Ken Betwa River Link Project: Land Acquisition threatens livelihoods in Chhatarpur and Panna districts
SUMMARY

- The Ken-Betwa River linking project, the first to materialize among 30 river linking planned projects, involves transferring surplus water from Ken River basin in Madhya Pradesh to Betwa river basin in Uttar Pradesh. A 77-meter-tall dam on the Ken River will store water and transfer it to the Betwa basin through 220-kilometer-long link canals.
- The dam, located within the Panna tiger reserve, will submerge 9,000 hectares of land. Of this, 5,578.92 hectares of Panna tiger reserve will be submerged, with 4,206.5 hectares lying within the core of the reserve, which is strictly maintained for wildlife protection, the remaining 1,372.42 hectares is in the buffer zone where regulated activities are allowed.
- Land acquisition for the dam and compensatory afforestation will affect 14 villages in Chhatarpur district and 11 villages in Panna district. The Madhya Pradesh government will acquire 3,830 hectares for these works.
- Project-affected people have raised objections against land acquisition notices, alleging flawed land measurements and incorrect valuation of their homes.
The Bundelkhand region, encompassing 14 districts – seven each in Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh – is considered one of the most underdeveloped regions in the country,\(^1\) ranked poorly on human development indicators such as literacy, incomes and health care. The region has suffered from successive droughts in recent times, making drinking water and irrigation critical issues affecting lives and livelihoods. The high dependence on agriculture, combined with small land holdings, also contributes to seasonal and all-year round out-migration from the region.\(^2\) The Ken-Betwa River linking project’s primary goal is to address these issues by providing drinking water and irrigation facilities. In Madhya Pradesh, Damoh, Tikamgarh, Panna, Chhatarpur and Jhansi, Mahoba, Banda and Lalitpur in Uttar Pradesh are the districts targeted to benefit from the project, as per the tripartite Memorandum of Agreement signed between the union government, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh on water sharing and regulation.

The project will require a large area of land for the construction of a dam on Ken River and to compensate for the loss of forest land due to submergence. This will impact 6,628 families in Chhatarpur and Panna district due to land acquisition, thus enlarging the project’s social and economic footprint.
a. Protests against land acquisition process and demands for better compensation

The land surveys were conducted in November and December of 2022 in affected villages across districts. In July 2023, the Chhatarpur district administration began issuing notices under section 21 to affected families, while the Panna administration followed suit in August 2023. Project-affected villages from Chhatarpur have staged multiple protests outside the collectorate, seeking more transparency in the land acquisition process, particularly regarding the assembly of Gram Sabhas. They have sought discussions on fair compensation and the rehabilitation and resettlement process. In May this year, a 15-day long sit-in protest took place outside the Chhatarpur collector's office and villagers were lathi-charged by local police.

b. Regulations

The land acquisition process is being carried out as per the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013 (LARR Act). The Chhatarpur administration issued Section 11 notices in January, 2022 enlisting the villages to be acquired and in July 2023, the district administration issued notices under section 21 to project-affected families based on the land surveys.

Project-affected villagers have alleged flaws in surveys in land measurements and in property valuations enlisted in these notices.
On September 13, the Madhya Pradesh cabinet cleared and announced a special package for rehabilitation and resettlement of those affected by the dam. It includes the option of accepting the compensation fixed by the district collector as per the LARR Act, 2013, or payment of Rs 12.5 lakh per hectare of land owned and Rs 12.50 lakh per hectare for those with titles on revenue or forest land.

For displacement from homes, the package has offered either a lump sum grant of Rs 12.5 lakh per family or plots, based on their availability, along with a sum of Rs 6.5 lakh in urban areas and Rs 7 lakh in rural areas. Contrary to the second schedule of the LARR Act, the package does not make any specific provision for a transportation allowance. Nor does it specify whether adults in each family will be eligible for the package. Adult children in affected families are supposed to be considered as one family unit, as per the LARR Act.

“IT WON’T SUSTAIN US IN THE LONG RUN. WE WILL BE TAKEN FAR AWAY FROM OUR FOREST RESOURCES. THERE WILL BE LIVELIHOOD PROBLEMS IN THE TIMES AHEAD.”
• Project-affected people who have received land acquisition notices have alleged that there have been errors in land surveys and they have sought clarifications and submitted objections in this regard.

• The dissatisfaction with the land surveys and valuation of land indicates the need for better dialogue between revenue department officials and families affected by the river-linking project.

• As a result of displacement from core areas of Panna Tiger Reserve, villagers will lose highly fertile land. There is fear among families if they would be able to afford equally fertile land with the compensation and rehabilitation package.

• Among people of the Scheduled Tribe, Scheduled Caste communities in the affected villages, there is fear of lack of alternate incomes in the near future. These communities will lose access to forest areas where harvest and sale of minor forest produce comprises steady income during summers.
RECOMMENDATIONS

- The district administration needs to have better dialogue with families that are likely to be displaced because of the river-linking project, to reassure them of fair compensation and about the possibilities of land in lieu of loss of land.
- Scheduled Tribe and Scheduled Caste communities, who have a high dependence on forest produce for their incomes need to be provided alternate sources of livelihood and employment opportunities to compensate for their livelihood loss.
- Wherever possible, such communities should be provided access to their old land for harvesting minor forest produce.
- Rehabilitation and resettlement ought to be done as per the LARR Act, 2013, with full benefits and provision of amenities in new colonies.
- State government should explore granting small land holdings to the landless among the displaced families.

REFERENCES