

Tuticorin Port VS Colombo Port

The Colombo port currently handles 1.7 million twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs) of which 40 per cent is Indian transshipment cargo. It fears Sethusamudram project can wean away a substantial chunk of it.

At a press conference held recently, the Minister of State for Shipping announced that work on the long-pending Sethusamudram project would begin after 2003 with an initial investment of Rs 200-230 crore. Even as the Nagpur-based National Research Institute (NEERI), entrusted with conducting the techno-economic feasibility study for the project, is scheduled to give its final techno-economic viability report by May 2003, the Centre has set up a coordination and monitoring committee headed by the Union Secretary for Shipping to expedite work on the project. According to the Minister, the work will initially involve construction of the canal with a depth of seven metres, which could subsequently go up to nine metres with an additional investment of Rs 200-250 crore. The project, which has been hanging fire since 1955, would help save Rs 70 crore per annum with a depth of seven metres, he said.

The objective of the Sethusamudram project involves excavation of a canal near the Rameswaram island situated at the south-eastern tip of the country for connecting Palk Strait with the Gulf of Mannar to facilitate passage of ships which, in the process, will connect the east and west coasts of the country. A high level committee appointed by the Government of India in 1964 had found the project viable and recommended implementation of the project along with the Tuticorin harbour project as both projects were inter-related and mutually-dependent (1968). Though the Tuticorin harbour project was completed and commissioned, the Sethusamudram project has been in the cold storage. As a result, even after 50 years of Independence, India does not have a continuous navigable route within its own territorial waters and ships from Kolkata still have to go around Sri Lanka to reach Tuticorin. A look at the salient features and strategic significance of this long-pending project and its relevance to the Tuticorin port.

The cost for the Sethusamudram project was estimated at Rs 37.46 crore in 1968, which was revised to Rs 280 crore in 1984. According to the Minister's statement, the project cost for both phases will be around Rs 400-480 crore. The cost could go up much higher if the canal were to be developed to facilitate passage of ships having draught up to 10.5 m. Once the project is completed, it would be possible to provide berthing facilities for several international vessels at Tuticorin itself, which will set the ball rolling for rapid economic development of the backward areas of Ramanathapuram and Tirunelveli districts of Tamil Nadu, while the berthing facilities will become an important source of foreign exchange earnings. All this is in addition to the likely savings of 500 km, leading to consequent savings in fuel and crew charges.

Ports of Tuticorin and Colombo

The Tuticorin port, which is one of the 11 major ports of India, is located on the south-eastern coast near the Indian ocean in Tamil Nadu. The port was commissioned in 1974 with certain limited facilities. At that point of time, taking up construction of the Tuticorin port even before commencement of work on Sethusamudram Project, amounted to putting the cart before the horse. The situation today is totally different.

The Tuticorin port now operates with three deep-water berths and three jetties of 9.14 m draught, four berths of 9.14 m draught and a shallow water berth of 6 m draught. The harbour basin extends to 400 hectares of protected water areas and is served by an approach channel of 1,450 m long and 183 m wide. The sea off Tuticorin is ably protected from rough weather all the year round owing to the presence of the island of Sri Lanka on the east and the stretch of mainland on the north.

To appreciate the prospects held out by the Tuticorin port, it is necessary to highlight the development of the Colombo port in the last two decades as a container port. During the 1950s and the 1960s, the Colombo port was basically a lighterage port which can be likened to a port like the then Kakinada port in Andhra Pradesh on the east coast.

Colombo has the advantage of its ideal location on the international sea trade route between Europe and South-East Asia. Since the commencement of operations in 1985 and 1987, the fully-equipped multi-berth terminal at this port enabled Colombo to serve the fast-growing demand for container traffic, handling transshipment in the region.

The container traffic has, however, grown more rapidly than expected with the result the terminal's full handling capacity was reached by 1992. To cope with the increased traffic, the port was subsequently expanded to construct No.3 berth in the container terminal and install cargo-handling machinery, including container cranes. Colombo received a substantial loan assistance on concessional terms from Japan for reinforcing container-handling capacity at the port. Japan extended a total of ¥ 18.5 billion to construct two container berths with modernised cargo-handling facilities in the basin

of Colombo Port aiming at improvement of the container-handling capacity of the port. For the third phase of the expansion of this project, Japan extended a loan of ¥ 21.05 billion towards constructing the No.4 Container Terminal Berth and installing cargo-handling machinery including container-loading cranes for the existing container berths.

This project also included dredging of the port, construction of an oil pipeline and development of the port's communication system.

The container revolution caught India only in 1973. Around the mid-1970s, container facilities were created at the Colombo port and the operating results of this port in recent years are very impressive. As against 85,000 to 95,000 20-foot equivalent unit (TEU) handled at Chennai and 2,57,000 TEU at Mumbai, the Colombo port handles around 4,87,000 TEU per annum and the figure is expected to reach 6,00,000 TEU. It is not as if the entire cargo offloaded at the Colombo port is meant for Sri Lanka but with the available facilities at Colombo port, larger cargo vessels from major exporting countries such as the US and Japan use the port to offload their cargo meant for several ports in the region such as Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai and send them to these ports through smaller vessels. With several other facilities such as flexible rates and low labour charges offered at the port, Colombo has been able to attract an enormous amount of business.

As the Tuticorin port is situated in the same region, not very far from Colombo, it should not be difficult to replicate the facilities available to international vessels at the port of Colombo.

Though the Government has a policy to develop Jawaharlal Nehru, Mumbai and Chennai ports as the hub ports in the region for the transshipment of containers, it seems likely that Vallapardam terminal at Kochi will also be developed as a transshipment port. Since Tuticorin has all the advantages of the Colombo port, it is desirable that the Tuticorin port be developed as a transshipment port, particularly keeping in view the fact that the port has been dredged at a cost of Rs 200 crore to cater to ships of draught up to 10.7 m.

The Tuticorin port now handles 13 million tonnes of cargo, primarily bulk in nature. It is necessary to highlight the dormant potentials of this port, which assumes greater significance in the wake of certain recent developments in the field of ocean transport.

In the first place as against a draught of 12.8 m available at Colombo, the draught available at Tuticorin is only around 9.14 m. The lack of draught in the approach channel of Tuticorin port, which also suffers from rock formation, is no doubt a constraint, but the problem is not insurmountable. As the dredging technology is highly advanced and similar type of rock has been removed in other parts of the world by direct dredging, it should be possible to create the necessary draught at Tuticorin port to facilitate handling container vessels.

In short, an integrated development of the Tuticorin harbour by simultaneously taking up both the Sethusamudram project and capital dredging operations by direct dredging should form part of an integrated project during the Tenth Plan.

If the Tuticorin port could be developed along these lines, it would be in a position to offer the type of services generally available at ports such as Colombo, Singapore, Jebel Ali and Dubai.

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