Ken - Betwa River linking Project

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Why is in news? Ken-Betwa river linking: Push helps clear project in time for polls

It took government push over the last few weeks for the Rs 44,605-crore Ken-Betwa Link Project (KBLP) to secure the final forest clearance, six years after it got the provisional nod, and just in time for the upcoming Assembly elections in Madhya Pradesh.

However, the project's wildlife clearance is under examination at the Supreme Court and it may still require a fresh environmental clearance before work can take off. Two key forest clearance conditions require KBLP to realign its canal and shift the proposed powerhouses from diverted forest land.

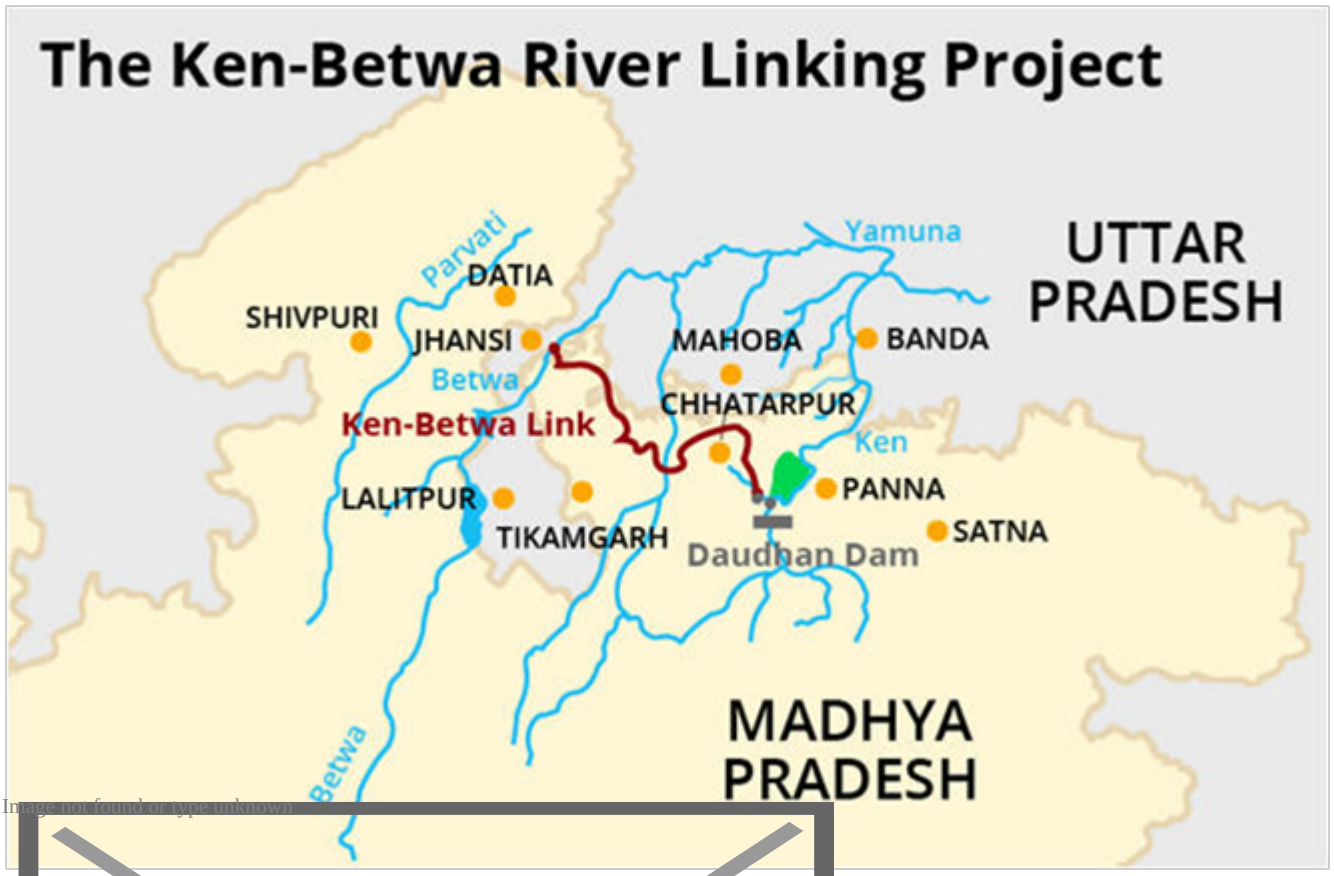
About the Project:

The Ken-Betwa Link project was **conceptualised in the 1980s**. However, the water-sharing agreement could not be reached between the States of Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh.

The work on the project was originally slated to begin in 2015 but got delayed.

The project got a fresh push in 2020-21, with the Union Government making a revised deal with the two states (Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh).

It is a **"flagship" project** that is critical for the water security and socio-economic development of the **Bundelkhand region (of MP and UP).**



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Under this project, **water from the Ken River will be transferred to the Betwa river**. Ken and Betwa rivers **originate in MP** and are the tributaries of Yamuna.

Ken meets with Yamuna in Banda district of UP and with Betwa in Hamirpur district of UP.

Rajghat, Paricha and Matatila dams are over Betwa river. **Ken River passes through Panna tiger reserve**.

The link will be in the form of a canal (flow through Chhatarpur, Tikamgarh and Jhansi districts) that will be fed by the **new Daudhan Dam** on the Ken, to be built within Panna Tiger Reserve.

The dam will **generate 103 MW of hydroelectric power** and is expected to **irrigate 6.3 lakh hectares of land** every year.

In **phase-I**, the **Daudhan Dam complex and its subsidiary units** such as the Low-Level Tunnel, High-Level Tunnel, Ken-Betwa Link Canal, and powerhouses will be completed.

In **phase II**, construction of the Lower Orr Dam, Bina Complex Project, and Kotha Barrage will be progressed in phase II of the project.

A Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) called **Ken-Betwa Link Project Authority** (KBLPA) will be set up to implement the project.

The Centre has set in motion the process of **creation of National Interlinking of Rivers Authority** (NIRA)

It will be an **independent autonomous body** for planning, investigation, financing and implementation of the interlinking of river (ILR) projects in the country.

The NIRA will have powers to set up SPV for individual link projects.

Benefits:

The project is slated to irrigate 10.62 lakh hectares annually, **provide drinking water supply** to 62 lakh people and generate **103 MW of hydropower and 27 MW of solar power**.

The project will be of immense **benefit to the water-starved Bundelkhand region**, spread across Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh.

The project is expected to **boost socio-economic prosperity** in the backward Bundelkhand region on account of increased agricultural activities and employment generation.

It would also help in **arresting distress migration** from this region.

Concerns:

It will lead to **massive displacement of people.**

River inter-linking is an **expensive business** from building the link canals to the monitoring and maintenance of infrastructure.

The **'surplus and deficit' model** has little basis in science (as these could be seasonal phenomena too) and it may endanger the water security of the Panna district (Ken – a non-perennial river).

The project has **not yet received a complete forest clearance**. The NGT is currently hearing a challenge to the project's environmental approval.

Approval by the National Board for Wildlife **violates Section 35(6) of the Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972** – improvement and better management of wildlife.

According to the SC, the creation of a high reservoir dam on the Ken River in the Panna National Park and Tiger Reserve for the KBLP is ultra vires to the WPA 1972.

The weight of billions of litres of water can **have seismic implications** in the Himalayan region.

The transfer of such enormous amounts of water will **inundate forests and land** for reservoirs.

The **destructive impact of the proposed dam** on the flow of water into and outside of the Ken Gharial Sanctuary (downstream of the Panna national park) is evident. The **deep gorges of Panna** will be drowned if the new dam is built.

By 2009, there were **no tigers in the Panna Tiger Reserve**, necessitating an incredible effort that lasted almost a decade to reintroduce them.

The **key wildlife species that will be affected** include endangered vultures, mahseer fish, and the critically endangered Gangetic gharial (Gavialis gangeticus) in the Ken Gharial Sanctuary.

Implementation of the project **not only needs a huge financial capital** but **also political support** both is scarce commodities as of now.

Another important issue is **building consensus among states** and Land acquisition.

Way ahead:

The government is developing a **larger 'Panna Tiger Landscape'**, which should be created in any case for Panna's tigers.

An "**independent" hydrological investigation** of the Ken is needed.

Restoration of Bunderlkhand's erstwhile **Chandel-period lakes and ponds**.

The developmental project should not destroy the ecology of fragile ecosystems and important tiger habitats in the country.

The **approach should be eco-centric** and not anthropocentric.