

Chapter 18

When Megaengineering Disturbs Ram: The Sethusamudram Ship Canal Project

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18.1 Introduction

The Sethusamudram Ship Canal Project (SSCP) is a megaengineering project in the Palk Strait, the sea between India and Sri Lanka. The purpose of the canal is to create a navigable route that allows ships to pass through between the two countries, instead of having to sail all around Sri Lanka. This project would enable ship companies to save significantly on travel time, distance and also on fuel and charter costs. Since the Palk Strait is very shallow, depths of less than 3 m (10 ft) occur in some places, extensive dredging is required. A salient detail, however, is that the Palk Strait is home to some of the world's most diverse and fragile ecosystems. This is why the canal obviously causes a great deal of concern among environmentalists.

Also economists have their objections. They state that the costs of maintenance dredging would be so high that the canal could never be profitable and that the canal is not attractive enough for “non-coastal” ships, which are expected to constitute about 70% of the users of the canal.

Later on in the debate, the proponents of the canal were confronted with opposition from a completely different source. Across the Palk Strait runs a chain of sandbars and limestone rocks called Adam's Bridge. Hindu activists believe that Adam's Bridge is in fact a mythical bridge, called Ram Sethu. Ram Sethu is a bridge built by the Hindu deity Ram to allow his army to cross the sea.

In order to complete the Sethusamudram Ship Canal Project, dredging through Adam's Bridge is required. This undertaking constitutes sacrilege to many Hindu activists as they consider this the destruction of the holy bridge. In a relatively short period, the debate on the Sethusamudram project changed from a discussion on the economic and environmental objections to the canal, which did not receive too much media attention all together, into a political storm on the destruction of the holy

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bridge Ram Sethu. The key question of this chapter is how this megaengineering project became the subject of an intense mega controversy.

This analysis is based mainly on a study into the media coverage of the Sethusamudram Project in Indian English language newspapers and magazines over the period from 2005 to 2008 and additional (English language) literature. The second section introduces the project itself, its proponents and their arguments. The third section presents the cases against the project that are pending before the Supreme Court of India and the arguments against the project. The fourth section discusses the Indian political system in order to unravel the dynamics of the debate and the parties involved. The final section considers possible development and also a possible compromise.

18.2 The Sethusamudram Ship Canal Project

18.2.1 The Canal

The Sethusamudram Ship Canal Project is the first the attempt ever to dredge an off-shore canal on this scale. The Indian government awarded the assignment to design the canal to the Danish-Indian engineering firm L&T-Rambøll Consulting Engineers Ltd. (Tuticorin Port Trust, 2005: 1). This firm has offices in various cities in India, among which in Chennai. The project in its full length measures 152.2 km (94.5 mi). The canal is 300 m (984 ft) wide and 12 m (39 ft) deep. The canal consists of a northern, a central, and a southern section. The southern section measures 20 km (12.4 mi) and runs through a chain of sandbars and limestone rocks called Adam's Bridge. The central section is the longest and measures 78 km (48.4 mi). Since the sea in this section is already of adequate depth, no dredging is required in this section. The northern section runs through the Palk Strait and measures 54.2 km (33.6 mi); it does require dredging. The canal runs along the maritime border between India and Sri Lanka, approximately 35 km (22 mi) off the Indian coast. Figure 18.1 shows the location of the project (Ramesh, 2005: 536). The canal is situated in the stretch of sea between India and Sri Lanka. Officially this "sea stretch" consists of the Gulf of Mannar to the south and the Palk Bay and Palk Strait to the north. The former and the latter two are separated by Adam's Bridge. When completed, the canal forms a short-cut from the Indian Ocean into the Gulf of Bengal (Fig. 18.2). It is worth noting that alternative megaengineering plans were proposed to construct a land connection between India and Sri Lanka through the Palk Strait using the Adams, Bridge (Schuiling, 2004).

18.2.2 The Historic Background

The idea of cutting a canal through the Palk Strait and into Gulf of Mannar was first coined in 1860 by a British naval officer, Commander A.D. Taylor. Up to 1922,



Fig. 18.1 Project location

nine proposals were made official for this project, but none of these appealed to the British colonial government. Between 1922 and 1955 the idea remained dormant. Between 1955 and 1980 five proposals were submitted to the Indian government, but also none of these appealed. In 1980 the government issued a press statement that such a project would not be economically viable. However, between 1981 and 1986 a government-appointed committee conducted another investigation and concluded that it in fact could be economically viable. This signal gave the project momentum. In 2000 another study was carried out on the feasibility of the canal. In 2005 the Cabinet Committee of Economic Affairs gave a green light to the project, and that same year, the dredging works were officially inaugurated (Paleri, 2005: 15–16).

18.2.3 Proponents and Expected Benefits

Major benefits are expected from the project by its proponents. The most articulate proponents are the ruling political parties in the Indian national government and in the Tamil Nadu state government. The foremost proponents among them are the Congress Party in the national politics and its primary coalition partner, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). The DMK is the ruling party from Tamil Nadu and is also present in the national politics. The DMK not only expects major

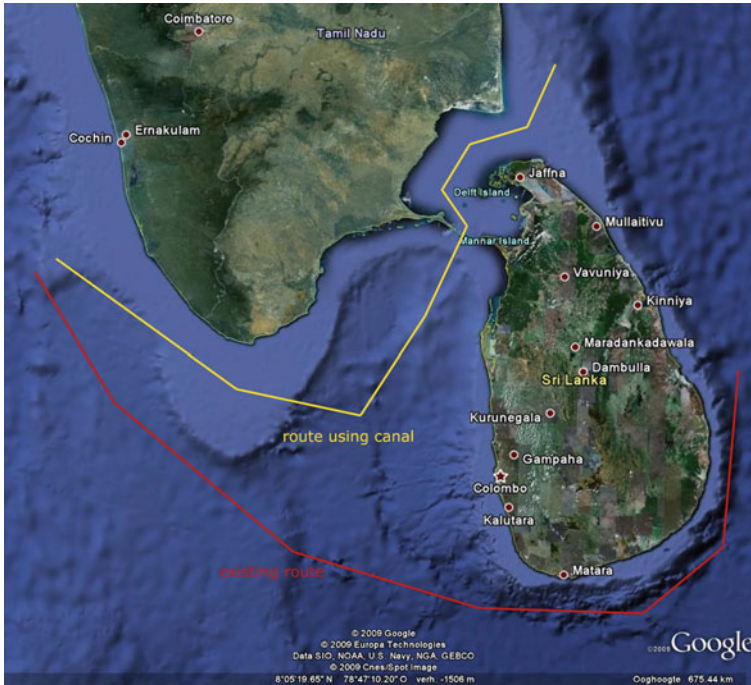


Fig. 18.2 Map of sea routes

economic benefits, but also sees a rhetorical victory in the canal, as it regards it as the fulfillment of a “150 year old Tamil dream” (*The Hindu*:16 September, 2005). The Congress party mainly stresses the economic opportunities in relation to small external effects (Van Dijk, 2008: 70–75).

The benefits envisaged are mostly economic, but also some security issues are involved.

The project’s main goal is to create a continuous shipping route around the Indian peninsula (Paleri, 2005: 16). Distances between various Indian ports could be shortened by hundreds of nautical miles, according to economists in favor of the project. By using the canal, ships are expected to save up to 36 h in travel time (Suryanarayan, 2005: 23). Another advantage is that the Sethusamudram Canal enables ships traveling from one Indian port to another can fulfill the entire trip without having to leave Indian territorial waters. The canal is also expected to present security advantages as the Palk Strait would be easier to access for the Indian Navy (Suryanarayan, 2005: 25).

Other important benefits are expected for the economic development for the state of Tamil Nadu. The port of Tuticorin, which is the closest to the south end of the canal, is expected to grow significantly, which should lead to increased employment opportunities in the port and other related economic sectors. This project should lead to increased growth for the entire local economy. Also benefits for the fishing industry are expected, as they can now cross Adam’s Bridge and use a larger area to

catch fish. Proponents expect the canal to lead to coastal trade development in the broadest possible sense (Paleri, 2005: 16).

18.3 Procedures and Arguments Against the Project

At the moment, two legal cases against the project are pending before the Indian Supreme Court. The first case has been filed by Coastal Action Network (CAN). This network is an NGO protecting the coastal environment and the interests of fishermen. In 2007 CAN filed a petition in the Madras High Court, which was later on transferred to the Supreme Court. CAN's bone of contention is the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). CAN activists claim that the EIA contains some significant omissions and that it does not meet several legal requirements. These requirements need to be met before the project would receive environmental clearance. Despite these shortcomings, the project received clearance. Coastal Action Network still attempts to reverse this clearance in the Supreme Court (Van Dijk, 2008: 58–60).

Another petition was simultaneously filed by Subramanian Swamy, a prominent Hindu activist. He is the president of a splinter party, the Janata Party and is a very important person in Indian politics, because he is a very articulate and critical opponent of many government development plans. His views have a significant impact on the debate about the Sethusamudram Project (Van Dijk, 2008: 60). Swamy's argument is based on four points. First, he claims that the Indian Penal Code forbids any damage done to any object that is considered holy by a certain group of people. Since Adam's Bridge is considered as such by Hindu organizations, dredging there would be a criminal offence. Second, Swamy claims that the EIA lacks several features required by law and that the environmental clearance is not valid. Third, he claims that a marine project of such a scale also requires clearance from the Coast Guard; this was never issued. Fourth, Swamy claims that the project violates international laws. These laws require that India and Sri Lanka set up a joint monitoring committee on the environmental impact of the project, since the international border between the two countries is directly adjacent to the project alignment. This was also never done according to Swamy (2008). As of mid-2009, the Supreme Court had not yet reached a verdict in either of these two cases.

Overall opponents articulate three major types of arguments. These are environmental, economic and religious arguments. The first two types are mostly voiced by actors in what can be called the "secular" civil society. These are NGOs, independent academic research institutes and economists. Views in the third argument are articulated by Hindu activists and also by the leading opposition party in the national government, the Bharatiya Janata Party.

18.3.1 Environmental Arguments

Environmentalists have two major objections. The first is that the project itself, but also the dredging activities threaten the ecologically sensitive marine areas close-by, specifically, the Gulf of Mannar and the Palk Strait Their second objection focuses

on the procedures followed by the government while planning and implementing the project. Environmentalists contend that the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) reveals several important knowledge gaps. They also claim that the EIA failed to meet several legal requirements (Rodrigues et al., 2007: 24).

The Gulf of Mannar and Palk Strait are among the world's richest marine ecosystems in terms of biodiversity. But, they are also among the most sensitive and fragile in the world. The Gulf of Mannar includes more than 3,600 animal and plant species, including 117 species of coral. Also the majority of sea grass species present in India's coastal areas can be found here. The Palk Bay is a very shallow sea basin. Its depth never exceeds 15 m (49.2 ft) and it is home to one of the India's five major coral reefs in India. (Rodrigues et al., 2007: 6–7). Because the Palk Strait and the Adam's Bridge area are very shallow, extensive dredging would be required to reach a sufficient depth for the canal. Environmentalists fear that the adjacent fragile ecosystems will be severely damaged by the dredging. They also claim that the dredging works, including maintenance dredging upon completion of the canal, destroys organisms on the seabed, including the coral reefs. Organisms outside the dredging route are also threatened. The dredging produces large amounts of sediments making the water turbid, while sediments eventually sink down to the seabed and cover the coral and other organisms. These organisms, require a great deal of sunlight to survive. This sunlight, however, will be blocked by sediment. The amount of sunlight reaching the seabed is also reduced by the increased turbidity of the water (Rodrigues et al., 2007: 30–40). Also the dumping of dredged materials causes concern among environmentalists. The dredged materials are to be dumped in deeper waters, approximately 40–50 km (25–30 mi.) offshore. However, not all dredged materials are to be transported away from the project site, parts of it are dumped on the spot itself, adversely affecting the light conditions in the sea (Rodrigues et al., 2007: 31).

The second major bone of contention is that the studies done in the EIA fail to or are insufficient in meeting several legal requirements. For example, only at one specific location along the 152 km (94 mi) long project route has the soil below the seabed been investigated; no extensive depth measurements have been carried and as the impact of sediment flows on the marine ecosystem has also not been assessed. Environmental scientists have also been pointing to knowledge gaps on the impact of extreme weather conditions in the strait, including cyclones (Rodrigues et al., 2007: 14–16).

Environmentalists are also pointing to the fact that no study on the consequences of a major oil spill or a grounded ship in the canal has been carried out. The risk of a ship getting grounded in the canal is realistic, given its narrow breadth (only 300 m or 984 ft) and the shallow depth of the surrounding sea. The canal is also believed to be too narrow for ships to turn around while they are traveling through which leaves ships vulnerable to sudden extreme weather conditions. Environmentalists are also pointing to the fact that there is no disaster mitigation plan for these situations, even though this is required by law (Lu & Chernaik, 2004: 7). This is also a reason why Coastal Action Network filed a case against the EIA, which is now pending before of the country's Supreme Court, as mentioned above.

18.3.2 Economic Arguments

Economists state that the savings in time and distance are in fact much smaller than the proponents of the project states. Proponents state that the canal should save ships up to 36 hours of travel time, relative to the existing route around Sri Lanka. However, this figure is only valid for a trip from Tuticorin to Chennai. The latter is the closest harbor to the north end of the canal. Critics say that project proponents are overstating the gains of the project, since a trip from Kanyakumari, at the most southern tip of the Indian peninsula, to Kolkata is said to be shortened by only 18 hours when ships use the canal.

Only the savings in time, but also the savings in distance are overstated according to the critical economists. Proponents say that the canal could save up to 570 nautical miles of travel distance. These figures can only be valid for ships moving around the coast of India. Ships moving for example from Mauritius or Europe to Kolkata save up to only 215 and 70 nautical miles respectively and only 8–4 hours respectively, according to the critics.

Critics acknowledge that no detailed calculations of savings in terms of distance and time have been made for trips with different starting and destination points. Nevertheless, proponents expect a steady revenue stream from the project, despite these more modest figures (John, 2007: 2993).

Economists state that ships on a coastal trip can save a larger percentage of their total hiring costs than ships on a non-coastal trip, because ships on non-coastal trips have no reason to use the harbors at each end of the canal for refueling, while ships on coastal trips do (Rodrigues et al., 2007: 45). Ships on non-coastal trips are expected to constitute around 70% of the users of the canal. In addition, the government plans to charge a tariff that would amount to half of the reduced expenditure in terms of charter rates and fuel costs. The saving will thus be relatively small. Moreover, a more expensive type of fuel has to be used at the lower speeds when ships will cruise in the canal, because cheaper fuel is more likely to damage the engine when it is used at a low speed (Rodrigues et al., 2007: 45). Therefore it could actually be cheaper for ships on non-coastal trips to move around Sri Lanka (John, 2007: 2993).

Apart from the limited revenue economists expect from the project, they also point to other critical issues. They also identify the lack of studies that environmentalists have identified. Economists say that the lack of such investigations could result in an underestimation of the required amount of maintenance and capital dredging. Based on the overestimation of the revenue and the underestimation of the costs, economists have serious doubts that the project will be economically viable (John, 2007: 2994–2995). The environmental activists of Central Action Network fear that the project could also be threatening the livelihoods of the traditional fishermen living along the coast of Tamil Nadu. The dredging works and the ships passing through the canal could chase away the fish, leaving those in fishing without an income. It is possible that hundreds of thousands of fishermen living along the coast of Tamil Nadu could lose their livelihoods because of the project. They already are a marginal group in society and are not likely to be very resilient to the

shocks to their livelihoods caused by the Sethusamudram Project. The implications to them are that the project runs straight through the main fishing grounds. Ships passing through the canal will also limit the area they can fish. Furthermore, the fish will be chased away by the noise from ships and the dredging works. Fishermen organizations have held numerous demonstrations throughout Tamil Nadu to stress their concerns (Coastal Action Network, 2007: 19).

18.3.3 Religious Arguments

By the end 2006, the SSCP became the subject of opposition from a completely different angle. A prominent Hindu political activist, Subramanian Swamy, asked that the SSCP should be realigned. In its current alignment, the project route runs through Adam's Bridge, which is a chain of sand bars and charcoal rocks, separating the Palk Bay from the Gulf of Mannar. However, in Hindu mythology, Adam's Bridge is in fact a god-made bridge called Ram Sethu. Therefore, he claimed that it should be declared a national monument and that the SSCP should be realigned in order to avoid dredging at Ram Sethu. His remarks did not receive much attention at that time. However, in March 2007, various Hindu priests started to express their concerns on what they regarded as the destruction of Ram Sethu. The government replied to this charge by stating that no man-made structures had been found on the project route after extensive studies. In April 2007, the SSCP started to receive opposition from political parties and Hindu organizations. The leading opposition party, the Bharatiya Janata Party, stated that Ram Sethu should not be damaged, because it is an important place of worship. An important Hindu organization, the VHP, started threatening to organize mass demonstrations against the "break of Ram Sethu" (Van Dijk, 2008: 30).

In May, the religious controversy reached a boiling point in politics. During one session of the national parliament, government parties asked the BJP for evidence that Adam's Bridge is in fact a god-made bridge. Members of the BJP started protesting so loudly after this request that the Speaker adjourned the House for that day. At the same time, Subramanian Swamy filed a case against the breaking of Ram Sethu in the Madras High Court. He stated that is illegal to do any damage to ancient monuments and that the dredging at Ram Sethu should be stopped.

This case, as noted above, was later transferred to the national Supreme Court. This transfer has resulted in a ban on all dredging activities on or near Adam's Bridge as long as the case was pending. In response to Swamy's claims, the government issued a statement in the Supreme Court that "religious texts cannot be interpreted as historical evidence that any of the characters or events cited ever existed in history." This statement and also the one that "human history is a scientific study, which must be carried out in a scientific manner, based on tangible evidence," caused a strong reaction from the BJP, accusing the government of blasphemy. One day later, the government withdrew the statement again (Van Dijk, 2008: 34).

But it was already too late. In the second half of September 2007, the debate on the project reached its ultimate boiling point, with demonstrations and threats against the project by Hindu- as well as fishermen-organizations. As a consequence of this turmoil, the Supreme Court suspended the case until January 2008, in order to calm things down. In February 2008, the government issued another statement, saying that there is no clear evidence whether Ram Sethu is indeed human-made. The government remained silent on the existence of Ram, the issue it burnt its fingers on in September 2007. Based on this lack of evidence, the government asked the Supreme Court to lift the ban and to allow dredging to continue.

In May 2008, the Supreme Court asked the government to investigate whether or not Ram Sethu is indeed a national monument and to study the possibilities for other alignment options. To date these studies are not completed and the ban is still not lifted (Van Dijk, 2008: 29–36).

18.3.4 International Issues

Apart from these objections from the Indian civil society, concerns voiced by Indian officials and by the neighboring state of Sri Lanka should be mentioned here. A megaproject like this also raises a number of security concerns. The conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the *Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam* (LTTE) has been of particular concern to this project. Fears are that the LTTE could place sea-mines in the canal or that it could hijack ships cruising through. Indian Naval officers, therefore, recommend that substantial efforts are made to safeguard the canal (Hiranandani, 2009). The LTTE has in fact tried to use the project to its advantage. In 2005, it called for a halt of the project, unless their territory was to be recognized as a de facto state (*Lankanewspapers.com*, 17 September 2005).

The government of Sri Lanka is also concerned about the possible environmental impacts of the project. It is particularly concerned about the possible implications for the Gulf of Mannar Biosphere Reserve, which lies in the border area of the two countries. Sri Lanka is advocating precautionary measures during the construction, operation and maintenance of the canal (Nakhandala, 2005: 37). The Sri Lankan government has a rather ambivalent perception of the expected economic impacts on the country. It regards the project as an opportunity for economic cooperation between India and Sri Lanka, but on the other hand, Sri Lanka is concerned that less ships will use the port of Colombo (Nakhandala, 2005: 39). Despite these concerns, the Sethusamudram Project has always been of only marginal importance in Sri Lankan politics (Frontline, 16 July 2005).

18.4 The Dynamics of the Struggle About the Canal

Throughout the Indian debate, religious arguments have become increasingly important. This shift of the focus of the debate has a number of explanations, all which

are related to the Indian political system. This section elaborates on this system and the political actors in the debate.

18.4.1 The Political System of India

Since Independence in 1947, India has been a federal state, consisting of the central government in New Delhi and state governments in each state. Both levels of government have their own political alignments and dynamics. Each state also has its own political alignments. Apart from two years of dictatorship from 1975 to 1977, the country has always been a parliamentary democracy (Brass, 1994: 35).

The division of powers between the central government and the state governments has been institutionalized in the “Union List,” the “State List” and the “Concurrent List.” These Lists are parts of the Constitution of India (Johari, 2008: 308). The Union List contains all the powers and privileges assigned to the central government, which include defense and foreign policy, but also the policy on infrastructure, maritime shipping, major ports and ancient monuments. The State List includes all powers assigned to individual states, including fisheries, local government and the maintenance of public order. The Concurrent List includes powers assigned to both levels of government. Economic and Social Planning is one of the policy domains of the Concurrent List (Government of India, 2004: 220–224). This division of powers makes the central government the primary level on which decisions on the Sethusamudram project can be made.

An important feature of both (central and state) levels of government is the prevalence of party coalitions. In elections, multiple parties act as a single actor through these coalitions. Coalitions also make common statements in Supreme Court cases. After elections, the parties of the ruling coalition divide the ministries among each other, but the leading party generally delivers the Prime Minister and often assumes the most important ministries (Guha, 2007: 653–654). The coalitions in individual states are not necessarily parallel to the coalitions at the national level. That is, each state has its own political dynamics and most states also have specific regional parties (Van Dijk, 2008: 7).

During the period of the debate studied here, three coalitions dominated in national politics. The ruling coalition was the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) under the leadership of the Congress Party, joined by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and others. The opposition was united in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), under the leadership of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Third, there was the Left Front, a coalition of two Communist parties, that supported the UPA until recently. The ruling coalition in the state of Tamil Nadu is the Democratic Progressive Alliance (DPA). This government is formed by the DMK, the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee (TNCC), the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK) and the two Communist parties. The TNCC is the state branch of the national Congress party in Tamil Nadu. The opposition is united in the Democratic People’s Alliance, which is abbreviated as DPF and consists of the All India Inna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) and three other parties.

18.4.2 Party Dynamics and the Debate on the Megaproject

There were six political parties involved in the debate about the Sethusamudram project. At the national level in New Delhi they are the Congress Party and the Bharatiya Janata Party. In Tamil Nadu, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the AIADMK are the major players. These regional parties are also active in national politics. Finally, the Left Front coalition is also active in the debate on both levels of government. An examination of the role of each of these parties in the debate and how party politics influenced their positions is needed.

The Congress Party was founded as a nationalist movement under British colonial rule and was led by Gandhi in the struggle towards Independence (Brass, 1994: 69). Prior to the 1990s, this party has been the most powerful party in India. But then, the power of the Congress started to decline. So far, no single party has been able to fill the void, leaving a political and ideological vacuum behind. This vacuum leads to fluxes in politics as other parties attempt to fill this gap (Vanaik, 1997: 173). Its ideological orientation is primarily “left of center,” but, nonetheless, very broad. This broad ideology enables the party to maintain its amorphous character and to form broad coalitions and a large support base (Johari, 2008: 552).

The Congress Party expects major benefits from the Sethusamudram Project in terms of economic growth and employment opportunities. The party has not contributed directly to the discourse shift in the debate, as it has always been a proponent of the project. Its decline in power, however, could have facilitated it. Also the statement on Ram has poured oil on the fire, which turned out very useful for the opposition.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has always been the archrival of the Congress in national politics. It was formed after a breakaway from the Janata Party in 1980. One of the party’s primary goals is to form a national consensus around Hindu national identity, thereby, excluding other cultural groups. This can be considered an unmistakable but carefully formulated message supportive of Hindu nationalism (Graham, 2006: 160). Throughout the 1980s the party had been a small opposition party. But, in the 1990s, the party started to grow quickly, partly at the expense of the Congress party (Vanaik, 1997: 174). The party seeks to turn into India a modern industrial state, but it does use Hindu religious symbols as a means to create the national unity it envisages (Brass, 1994: 87–88).

Currently, the BJP is the major political opponent of the Sethusamudram Project. It is however important to note that in 2005 the party was still claiming to have taken the initiative to implement the project (*The Times of India*, 11 July 2005). In 2007, however, the party switched to being an opponent. They feared that the possible “breaking” of Ram Sethu would hurt the religious feelings of many Hindus. The party now also wants to declare Ram Sethu a national monument. However, a more down to earth explanation is their determination to be in opposition to Congress.

The Dravidian Parties, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), are the two major parties from Tamil Nadu. The former is also a coalition partner of Congress party in national politics. They have always been each other’s archrivals, although they have shared

roots in the so-called “Dravidian Movement.” Their primary goal is to promote the Tamil regional cultural identity and to defend that identity against “the intrusion of the Hindi language.” This shared primary goal, however, does not lead to a shared point-of-view regarding the Sethusamudram Project. DMK is a major proponent of the project, while the AIADMK is a major opponent. Moreover DMK regards the Sethusamudram Project as a “150 year-old Tamil Dream.” Like the Congress party, it expects a large increase in economic growth and employment opportunities in Tamil Nadu and it wants to use the Project to turn Tamil Nadu into one of the economic power areas of India. The leader of the party heated up the controversy around Ram Sethu considerably by several remarks on Ram that offended the opposition. The AIADMK, however, is a major opponent. Unlike the BJP, the party has always been an opponent, but it has also changed its motivation during the debate. It started to oppose the project on environmental grounds, especially by stressing the flaws in the Environmental Impact Assessment. Later on, their bone of contention also turned out to be the breaking of Ram Sethu. They also claim that this project would hurt the religious feeling of millions of Hindus (Van Dijk, 2008: 75–76). The party thus moved closer to the BJP in the debate, again for strategic reasons.

The Communist Parties are also proponents of the Sethusamudram Project, but they are only indirectly involved in the debate. The Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)) are separate parties, but they generally work together on a common platform. Despite this, they have slightly different ideologies (Rodrigues, 2006: 224–227). Their main point is that they accuse the opponents of the project of trying to use it for their own political interests. They accuse the BJP of turning the project into a religious issue, while they were taking credit for implementing it at the start. The CPI(M) stresses the need to address genuine, economic and ecological, concerns on the project. Despite their limited role in the debate, they are very important actors. They provided the Congress with a majority in Parliament, thereby supporting the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition. This support became even more important, because this alliance was under pressure due to conflicting views on other political issues. In the summer of 2008, the Left Front withdrew its support of the Congress, which weakened the Congress party’s position in the national Parliament and also in the Sethusamudram Debate (Van Dijk, 2008: 78).

18.5 Conclusion

The key question of this chapter was how a megaengineering project became the subject of a mega controversy on religion. Debate on the project started as a relatively low profile discussion on the environmental and economic objections to the canal. Later on it turned over into a political storm on what Hindu activists see as the destruction of Ram Sethu.

This reversal in the debate has multiple explanations. The foremost political explanation is the deteriorating powerbase of the Congress party at that time. Since 1990s the party has been losing power, but no single other party has been able to

fill the ideological and political vacuum left by the Congress. Also on a shorter timeframe, the position of the Congress was weakening. The Communist parties withdrew their support to the Congress-led UPA-coalition, depriving it of a majority in national parliament. The controversy on Ram Sethu could, therefore, also be interpreted as an attempt of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to use this vacuum to its advantage.

Another explanation for the storm on Ram Sethu is related to the Indian culture. Environmentalists in the debate are basing their opposition to the canal on the paradigm that the environment is something fragile that should be protected from harmful human interference. This paradigm, however, was formed during the Enlightenment period in Western Europe during the 18th century. This paradigm reflects a predominantly western way of thinking. Hinduism also has ideas on preserving the environment, but these are not based on modern-day environmental concerns, but rather on the idea the Earth is sacred and should not be polluted. In other words, there is an immense difference between the paradigms of modern-day environmentalists and Hindu ideas on preserving the environment (Tomalin, 2004: 266–267). The western environmental paradigm is not so widespread in India, while Hinduism, by contrast, is prevalent all throughout the country. This fact explains why it is much more difficult to influence the public opinion and to receive media attention on the Sethusamudram Ship Canal Project for environmentalists than it is for Hindu activists, therefore, for ecological arguments than for religious arguments.

The Indian Supreme Court still has to rule in the two main cases regarding the project. Is a compromise likely that could be acceptable to both the government and the Hindu-activists? It is difficult to imagine how religious arguments can be rolled back by the BJP, even if it is more strategic for the party to support the project again. As a point of fact, the Supreme Court of India already has suggested both parties in the case of Subramanian Swamy take the first steps in the direction of a technocratic compromise. It suggested that the government should carry out a study into a possible re-alignment of the project. At the western end of Adam's Bridge lies Rameswaram Island (see Fig. 18.1). The Supreme Court asked the government to investigate whether or not it would be possible to realign the project, so that it would run between the Indian mainland and Rameswaram Island. With this alignment no dredging is required on Adam's Bridge which would save Ram Sethu from being damaged or destroyed, while the canal could still be implemented (Van Dijk, 2008: 66). At this point (mid-2009) the results of these studies were not yet published and the fate of this megaproject remains uncertain.

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