

We have not heard of Ramar Paalam until now - Rameswaram Fishermen

"We have not heard of Ramar Paalam until now when the BJP talked about it. We have always known the islands as theedai or thittu," says Ramalakshmi who lives with her husband Selvaraj, and their three children, as have generations before them in Rameswaram

As the cries of sea gulls shatter the sea's rhythmic roar, Aintham Thittu or Fifth Island, which forms part of the necklace of 18 islands that constitute the shoal chain that is also known as Adam's Bridge, is calm. The only residents of this half-a-kilometre long island are the sea weeds, shells and the dead crab that lie half embedded in the sands. Here, there is none of the turbulence being witnessed elsewhere over Ram Setu or the bridge purportedly built by Lord Ram.

While five and a quarter of the 18 islands fall within Indian waters, the remaining are in Sri Lanka's territorial waters. If the deepening of a shipping channel along Ram Setu continues, then three islands would disappear during dredging. But this hardly worries Dhanushkodi or Land's End, as it is called, the ghost village that was wiped out by the 1964 cyclonic storm. While the ambitious and expensive Rs 2,427-crore Sethusamudram project has deepened the battle lines between political parties, in Dhanushkodi, barely 2 km by sea from Fifth Island and close to Ground Zero, the subject is of little interest to the villagers.

Dhanushkodi is close to Rameswaram, the coastal fishing town, also famous as a pilgrim town with its Kothandaramasamy temple devoted to Lord Ram.

"We have not heard of Ramar Paalam until now when the BJP talked about it. We have always known the islands as theedai or thittu," says Ramalakshmi. She lives here with her husband Selvaraj, and their three children, as have generations before them.

"Our men have been fishing in these parts for years. No one talked about a Ramar bridge before. This is the first time we are hearing about it," she says. Their concern is not political. Their fear is that once the channel is opened for navigation, fishermen would not be able to put out their nets and that the catch would reduce. But amid the confusion, all viewpoints are being discussed. Says S Subramani, "There is also a theory that with the deepening of the sea here, more fish will swim to this side. Right now we go to deep into Sri Lankan waters to fish."

Theories are good for debates, but it is the ground reality that angers the villagers. They have had to put up with without even the basic of amenities like power and water, and progress has been eluding them for four decades. There is simmering anger that while huge amounts of money is being pumped in to dredge a sea channel, the village has been in darkness since that debilitating cyclone.

Undeterred by the destruction left behind by nature, about 600 families came back to their destroyed huts on the golden sands, the wrecked Dhanushkodi railway station, a church, with its roof ripped off, a high stone-walled water tank and some brick-and-stone store houses.

"We have just one lamp," says an angry Kaliamma, pointing to the tall solar lamppost stuck into the sand at the centre of the village. Few households here have televisions—only those who can afford have battery-operated sets. But every time the battery runs out, that is every 10 days, they need to be taken to Rameswaram town to be recharged. Dhanushkodi is accessible only by tempo vans or jeeps. Tourists hire these vehicles to take a dip in the sea near Land's End.

"They are spending so much digging the sea. Why can't they spend a little money to dig four drinking water well for us?" demands Tamizhselvi. The village is rich in spring water and the villagers depend on little water holes, about 2 ft deep, that they dig occasionally to shore up their drinking water supply.

Wedged between the sea, Dhanushkodi's families depend solely on fishing. The village enjoys an advantage. "When the winds are strong on one side of Adam's Bridge, we fish on the other side. But we dread to think what will happen to us once the Sethusamudram project is implemented. That has been our biggest fear," says Nagaraj. Their apprehension has been that a fishing village so close to development could prompt the Government to clear them out. "Fishing is the only livelihood we know," he says.

But the project has its supporters. Neechal Kali, 82, is one of them. "The Sethusamudram project will bring

in huge economic development, so why are people protesting?““ he asks. Kali supplies drinking water to tourists from his water hole, drawing the wrath of the villagers. His son, Bakiaraj, is the only hawker in the village, peddling curios made of sea shells.

Until September 17, much after the controversy over the shipping canal broke out and the Supreme Court stayed the operations near the Adam“s Bridge, a dredger had been busy operating north of the island, feverishly working to keep the November 2008 deadline for creating the the canal that was projected to usher in an economic boom in the southern parts of Tamil Nadu.

According to figures posted on the official website of the Sethusamudram Corporation Ltd., 24.76 per cent of the dredging has been completed north of Ram Setu. However, from September 18, the dredger operating there packed up and left the seas, moving towards the Palk Strait and the Palk Bay. The dredger operating south of the Bridge stopped work in April and was scheduled to resume in October. But the controversy and the legal intervention could delay resumption of operations indefinitely.

After raking up the Ram issue, the saffron brigade made several visits to Rameswaram, trying to mobilise support against the Sethusamudram project.

In Rameswaram, fishermen and their families are more preoccupied with the frequent detentions and alleged harassment by Lankan authorities when some them stray into that country“s territorial waters.

““We have never objected to the Sethusamudram project right from the time it was announced. And the Ram issue never figured even once all these years,““ says Antony Raj, a staunch AIADMK sympathiser and president of the Mechanised Boat Fishermen“s Association. The fishing town has 1,200 mechanised boats and over 2,000 country boats. ““I may be a strong supporter of Amma (AIADMK General Secretary J Jayalalithaa). But, we feel this is a big conspiracy by whosoever is opposing the project to stall development of this region,““ he says.

While cautioning Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M Karunanidhi to tone down his anti-Ram remarks, the fisherman pointed out that once the sea is deepened in the Palk Strait, ““the time it takes us to reach the Indian Ocean would be much shorter. Currently, we require 150 litres of diesel to reach the Indian Ocean, which is deeper and offers better catches. Once the Palk Strait is deepened, we will need only 50 litres of diesel and we don“t have to go into Lankan waters to fish,““ he says.

Antony Raj and his associates know what it means to lose their way into foreign waters. They had been desperately mediating with Sri Lankan judge to get their 10 mates released after they were detained in Anuradhapura for fishing in Lankan waters. On September 20, the judge ordered their release along with two of their boats.

““I have been fishing in the waters near Rameswaram since I was seven. We have never heard of the Ramar Paalam before. Once the Sethusamudram project is implemented, every Indian would be proud of it. And there is no basis for fears that a fisherman“s livelihood will be affected if shipping activity begins. Aren“t fishermen in Kolkata, Vizag, Mumbai or Chennai happy with the ports near their sea? So why should Rameswaram be deprived of development?““ argues Raj.

According to N J Bose, the state General Secretary of the Tamil Nadu, Pondicherry Fisherman Federation, the dredging of the channel would bring in ““related developments““–like a big harbour, facilities for exporting fish, an auction hall and storage facilities. ““For most of the families here, fishing is their main livelihood. And any development related to fishing is the best thing that can happen for us,““ he said.

There is a contra view. D Kuppuramu, the National Secretary of the Rameswaram Ram Setu Protection Movement, a native of Ramanathapuram, accuses the fishermen“s association of being the mouthpieces of the ruling DMK and campaigning in favour of the Sethu project. ““Even the BJP is a confused party. The fourth alignment they are suggesting for the channel is also not feasible. The Government has to give up the Sethusamudram project altogether as there is no alternative that would not affect the environment and livelihood of fishermen. A reputed, neutral organisation should conduct an environment impact assessment before going ahead further with the project,““ he says.

Meanwhile, Kaliamma and her friends back in Dhanushkodi village have other problems to think about. Both know the futility of thinking that the state Government, so caught up in realising a 150-year-old Tamil dream, even has time for them.

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