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***STRENGTHENING CAPACITY FOR ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE
CHANGE LAW IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC
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**SESSION 13: SETHU SAMUDRAM CANAL PROJECT
CASE STUDY**



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Another issue which concerns the Tamil Nadu fishermen is the ambitious **Sethusamudram Shipping Canal Project**, which proposes to link the Palk Bay and the Gulf of Mannar between India and Sri Lanka by creating a shipping canal.



SETHUSAMUDRAM

Despite the findings of the R.K. Pachauri-headed committee, the government has decided to go ahead with the controversial canal project, a move that has made the BJP and other opposition parties see red



THE PROJECT

- Sethusamudram Shipping Canal Project (SSCP) involves developing an off-shore shipping canal in the Palk Strait to cut short the distance for ships navigating between the west and east coasts of India, by avoiding the circumnavigation of Sri Lanka
- In the new route, the ships would navigate

through Gulf of Mannar and Palk Strait and enter Bay of Bengal directly

- The project will involve dredging shallow seabed of Palk Strait and Adam's Bridge to a depth of 12 m

- Total length of the canal in Palk Strait is 152.2 km, with a width of 300 m. This is divided into three legs: the southern leg in the

Adam's Bridge (20 km); the northern leg in the Palk Strait (54.2 km) and the central portion (78 km)

- Dredging would be done in southern and northern legs only since the central segment is considered to have the adequate depth

- It will be the longest seabed-dredging project planned so far in India

The Ram Setu is 30-km long and separates Gulf of Mannar from Palk Strait. The channel is expected to cut over 400 km off the voyage around the island of Sri Lanka



ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

- The bay is heavily sedimented due to water drained by various rivers as well as sediments transported during storms. In addition, the massive dredging will result in huge amounts of much that will have to be dumped

- One of the major negative impacts is possible threat to coral habitats in Gulf of Mannar area. Dumping of dredged spoils undersea will affect marine ecology and fishing ops



- The Gulf of Mannar region is home to 3,000 species of fauna and flora, including rare and endangered turtles, dolphins, dugongs, and whales. The biodiversity of

this region is already under threat

- Breaching of Adam's Bridge, which acts as a natural break-water between Gulf of Mannar and Palk Straits, will lead to

changes in water temperature, salinity, and nutrient flow

- Some experts fear the project may lead to a rise in sea level and inundation of parts of the Jaffna peninsula

- Sethu Samudram is the sea that separates India from Sri Lanka.
- With a depth of less than 10 meters across most of its extent, the sea is not sufficient for the movement of ships.
- This is due to the presence of the shallow region of Adam's bridge, that joined Sri Lanka to the continent of Asia during the last ice age.



RAM SETHU / ADAM'S BRIDGE



ADVANTAGES

- The advantages of the canal were that the distance between Cape Comorin and Chennai would be reduced to 402 nautical miles from the prevailing 755 miles.
- Travelling time would come down by 36 hours.
- Resulting in savings in fuel / costs.
- The Sethusamudram Project has a very important geo-political dimension.



TIME LINES

- Conceived in **1860** by Commander A. D. Taylor of the Indian Marines
- **1955** - The Government of India constituted the Sethusamudram Project Committee under A. Ramaswamy Mudaliar to examine the feasibility and desirability
- **January 1999** - Defence minister George Fernandes announced that the government would complete the digging of the Sethusamudram channel in three years



TIME LINES

- **2004** - The National Environmental Engineering Research Institution (NEERI) submitted the techno-economic feasibility and environmental impact assessment report of the project.
- **June 2005** The United Progressive Alliance Government of India headed by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh announced the inauguration of the construction, with an approved cost of Rs.2,427.40 crore.



TIME LINES

- **March 2007** - Some Hindu groups launched an international campaign to halt the project, on the grounds that it will destroy the Adam's Bridge, which Hindus believe was built by an army of monkeys to allow Lord Rama to cross to Lanka to rescue his abducted wife.
- **Aug-Sept 2007** - Dredging in the Adam's Bridge region had to be stopped following a Supreme Court order on 31 August and 14 September 2007 asking the government to set up an expert panel on the matter.



TIME LINES

- **July 2008** - The apex court while reserving its verdict on a bunch of petitions challenging the project had asked an expert committee headed by environmentalist R K Pachauri to study the feasibility of an alternative alignment to avoid damage to the Ram Setu or Adams Bridge
- Only about 40% of the total project has been completed so far .
- **November 2017**: Petitioner Subramaniam Swamy informed that Government has abandoned? SC directed the Centre to state its position...
- **The New Avatar: Sagar Mala? (2017)**



Environmental Concerns

- Green groups and experts have been opposing the project for the damage it could cause to the fragile ecology of the Gulf of Mannar, which is a marine biodiversity hotspot.
- **R.K. Pachauri Committee:** “... it can be seen that the project, including the possibility of adopting the alignment 4A, could potentially result in ecological threats that could pose a risk to the ecosystems in the surrounding area and, in particular, to the biosphere reserve.”
- **Pachauri** also warned against other variables such as risk of oil spills, cyclones, tsunamis and other natural threats.



GULF OF MANNAR



Countries Position - **India**

- The project is expected to provide a boost to the **economic and industrial development of coastal Tamil Nadu**. The project will be of particular significance to Tuticorin harbor
- The Sethusamudram Project has a very important **geo-political dimension**
- 80% of Japan's oil supplies and 60% of China's oil supplies shipped on this sea-lane. **Almost half of the world's container traffic passes** through the choke points of this sea-lane and its branches in the Indian Ocean.
- The strategic importance should also be understood in the light of *India's* ambitions to become the Indian Ocean's **predominant naval power**.



Countries Position – Sri Lanka

- Sri Lankan environmental groups so far has made several appeals to the respective governments and to the United Nations Environment Programme.
- Although Sri Lanka has an Environmental Impacts Assessment procedure under the Coast Conservation Department this project does not come within their jurisdictions.



Countries Position – Sri Lanka

- However, Sri Lankan environmental concerns are not addressed in the Environmental Impacts Assessment process by Indian authorities.
- The Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) study on the Project carried out by India rarely refers to Sri Lanka, which is a main stakeholder.



Countries Position – Sri Lanka

- In number of occasions environmental groups urged to conduct a joint Indo-Lanka Environmental and Social Impacts Assessment. But Indian approach is very defensive.
- The Sri Lankan government, even as late as 2005 has been demanding the establishment of a standing joint mechanism for exchange of information.
- These concerns still remain unsettled.



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धन्यवाद

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Thank You

