

## Superstition May Yet Save Marine Reserve

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NEW DELHI, Sep 24 (IPS) - India's plans to dredge a navigable canal between the Gulf of Mannar (which separates India from Sri Lanka) in the face of strong economic and ecological objections have now run, of all things, into a religious obstacle.

This has taken the shape of fierce opposition to the project from Hindu fundamentalist or communal groups, which claim that the canal's construction will damage a sub-sea structure of great religious-historical importance, popularly called Ram Setu (Lord Rama's bridge) or Adam's Bridge.

These groups, led by the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and its more extremist cohorts like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Organisation) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Self-help Organisation), contend that the shoal/sandbar formation is a man-made structure -- a bridge to Sri Lanka, constructed in ancient times under Rama's instructions by an army of monkeys.

The project, called the Sethusamudram Ship Canal Project, is also creating a rift within India's ruling United Progressive Alliance, in particular, between the Tamil Nadu-based Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), and the Congress party, which is the UPA's largest component.

The DMK, which rules the southern state of Tamil Nadu and also holds the surface transport portfolio in the Central (federal) government, is strongly rooting for the project, which offers lucrative contracts worth more than 600 million US dollars. It summarily dismisses all arguments against the canal, including religious ones.

The VHP has launched a vicious attack on the DMK. One of its senior leaders has offered a reward in gold to anyone who beheads DMK leader and Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi.

The Congress, under pressure from the BJP, has turned defensive and apologetic, and ended up lending respectability to the Hindu communalists' arguments, which border on rank obscurantism.

The UPA government has withdrawn a detailed affidavit filed by the official Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) in the Supreme Court explaining why the Ram Setu is a natural, not man-made, structure.

Ironically, there is little debate on rational grounds on the real, substantive, critical issues involved: namely, the questionable economic viability of the canal, and the environmental destruction its creation is likely to cause.

Nor is there a reference any longer to the disquiet the project may have caused in Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan government experts are known to have apprehensions about the hydrological impact of the project. The Indian government appears to have prevailed over them by claiming that the Sethusamudram canal would speed up the movement of naval ships and help intercept the boats of the militant Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Meanwhile, the Ram Setu issue is before India's Supreme Court in a petition which argues that the bridge is a man-made structure of great importance to the Hindus and must not be disturbed. In support of this claim, the petitioner has cited the scriptures and mythological texts like the Ramayana and an epic poem eulogising Ram, written in the Middle Ages.

"All kinds of agendas have got mixed up in the Sethusamudram issue," says Tanika Sarkar, a historian who teaches at Jawaharlal Nehru University, and who has studied the evolution of the BJP in depth. "They won't get disentangled until the BJP's claim about the Ram Setu is sorted out. That will demand courage from the government and a commitment to stand by the expert opinions of archaeologists, historians and geologists on the nature of the structure."

Such opinions are unanimous. Besides the ASI, historians, geologists, and earth and marine scientists have said that the Ram Setu cannot be considered a man-made entity in the absence of material evidence.

Yet, the BJP and its cohorts contend that the ASI affidavit denies Ram's existence and constitutes "blasphemy" and an "insult to the Hindus". The government has "sought to negate all that the Hindus consider sacred...and wounded the very idea of India," it railed.

In fact, the affidavit is extremely deferential to the scriptures. It reads: "The ASI is aware of and duly respects the deep religious import bestowed upon these texts by the Hindu community across the globe..." Yet, it argues that no material evidence, such as human remains or other artefacts, has been discovered at the site, which would corroborate the mythological account.

It also quotes studies by India's Space Applications Centre, which "conclusively" show that the Setu formation is purely natural, and says that the imagery collected by the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration cannot be interpreted as "proof" of a man-made structure. NASA itself has clarified that remote visual images cannot prove or disprove this.

That's not all. A GSI study around Adam's Bridge, based on drilling holes into submerged rocks, also found "no evidence" of man-made structures. It revealed three cycles of sedimentation of clay, limestone and sandstone -- a natural phenomenon which occurred millennia before humans settled in peninsular India.

"The BJP is trying to exploit superstition and rank ignorance to press its ridiculous claims," says Sarkar. "It has developed this into a political tactic. It succeeded in doing that in Ayodhya, in Uttar Pradesh, in the 1980s by claiming that a temple marking the birthplace of Rama had been destroyed there by the first Moghul Emperor in the 16th century to build a mosque."

The BJP mobilised a hysterical campaign which eventually led to the demolition of the mosque in December 1992, and a series of violent riots against Muslims all over the country.

Economists and environmentalists argue against the project on the ground that the canal will result in very little saving in terms of shipping distance or time, and will cause enormous ecological destruction.

Jacob John, an infrastructure economist, argues that the canal will cut transit time for coastal shipping, but will have little benefit for international shipping from Europe and Africa, which accounts for two-thirds of the maritime traffic. In fact, transit time from Africa to Kolkata is likely to increase by 3.5 hours because piloting a ship through the canal, which has a shallow draft, will be a slow process.

The economic rate of return from the project is estimated to be just 2.5 percent. But India is borrowing loans for the project at rates as high as 8 percent.

"The Sethusamudram canal is an economic deadweight," says Sudarshan Rodrigues, a Chennai-based environmental economist and marine conservationist. "But its ecological impact will be utterly disastrous. The project area is part of the Gulf of Mannar marine biological reserve, which has over 3,600 species and major groups of biological resources, including precious mangroves, which protect the coast against storms and tidal waves. Some of them are endangered species. The canal's construction will jeopardise their existence."

Among the endangered species are sea fans, sponges, pearl oysters, chanks and holothuroids, and above all, coral reefs. Corals, sea fans, sponges and holothurians are all "protected species" under the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972. Corals belong to the same "protected" status Schedule of the Act as the tiger.

"The project is a recipe for destruction and ruin, and must be opposed on environmental and economic grounds. But superstition and blind faith guide decision-making in a globalising India that aspires to become a modern economic superpower," said Sudarshan.