

# **Sethu Samudram project getting resurrected?**



**-Pudumadam Jaffar Ali, for  
contact: pudumadamjaffar1968  
@gmail.com**

Some arguments will not end easily. Since various things become subject matters of discussions over the years, old debates may sink into oblivion. However, at one point of time discussions on some pretty old issues may get resurrected. One such issue is the Sethu Samudram project.

Recently answering a question in the Rajya Sabha, Jitendra Singh, Minister of State for Nuclear Energy and Space, said, "After a satellite examination, it could not be stated categorically that there existed Ramar bridge." At the same time, the people steeped in religious beliefs have a faith in the bridge. Consequently, the

discussion on the Sethu Samudram project has started reaching a crescendo.

## **Background of the project**

India boasts a coastline spanning about 7,500 km. There is no direct route by sea from one place to another in the country. Ships starting from the west coast cities such as Mumbai, Kochi etc. should take a detour via Sri Lanka to reach the east coast cities such as Chennai, Visakhapatnam, Kolkata and so on. The journey will take 30 hrs, covering 400 nautical miles and exhausting lots of fuel in the process. It was only by way of

sparing cargo ships all these troubles that the Sethu Samudram Shipping Canal project was drawn up.

The project envisages deepening of the shallow Palk Strait between India and Sri Lanka and creating a navigable shipping route so that ships reach the Bay of Bengal through Sethu canal bypassing Sri Lanka. The project has certain global precedents. For instance, Suez Canal connects the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea. Panama Canal connects the Pacific Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean. Both canals were man-made, created as they were by

digging the landscape and connected to the sea. But the Sethu Samudram project is different insofar as it involves deepening of sea and connecting it with sea.

## **Pioneering efforts**

During the British rule in India, a study was conducted from 1760s to 1838. At that time, a small canal was dug up and small ships plied along the route. The project on the Sethu Samudram turned a damp squib. According to the Britannia Encyclopedia, it was A. D. Taylor who again put forward the project and till 1922 the British

government took several measures on this count.

After India became independent, a committee under the stewardship of Dr. A. Ramasamy Mudaliar was set up in 1955. Later, the Tamil Nadu government drew up a plan at the estimated cost of Rs.21 crore in 1963. The draft was sent to Parliament. Then, in 1983 the Lakshmi Narayanan Committee also studied the Sethu Samudram project and submitted a report which, however, the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, rejected. After 15 years, the then Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalithaa in 1998 pressured the BJP's union government led by Vajpayee to

implement the Sethu Samudram project. Her demand assumed significance in view of the support that the Jayalalithaa-led AIADMK had extended to the BJP government. The then Defence Minister George Fernandes, who came down to Rameswaram for some event, assured that the Sethu Samudram project would soon be implemented. Thereafter much water flowed under the bridge.

On July 2, 2005 the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government led by the then Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh resurrected the Sethu Samudram

project at the estimate of Rs.2,427 crore. Manmohan Singh, Sonia Gandhi, UPA leader, and M. Karunanidhi, the then Tamil Nadu CM, inaugurated the project in Madurai. The AIADMK, which had till then supported the project, started slamming it, saying, "No benefit would ensue from the project." The BJP, for its part, joined the league of detractors, openly saying that it would not allow the Ramar Bridge to be damaged during deepening of the sea as part of the project. The Viswa Hindu Parishad and Dr. Subramanian Swamy moved the Supreme Court against the Sethu Samudram project and got an



interim stay on implementation of the project. Consequently, the work of deepening the sea came to a halt and the project was put on the backburner on July 27, 2009.

## **Sandbars**

The sandbars from Dhanuskodi in Tamil Nadu to Thalaimannar in Sri Lanka are called Ramar Bridge by the Hindus and the Adam's Bridge by the Muslims. They provide background for the natural phenomenon from their own religious perspectives.

Geologically sandbars are said to be formed at the intersection of two seas or at the dividing line between two landscapes as a result of the surging waves in clash. Sandbars are seen at the junction of the American and Russian seas, the North American and South American seas and the African- European seas. The Dhanuskodi-Thalaimannar sandbars had similarly been created, argues a section of people.

## **Support and opposition**

General opinion is divided on the pros and cons of the Sethu Samudram project.

The fishermen's side argues that the Sethu Samudram project should be implemented so they can have a hassle-free deep-sea fishing. Another argument says that the project will facilitate an immense growth of the Thoothukudi and Rameswaram ports. At the same time, there are fishermen groups which say that the Sethu Samudram project will sound a death-knell to the fishing industry.

There is another view that even as the sea is more and more deepened, the sandbars will continue to be formed and so it

will be a highly tough job to maintain the region.

Even when the DMK was a powerful constituent of the UPA government in Delhi, several political questions were raised over the crores of rupees spent on the Sethu Samudram project and the quantity of sand dredged out.

Arguments from the ecological perspectives were also put forward. Even if the sea is deepened to a greater extent, only the small ships can navigate the route. Apart from it, the fishermen's livelihood will go for a toss. Rare marine species will be

lost and environment will also be affected.

Under the Sethu Samudram project, the sea was deepened from 2005 to 2009. Now, the government must come up with data about environmental damage, if any, which may have happened due to that. It must be ensured that the country's security is not put in jeopardy. It must also be guaranteed that after investing crores and crores of rupees in the project, it will not be given up citing its lack of feasibility.

Above all, the Sethu Samudram project should be planned and

implemented in such a manner that the sentiments of our people, who generally attach importance to memorials based on holy beliefs, are not wounded.

**Translated by V. Mariappan.**