem cannot be recreated;*

- *the very objective of declaration of this unique ecosystem with special morphological significance and unique biodiversity as national park to ensure operation of laws of nature including natural evolution unhindered by human intervention will be defeated and will result in complete breakdown of the evolutionary process of millions of years;*
- *the mitigative measures are grossly insufficient to mitigate the loss of habitat and the unique ecosystem of KNP and the threat of PTR losing the status of "source area" without any reliable "source area" in the proposed landscape, the viability of tiger population in the entire land scale will be at risk;*
- *the assumption of NWDA, Standing Committee of NBWL and MoEF&CC that the project will have positive impact on the tiger population are found to be flawed as the large flood plains vacated by the villagers on relocation will remain under water even during summer as being located below 240 M dead storage level;*
- *SC NBWL while giving wildlife clearance to this project has not taken into account the decision of this Hon'ble court in LA No. 100 in WP (C) No. 337 of 1995 with LA No. 3452 wherein it is held that our approach should be eco-centric and not anthropocentric and we must apply the "species best interest standard" as all species have equal rights to exist on earth;*
- The SC NBWL has ignored the following critical findings of its own expert committee:
 - a) no developmental project should destroy the ecology of remnant fragile eco systems and an important tiger habitat in the country. In an ideal situation, it would be best to avoid such projects in such wilderness areas with protected area status and specifically when it runs the risk of providing justification or unhealthy precedence for more such developmental projects within the protected areas that will not be in the interest of wildlife and the overall well being of the society in the long term.*
 - b) the present proposal may not be the best possible option for addressing livelihood and development of the region using water resources from the River Ken.*

5. There are available much cheaper, faster and sustainable alternatives to the project

Experts like Prof. Brij Gopal, Prof. Dinesh Kumar Marothia and others have made strong case to suggest that much cheaper, faster and much more sustainable alternatives to the project are available for the people in the Bundelkhand region in whose name the Ken-Betwa link project is being pushed.

With thousands of Chandela and Bundela period tanks 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 than promote costly, long gestation and uncertain results mega projects like the present one in the name of Ken-Betwa Link.

According to a 2016 publication by Prof. Brij Gopal and Prof. DK Marothia:

Restoring large tanks and village ponds must be accorded high priority. For centuries, village communities managed them as common pool resources. In recent decades, however, they have degraded due to weak property rights relations, institutional arrangements, and a breakdown of local authority systems, whether they be community-based organisations, local resource users' groups, or village panchayats.

Property rights/tenure security can effectively influence incentive structures for sustainable use of the commons (Marothia 1993, 1997, 2010, 2015), and appropriate property rights and an institutional hierarchy have to be established to restore and manage common waterbodies under the MOWR's RRR (repair, renovation, restoration) scheme and Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana.

Several successful farm pond schemes are already in operation in the Bundelkhand region. These can be upscaled over the entire region with suitable government support and schemes. Also, the region receives more than 1100 mm of rainfall annually and there are many examples in the country where village communities with less than half of this rainfall has been able to create water security by harvesting local water through watershed development and demand management.

The above fact has been endorsed by the report of the Supreme Court's CEC as under: "the alternative to the main objectives of the project proposal of irrigation and alleviation of poverty have not been examined by the project proponents".

6. Does River Ken have the kind of water the KB Link project claims for it?

It is a fact that river Ken turning into pools during the summer months has never carried the kind of water that its hydrological assessments claim to possess. Otherwise why would the existing Bariyarpur barrage along with its 59.34 km canal and 960.6 km long distribution system designed to irrigate a command area of 2,29,360 hectares, has been able to irrigate only 66,000 ha with a maximum 86,000 ha in 1994–96?

7. International experiences of river diversions

These have been ecologically disastrous to say the least. The best example is of 'Aral' sea, world's fourth largest (68,000 sq km) freshwater lake in 1960s which is today struggling for survival. UN Secretary General Ban-ki-Moon called it in 2010, "the planet's worst ecological disaster".