

## Beyond Belief

Sethusamudram project is being built for all the wrong reasons; and that now, it is being supported and opposed for all the wrong reasons

- Vaishna Roy

Let's first establish that I am not religious. I am far more comfortable with Darwinian concepts of creation than theories that emanate from the navel lotus or the apple. So I feel no emotional outrage about the anti-Ram comments that have been spewing forth. The angst of the good Hindu is not mine. In fact, I should ideally be terribly thrilled that so many prominent people are taking up the cause of reason with so much vigour.

But I am not thrilled. I am irritated. It riles me that people like M. Karunanidhi, the chief minister of Tamil Nadu, should spout rationalism when it's clear that he is clueless about it. It riles me that historians should suddenly discover the absence of historical proof of Ram's existence when there has never been any from day dot. It maddens me when feminists now tell me that Ram is anti-women. All these people are suddenly crawling out of the woodwork and trying to jostle for a place on the sunlit stage of reason, convinced that their credentials to common sense need no examination simply because their arguments are pitted against the passion and fury of religion. The fact is, their arguments are vapid, and their position an ineffectual response to the situation.

There is little doubt about the vested interests of almost everyone who is egging on the Sethusamudram Project. Let's take that as a given &mdash; there's little evidence to suppose that the project is going to bring untold prosperity to the region. But to cover up naked greed with the fig-leaf of rationalism is to assume that you can fool all of the people all of the time, a chancy call at any time.

The first fact that any person of common sense has to acknowledge is that the staunchest rationalist cannot wish away religion. Ram is a god to millions in this country, and the Ramayana is considered not myth but gospel truth. And this is not going to change in a hurry. When eminent scholars now point out that the Ramayana is not a historical fact, they must realise that neither are Eden, burning bushes or Jibril's voice proven historical facts. They are underpinnings of faith, grand props in the fabulous game of make-believe that religion is all about. Therefore, to argue history to the faithful and expect them to accept it is ridiculously futile. Why, if we extend this debate to its logical conclusion, then the very basis of Israel is questionable. And that's a can of worms no one cares to open. As Marx said, to ask people to give up the illusory happiness of their condition is to ask them to give up a condition that requires illusions.

We also have the grand Dravidian position, one that can't quite make up its mind about whether it's rationalist or religious. On the one hand, the men of science ask for Ram's engineering degree as proof of his existence, and in the same breath they tell you that their Tamilian brethren actually worship other, local gods, who no doubt have produced ration cards to convince this sceptical lot.

Then, of course, we have the wacky arguments about Ram's personality. As much as any Dravidian, I admire Ravan whole-heartedly. He has all the scent of romance, the fine halo of hubris like Milton's Satan that the vacuous Ram lacks. But this is the realm of pure and legitimate literary criticism &mdash; how does Ram's chicanery in the epic ipso facto make the Ram Setu site the best place for a shipping channel? Or does his being anti-feminist somehow become reparation for the environmental damage?

And that's what is so infuriating about all this absurd posturing. Where is the thread of logic? The vital issues at stake here are in another sphere altogether, and worth a far closer look.

Why is this channel being built? Ostensibly, to shorten sailing times between the western and eastern coasts of India and thus create an economic boom. We have been told that it will chop off about 30 hours in the voyage from the Gulf of Mannar to the Bay of Bengal because ships won't have to go around Sri Lanka. In the first place, this is not a great reduction. Second, navigation experts point out that even this saving applies only to certain voyages, mostly local ones like that between Chennai and Tuticorin. Time saved by other ships, those originating in European or African ports, will be considerably lower &mdash; more like eight or four hours respectively.

This is a significant point because the Draft Project Report for Sethusamudram envisages the bulk of the revenue (about 60 per cent) as accruing from vessels that embark from foreign ports and not Indian ports. However, if the time savings for such ships is not significant enough, why would they use the canal at all? All the more so when the proposed canal has severe draft restrictions and pilotage delays.

The canal when finished will have an average depth of about 12 metres, which means it can be used by vessels of up to 30,000 tons only. Globally, the shipping industry has long moved towards vessels of 60,000 and higher tonnage and super-heavy tankers of 150,000 tons, none of which can use Sethusamudram. The Draft Report bases its revenue calculations on more than 3,000 ships using the canal by the end of 2008, but given the draft availability, marine experts peg the number at about 1,000 ships per annum at best.

Worse, to maintain even the 12 metre depth, the dredging along the canal will have to be continuous. That is because Palk Bay is one of the five major sediment sinks of India, which basically means that large quantities of sediment and silt are deposited in the seabed here annually from coastal rivers of both India and Sri Lanka as well as from tidal currents. Continuous dredging means heavy maintenance costs plus the heavy costs and problems of disposing of the dredged material. These costs are not factored into revenue calculations, neither the effects of it on ecological calculations.

The most gains that the canal can bring about is to regional trade &mdash; to compare the gains to global shipping to be of the magnitude of that attained by the Suez is silly beyond belief. And that is just the economics. What about the environmental damage? The basic EIA (environmental impact study) that was conducted here is suspect &mdash; it ignores fairly obvious ecological issues. It does not take into account the effects of future pollution, sea-bed disturbances due to continuous dredging, and the entire issue of cyclones and tsunamis. The area is a rich and unique biosphere that need not be sacrificed for a development project of minor and dubious economic merit. Several experts have pointed out the loopholes in the Sethusamudram project but despite the persistent doubts about the wisdom of large-scale manipulation of natural formations, there are few signs of those in power slowing down and thinking this through.

The irony is this: that the Sethusamudram project is being built for all the wrong reasons; and that now, it is being supported and opposed for all the wrong reasons.

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