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OPINION

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Road To Perdition

The Sethusamudram Ship Canal Project is based on assumptions that are fundamentally false, making it a waste of the taxpayer's money, writes **SUDARSHAN RODRIGUEZ**



THE PUBLIC DEBATE surrounding the Sethusamudram Ship Canal Project has largely focused on the cultural and political aspects of the situation. In the process, the primary arguments against the project over the past three years — namely its environmental and economic impact — have been overlooked. Some political parties support it only because another party opposes it and, as a result, neither the traditionalists nor the modernists seem to be concerned about the region's natural history and the livelihoods of the 10 lakh fishermen living there which will be severely impacted as a result.

The first question concerns the ecological significance of the region. The proposed canal and Adam's Bridge fall within the Gulf of Mannar Biosphere Reserve. It is India's largest biosphere reserve and, being one of the country's major coral reef ecosystems, is home to 3,600 species of flora and fauna of which 377 are unique to the region. The other part of project area, the Palk Bay, is ecologically sensitive, with extensive seagrass meadows, corals, and other unique examples of biological diversity.

The impact of dredging Adam's Bridge would, given this, be significant. The Palk Bay is noted for its unusually high sedimentation rate and is one of the five permanent sediment sinks of India. Strangely, all the project documents, especially the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) report, summarily ignore this important fact of sedimentation. Its bibliography stops at 1989, even when some of the key papers were published after the late-1990s. There is evidence to suggest that there is an annual seasonal cycle that allows sediment flow from the Palk Bay into the Gulf of Mannar along Adam's Bridge. Thus dredging Adam's Bridge along a 300 metre wide stretch to make the canal passage will have drastic consequences for marine ecosystems and is likely to increase the sediment flow into the Gulf of Mannar. This will affect the coral, fisheries, the area's biodiversity and, as a result, the livelihoods of fisher folk.

The project will directly result in the loss of wildlife specifically protected under the Indian Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972. The National Environmental and Engineering Research Institute's EIA report concedes as much, acknowledging the presence of corals, sea fans, sponges, pearl oysters, chanks and sea cucumbers along the canal. In another section, the EIA report states, "Due to dredging, the bottom flora and fauna on an area of about 6 km squared along the channel alignment in Adam's Bridge and about 16-17 km squared in Palk Bay/Palk Strait area will be lost permanently."

Thus the dredging activity for the canal will result in the permanent loss of these species, all of which are protected under the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972. Corals are Schedule-I species, which means the Indian government accords it the same protected status as a tiger. It is shocking that this aspect is being overlooked. And, according to some proponents of the project, this loss seems an acceptable price to pay as the government ignores its own laws!

The loss of biodiversity and livelihoods is justified if the economic benefits of the project are great, and can compensate for these losses. The project is justified on account of the government's contention that it would save significant hours of shipping time. The L&T Ramboll Detailed Project Report (DPR), assumes that all ship voyages begin either at Tuticorin or Kanyakumari, saving 16 and 20 hours respectively. This amounts to a saving of about \$17,962 per voyage. DPR hopes to charge 50 percent of this amount (\$8,981) as tariff for all ships using the canal. For ships coming from Europe and Africa, the average savings is just 8 hours. This would mean a loss of \$4,992 per voyage and hence such ships would not use the canal. Yet the DPR assumes that 65 percent of the voyages (and hence revenue) originate from Africa, the Middle East and Europe. Unless ships are incentivised to use the canal (by reducing tariff), the Sethusamudram Ship Canal Project would become unviable and hence "sick".

Moreover, the canal would benefit only ships with draughts less than 10m (30,000 DWT and below). There has been a recent shift to container ships exceeding 35,000 DWT and 62 percent of the bulk cargo is now carried in vessels of 60,000 DWT and above. The maximum size of the bulk carriers has increased steadily from 75,000 DWT in the 1970s to approximately 1,83,000 DWT in 2005. Even most Very Large Crude Carriers (VLCCs) and tankers in ballast (when empty) have draughts greater than 12m. Coastal tanker traffic is dominated by LR-I size tankers which are about 11.1m draught on load. This discrepancy exposes how out of sync the project is with the Indian and global shipping trends.

The project rests on fundamentally flawed assumptions, making it a waste of taxpayer's money and a drain on the economy. It is a financial white elephant and one of the worst cases of environmental and economic misgovernance in India's history.

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