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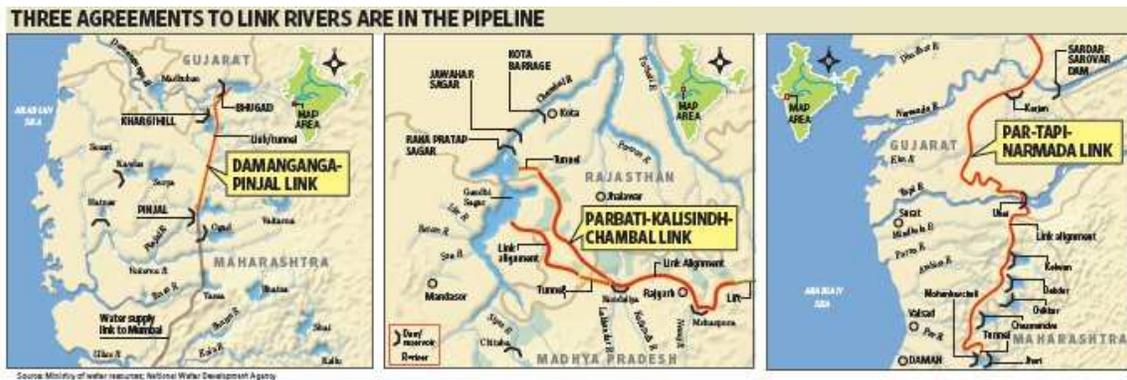
Four states set to sign river linking pacts

Move by Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh is a welcome change in govt focus, experts say
Siddhartha Sarma

New Delhi: The governments of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra are poised to sign three new agreements to link their rivers in an attempt to harvest surplus water for irrigation and drinking purposes, and address shortages in some of the states.

The so-called river linking schemes are part of an ambitious national river linking project, or RLP, and they are being overseen by the Union ministry of water resources. However, experts say the decision to sign agreements such as these reflects a change in focus of RLP, from linking geographically distant rivers to more realistic projects.

Three agreements to link rivers are in the pipeline ([Graphic](#))



RLP was conceived by the National Democratic Alliance government in 2003 and envisaged connecting 30 rivers across India—14 rivers in north India and 16 in peninsular India. The government believed that this would help irrigate 37 million hectares of land, generate 34 million MW of electricity, control floods, and prevent drought.

Since then, experts have said it is not feasible to link divergent river systems. And states have bickered on the contours of the project. That makes the three agreements that will be signed significant.

The first of these could be signed between Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh and will link the rivers Parbati and Kalisindh to Chambal.

“The two states have approached a consensus on linking the rivers and the boundary issues involved,” and will soon sign an agreement, said a water resources ministry official who did not wish to be identified.

According to officials at the National Water Development Agency, or NWDA, an autonomous society under the government that carries out surveys and makes plans regarding water bodies and irrigation, the project will divert surplus waters of two rivers, Parbati and Kalisindh, to the Gandhisagar (in Madhya Pradesh) and Rana Pratap Sagar (in Rajasthan) dams across the Chambal river.

“The water from these two rivers will irrigate areas around the link canals and at the Kota barrage in Rajasthan. The water saved in the Chambal by using the water from these rivers will be used in the drought-prone areas of the upper Chambal,” said an NWDA official who did not wish to be identified.

According to the feasibility report discussed by the two state governments, the length of the link to Rana Pratap Sagar dam will be 243km.

Similarly, Gujarat and Maharashtra are also on the verge of concluding their discussions on two river linking projects. One of them is the Damanganga-Pinjal project.

This link, say planners, will divert surplus waters from Bhugad and Khargi Hill reservoirs in Damanganga basin, Gujarat, to Pinjal dam, set up across the river Pinjal in the Vaitarna basin north of Thane, Maharashtra. When completed, the link will supply 909 million cubic metres of water to Mumbai.

“Two link tunnels will transmit the water. The tunnel from Bhugad to Khargi Hill will be 17km long, and the tunnel from Khargi Hill to Pinjal reservoir will be 25km long,” the NWDA official said.

Both state governments have informed the Union government that since the tunnels will be underground, it will not involve displacement of inhabitants. In addition, Gujarat and Maharashtra have also ironed out the details of linking the rivers Par, Tapi and Narmada and will sign an agreement on this shortly.

NWDA has so far prepared 14 feasibility reports, including these three.

It is also close to finalizing the detailed project report, or DPR, of the Ken-Betwa link between Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. This was the first ever river linkage project in the country but was delayed because of differences between the two states. The two governments had signed an agreement in 2005 for linking the basins of the two rivers through a 230km canal.

DPR is a document which outlines the finer details of projects and is the final step before work on the project begins. Work on the Ken-Betwa link is expected to begin later this year.

In 2005, analysts had said that the Ken-Betwa link did not make sense as the Ken didn't have surplus water. That has changed now, said the NWDA official.

Experts view these developments as a shift by the Union government away from linking geographically distant river systems—an idea floated when the river linking issue first emerged—to more realistic projects such as linking adjacent river systems.

“Linkages like the Damanganga-Pinjal project are very interesting. These are very proximate water bodies and surplus water can be diverted to the reservoirs planned as part of the project,” said Dinesh Kumar Mishra, an expert on irrigation systems and floods, and head of Barh Mukti Abhiyan, a non-governmental organization.

“This is a realistic project and so is the Parbati-Kalisindh-Chambal. These are a far cry from the wild theories about linking northern and southern rivers. However, each project approved or signed by the states in the future must be carefully studied to see if the rivers or basins involved are suitable for these linkages,” he added.

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