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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Water Gained, Forest Lost: The Ken-Betwa Dilemma

 DOWN TO EARTH

11 July 2026

ENVIRONMENT

GS2

GS3

CURATED & WRITTEN BY

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THE LIFT LINE

Every large dam answers one scarcity by creating another, and the true measure of the Ken-Betwa project is not the water it moves but whether the people and forest it displaces are made whole.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

The Ken-Betwa Link Project, the first scheme under India's river-interlinking programme, aims to carry water from the Ken to the water-scarce Betwa basin in Bundelkhand. Its centrepiece, the Daudhan dam, would submerge a large area of forest, including part of the Panna Tiger Reserve, and displace forest-dwelling and tribal communities. For GS2 this raises questions of tribal rights, consent and [rehabilitation](https://ujjyari.com/vocab/rehabilitation/) (<https://ujjyari.com/vocab/rehabilitation/>); for GS3 it raises the core dilemma of water security against ecological cost.

GS Paper 2: governance, welfare of vulnerable sections, rights of Scheduled Tribes and forest dwellers, and the mechanisms for rehabilitation and consent.

GS Paper 3: conservation, environmental impact, water resources and the management of large infrastructure.

For **Prelims**, hold the framework: interlinking of rivers under the National Perspective Plan implemented through the National Water Development Agency (NWDA); the Daudhan dam on the Ken; the Panna Tiger Reserve; the Forest Rights Act, 2006, which recognises the rights of forest dwellers and requires gram sabha consent; and the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement (LARR) Act, 2013. For **Mains**, weigh water security in a drought-prone region against forest, wildlife and tribal displacement, and argue for rights-based rehabilitation.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

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Bundelkhand is one of India's most drought-prone regions, and the promise of the Ken-Betwa link is real: transferring surplus water from the Ken to the deficit Betwa basin to serve irrigation, drinking water and power. Conceived as the flagship of the larger river-interlinking idea long championed in Indian water policy, the project has moved from plan to construction, with the Daudhan dam at its heart.

The costs are equally concrete. The reservoir would submerge several thousand hectares of forest, a significant share of it within the core zone of the Panna Tiger Reserve, a habitat painstakingly rebuilt after tigers were once lost there. A large number of trees would be felled, and villages, many of them home to tribal and forest-dependent families, face submergence or relocation. Affected communities have protested against displacement and inadequate compensation. The project thus sits at the intersection of water security, wildlife conservation and tribal rights, and none of those claims is trivial.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

A genuine trade-off, not a caricature

It is easy to reduce the debate to development versus environment, but both sides carry real stakes. Bundelkhand's water distress is severe, and the ecological and human costs of the dam are equally severe. Honest analysis holds both in view.

DIMENSION	BENEFIT CLAIMED	COST INCURRED
Water	Irrigation and drinking water for drought-hit Bundelkhand	Large forest and land submerged
Wildlife	Reservoir and downstream use	Part of Panna Tiger Reserve core zone lost
People	Regional development, employment	Displacement of tribal and forest-dwelling families
Ecology	Water storage and transfer	Felling of a large number of trees, habitat loss

Rights and consent are legal requirements

Displacement of forest dwellers is not merely a compensation issue; it is governed by law. The Forest Rights Act, 2006, recognises the rights of Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers and requires the consent of gram sabhas before diversion of forest land, while the LARR Act, 2013, sets standards for fair compensation and resettlement. Whether these consent and rehabilitation requirements are fully met is central to the project's legitimacy.

Ecology has no easy substitute

A tiger reserve core zone is not fungible (<https://ujjayanti.com/vocab/fungible/>) with compensatory afforestation elsewhere. The loss of mature forest and established habitat is difficult to offset, which is why the ecological objections carry weight independent of the human cost.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Read the project as a test of how India reconciles competing legitimate goods, water for the thirsty, homes and rights for the displaced, and habitat for wildlife. The transferable rule: a large project's legitimacy rests not only on the benefit it delivers but on whether the burdens it imposes are consented to, compensated fully and minimised. The right question is not whether Bundelkhand needs water, it does, but whether this design shares its costs justly and lawfully.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Bundelkhand water scarcity -> Ken-Betwa link proposed under National Perspective Plan (NWDA) -> Daudhan dam built -> reservoir submerges forest and part of Panna Tiger Reserve -> tribal and forest-dwelling families displaced -> Forest Rights Act 2006 consent and LARR 2013 rehabilitation triggered -> balance water security against ecology and rights -> just, lawful, minimised-harm implementation

WAY FORWARD

- ❶ **Uphold consent and rights.** Ensure the Forest Rights Act consent of affected gram sabhas is genuinely obtained and that individual and community forest rights are settled before further submergence.
- ❷ **Deliver full rehabilitation.** Provide fair, timely compensation and resettlement under the LARR Act, with livelihood restoration, not one-time payment alone, for displaced families.
- ❸ **Minimise and offset ecological loss.** Reduce the footprint where feasible, invest seriously in habitat management for the Panna Tiger Reserve, and treat compensatory measures as supplements, not licences for loss.
- ❹ **Strengthen independent review.** Keep environmental and social monitoring transparent and independent through implementation, so trade-offs are tracked and grievances addressed rather than deferred.

PYO LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

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UPSC has asked about interlinking of rivers, the rehabilitation of displaced persons, the Forest Rights Act, and the balance between development and environment. This editorial ties those themes to a live, first-of-its-kind project.

Practice question: “The Ken-Betwa Link Project encapsulates the tension between water security and the rights of displaced communities and ecology.” Critically examine with reference to the Forest Rights Act, 2006, and the LARR Act, 2013. (250 words, 15 marks)

Sources: *Down To Earth* (<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/>), *National Water Development Agency* (<http://nwda.gov.in/>)

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