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Chita Andolan: Tribal Protest Against the Ken-Betwa River Link

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WHY IN NEWS

Around July 6, 2026, displaced tribal families revived the “Chita Andolan” (pyre protest) on the banks of the Barana river near Kupi village, Panna district, Madhya Pradesh, against the Ken-Betwa Link Project, after promises on rehabilitation (<https://ujjyari.com/vocab/rehabilitation/>) and compensation went unmet.

THE PROTEST

The “Chita Andolan”, literally the pyre protest, is a striking form of agitation in which affected families lie beside funeral pyres to dramatise their demand for justice, under the slogan “Nyay Do Ya Mar Do” (Give us justice or let us die). Led primarily by tribal women, the movement resumed near the Barana river close to Kupi village after having been suspended in April 2026 on the strength of administrative assurances.

Protesters allege that the promises made then, on rehabilitation, monetary compensation and land-for-land resettlement, remained largely unfulfilled. They further claim that in the interim, families faced legal action, electricity disconnections and the demolition of homes and school structures, with some houses razed during the monsoon. Activists supporting the agitation, including a hunger strike alongside the pyre protest, put the number of those affected across the linked projects in the tens of thousands.

THE KEN-BETWA LINK PROJECT

The Ken-Betwa Link Project (KBLP) is India’s first river-interlinking project to be taken up under the National Perspective Plan (NPP) for interlinking of rivers, first articulated in 1980. Its core idea is to transfer surplus water from the Ken river to the water-deficit Betwa basin. Both the Ken and the Betwa are tributaries of the Yamuna, which in turn is a tributary of the Ganga.

FEATURE	DETAIL
Status	Ujivari Current Affairs - ujivari.com · Free Daily Current Affairs for UPSC & State PCS India's first river-link project under the National Perspective Plan
Donor and recipient basins	Surplus Ken river to deficit Betwa basin
Key structure	Daudhan Dam, inside the Panna Tiger Reserve
States and districts	Madhya Pradesh (Chhatarpur and Panna) and Uttar Pradesh (Bundelkhand)
Purpose	Irrigation, drinking water and power for drought-prone Bundelkhand

The project's engineering centrepiece is the Daudhan Dam, to be built on the Ken river inside the Panna Tiger Reserve. It is designed to deliver irrigation, drinking water and hydropower to the chronically drought-prone Bundelkhand region straddling Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. The affected districts on the Madhya Pradesh side are Chhatarpur and Panna, where the Daudhan Dam and its submergence zone displace thousands of families.

THE FAULTLINES: DISPLACEMENT AND ECOLOGY

The agitation crystallises two long-running debates in Indian development.

Development versus displacement

Large water and infrastructure projects deliver public goods, irrigation, drinking water, flood moderation, but the costs fall disproportionately on those submerged out of their homes and lands, frequently Adivasi (tribal) and forest-dwelling communities. Two legal frameworks are meant to protect them:

- **The Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement (RFCTLARR) Act, 2013**, which mandates fair compensation, resettlement and rehabilitation, and consent and social-impact-assessment safeguards for those whose land is acquired.
- **The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006** (<https://ujivari.com/legislation/forest-rights-act-2006/>) (**Forest Rights Act**), which recognises the rights of forest-dwelling Scheduled Tribes over land and forest resources and requires that these rights be settled before diversion of forest land.

Protesters argue that the spirit of these laws, particularly timely land-for-land resettlement and rehabilitation before displacement, has not been honoured in practice.

Forest and tiger-habitat trade-offs

Because the Daudhan Dam lies inside the Panna Tiger Reserve, the project raises acute ecological questions: submergence of forest land, loss of a large number of trees, and disruption to a tiger habitat that was itself painstakingly repopulated after local extinction of tigers in Panna in the late 2000s. The tension between water security for Bundelkhand and the integrity of a protected tiger landscape lies at the heart of the controversy.

The movement is also notable as a women-led environmental agitation, placing it in the lineage of grassroots movements such as Chipko and the Narmada Bachao Andolan, in which women have been at the forefront of resistance to displacement and ecological loss.

ANALYSIS AND WAY FORWARD

The Chita Andolan is less a rejection of development than a demand that its promised safeguards be delivered. The revival of the protest after suspended assurances points to an implementation gap: the RFCTLARR Act and the Forest Rights Act exist on paper, but rehabilitation on the ground has lagged the pace of dam construction.

A durable resolution requires sequencing that puts people first: complete settlement of forest rights and land-for-land resettlement before submergence, transparent and independently monitored compensation, and genuine consultation with gram sabhas. Environmentally, the trade-offs inside the Panna Tiger Reserve call for rigorous, credible [mitigation](https://ujjyari.com/vocab/mitigation/) and compensatory afforestation. The broader lesson for India's ambitious river-interlinking agenda is that engineering success cannot be separated from social justice and ecological stewardship; a project completed at the cost of trust and habitat is only half a success.

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 1: Society, salient features of Indian society, and issues of tribal and forest-dwelling communities; women's role and women-led movements; effects of urbanisation and development on population.

GS Paper 3: Conservation, environment and biodiversity (Panna Tiger Reserve); infrastructure and river interlinking; land acquisition, rehabilitation and the development-versus-displacement debate.

Prelims pointers:

- The Ken-Betwa Link Project is India's first river-interlinking project under the National Perspective Plan (NPP).
- The Ken and Betwa are both tributaries of the Yamuna.
- The Daudhan Dam is being built on the Ken river inside the Panna Tiger Reserve.
- Affected districts in Madhya Pradesh are Chhatarpur and Panna.

- Relevant laws: the RFCTLARR Act, 2013 and the Forest Rights Act, 2006.
- The “Chita Andolan” is a pyre protest, led largely by tribal women.

Mains question: “River-interlinking projects promise water security but pose serious social and ecological costs.” Critically examine with reference to the Ken-Betwa Link Project. (15 marks, 250 words)

FACTS CORNER

FACTS CORNER, KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

Chita Andolan: “Pyre protest” revived around July 6, 2026 on the Barana river near Kupi village, Panna district, Madhya Pradesh; led largely by tribal women; slogan “Nyay Do Ya Mar Do”.

Trigger: Suspended in April 2026 after assurances, it resumed as rehabilitation, compensation and land-for-land promises went unmet and homes were demolished.

Ken-Betwa Link Project (KBLP): India’s first river-interlinking project under the National Perspective Plan (NPP); transfers surplus Ken river water to the deficit Betwa basin.

Rivers: Ken and Betwa are both tributaries of the Yamuna (itself a tributary of the Ganga).

Key structure: Daudhan Dam, built on the Ken river inside the Panna Tiger Reserve.

Affected districts: Chhatarpur and Panna in Madhya Pradesh; benefits target drought-prone Bundelkhand.

Legal safeguards: RFCTLARR Act, 2013 (fair compensation and resettlement) and the Forest Rights Act, 2006 (forest-dweller rights).

Wider theme: Development versus displacement; women-led environmental movements in the tradition of Chipko and the Narmada Bachao Andolan.

Sources: *Down to Earth* (<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/>), *The Hindu* (<https://www.thehindu.com/>), *Ministry of Jal Shakti* (<https://jalshakti-dowr.gov.in/>), *Indian Express* (<https://indianexpress.com/>)

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