

A bridge built by monkeys ?

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NASA administrator Mike Griffin, who is currently attending the International Astronautical Congress in Hyderabad, India, was recently bewildered by a question on the agency's stand on a matter related to Hindu mythology.

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Adam's Bridge, a name given to it by an East India Company official, is known in India as Ram Sethu or Rama's bridge. Hindus believe their god Ram built a bridge in the area, with the help of an army of monkeys, to cross over to Sri Lanka. For those wondering why it was imperative for the Hindu god to cross over, it was to rescue his wife from a Lankan king.

The 48-km-long feature connects the Gulf of Mannar to Palk Strait. The Encyclopedia Britannica says it was once the world's largest tombolo – a sandbar connecting an island to another island or the mainland – but it was destroyed several thousand years ago by a slight rise in sea level. Today, all that remains is a chain of sandbanks that severely hinders navigation.

Right now, ships trying to move between India's west and east coasts have to go around Sri Lanka. To save time, India decided to build a shipping canal between the countries. The decision to build the Sethusamudram Shipping Canal itself is fraught with controversy – with several geologists and environmentalists from India and Sri Lanka raising objections on scientific grounds.

But then things got even more heated when ultra-right wing Hindu organisations swung into action and said in a petition to India's Supreme Court that NASA's images prove the existence of a bridge – Rama's bridge, they argue, which should be considered a "religious monument".

The project is temporarily on hold until the Supreme Court gives its verdict on the project. The Archaeological Survey of India testified in the court this month that the Adam's Bridge area was merely sand and coral formations and that the petitioners did not interpret NASA's images correctly.

Griffin, blissfully unaware of the complicated story of a Hindu god, monkeys, a bridge and religious fanatics, was therefore caught off guard when a leading Indian television station asked him what NASA's stand was on the shoals. "I don't know what you are talking about. I don't want to comment on anything I do not know," a baffled Griffin replied.

The channel persisted and explained it was a raging religious controversy. Griffin – quite sensibly, I think – said he refused to be drawn into religious controversies and had more pressing matters to attend to as NASA's chief.

<http://www.newscientist.com/blog/space/2007/09/bridge-built-by-monkeys.html>