

LORD RAM'S OWN SETHU:

Adam's Bridge envisaged as an aquapelago¹

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ABSTRACT: Taking the current geological, environmental and religious controversy around the iconic Adam's Bridge or Ram Sethu (as it is referred to in Hindu sacred mythography) and the proposed Sethusamudram canal project – which has been delayed since the late-20th century over several administrative terms, due to litigious procedures and protests by religious groups – this article examines the Ram Sethu as an *aquapelago*. The Ram Sethu is an *aquapelagic* zone, not merely in geo-historical terms but also in psychological ways, that is largely experienced in the Indian consciousness through the evolution of ancient folkloric motifs in contemporary media-loric polemic. As an *aquapelagic* imaginary, or indeed a performed *aquapelago*, the Ram Sethu is sustained by accumulating epistemic plurality from multiple geological, secularist, sacred and environmentalist interpretations. This epistemological plurality or transcendence of (geo-)logocentric meanings is an inevitable function of *aquapelagic* imaginaries, even more so of the Ram Sethu, which is reproduced by multiple determinate negations of religion (negating ambitions of economic development), developmentalism (negating themes of environmental sustainability), and environmentalism (negating majoritarian discourses of what constitutes the sacred).

KEYWORDS: Adam's Bridge, *Ramayana*, Ram Sethu, Sethusamudram, India, BJP, Congress, aquapelago

The coordinates Latitude: 9° 07' 15.60" N/ Longitude: 79° 31' 18.12" E famously belong to an isthmus or submarine chain of limestone shoals – the legendary 'Ram Sethu' (Adam's Bridge) – nestling longitudinally between the Gulf of Mannar and Palk Strait and latitudinally between Pamban Island in Tamil Nadu and Mannar Island in Sri Lanka (see Figures 1 and 2). Though lying outside the mainland Indian peninsula, Pamban Island is a region of sacred interest and Hindu-oriented pilgrimage tourism. This revolves around the temple town of Rameshwaram (Figure 2), that the Indian nationalist imagination continues to see as a sacred nucleus of the Hindu imaginary of the once-undivided Indian subcontinent. At the heart of this devotion lies the – geographically, geologically and geopolitically decentered – Ram Sethu, which, in satellite imaging, appears as a faint

¹ Debates in the 21st century around the Ram Sethu constitute many strands of developmental, secular, environmental, geological, archeological and sacred interests. Since this article does not privilege any of the above themes, it should not yield an interpretation that empirically accords primacy to either secular or religious interests. Concurrently, it embraces no ideological or empirical position that delegitimizes the sacred (Hindu) quest to scientifically ascertain the age of the ancient structure known as Adam's Bridge or Ram Sethu. Moreover, while the article surveys manifold ideological discourses on the Sethu since colonial times, it does not foreground any particular ideology, since its current objective is to offer a theorisation around those discourses in accordance with the tenets of Island Studies.

dotted line of corralled shoals on the international waters between India and Sri Lanka. Since the beginning of the 21st century, it has been a source of vibrant controversy among geologists, legal experts, devotees, economists, geographers, mythographers, historians, archaeologists, political leaders and, now, even the fraternity of filmmakers, with the prospect of a leading Hindi motion picture, *Ram Setu* (Sharma, 2022), to be set against the backdrop of archaeological and geological explorations into the history and veracity of the bridge’s mythology. While the Indian government and its various scientific and archaeological bodies are planning a major expedition to the Ram Sethu, the said motion picture has grabbed headlines as being the first Bollywood venture of Amazon (Reuters, 2021).



Figure 1 - Map of Sri Lanka and southern India, showing position of Tamil Nadu (GoogleMaps, 2021).



Figure 2 - Map of Ram Sethu (shoal bridge). (Google Maps, 2021).



Figure 3 - Adam's Bridge as seen between India and Sri Lanka, from Space Shuttle Endeavour during STS-59, 16th April 1994. (National Aeronautics & Space Administration, <http://eol.jsc.nasa.gov>. Wikimedia Commons.)

According to the Hindu epic *Ramayana*, Ram Sethu was built for Lord Ram by Hanuman's army of monkeys, facilitating his attack on Ravana's Lanka (supposed to be present-day Sri Lanka) to save his wife, Sita, from the clutches of the daemon king (See Figure 4). Credited to the Indian poet, Valmiki, who lived around 500-100 BC, *Ramayana* is believed in the Hindu tradition to be a representation of historical events, which may have occurred anytime between 1.7 million and 3,500 years ago, which is also the supposed dating of the Ram Sethu as has been suggested by religious, legal and some scientific participants in the controversy. NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) satellite missions have explicitly denied the veracity of the former claim, while remote sensing and carbon dating technology have tried to establish more conclusively the latter as being the age of a *bridge* that scientists firmly believe to be a natural formation. "As the Carbon dating of the beaches," writes S.M. Ramasamy, "roughly matches with the dates of great epic *Ramayana*, its linkage with *Ramayana* needs to be explored" (Ramasamy, 2003, p. 44). Ram Sethu is also the chosen spot for canalising the shallow marine strip between Palk Strait and the Gulf of Mannar to reduce the navigable distance between India and Sri Lanka and the eastern and western coasts of India and to promote industrial development in the harbours and fishing ports of Tamil Nadu. Although the idea of canalisation was first floated in colonial India in the 1860s, the present Sethusamudram Project, as it is called, entails dredging about 45 nautical miles around the Ram Sethu. As a consequence of constitutional procedures, religious and ecological anxieties, the project has been delayed several times.



Figure 4 - 'The Monkeys and Bears Build a Bridge to Lanka', Anonymous circa 1850. (Medium: Opaque watercolor and gold on paper. Source: Philadelphia Art Museum. Accession No. 1959-93-82. Wikimedia Commons.)

The Ram Sethu poses a unique formal problem to Island Studies, in that it is neither an archipelago nor an island, but the current public discourse it has generated outweighs the commemorative value of historic archipelagos – for instance, the abject status of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in colonial and postcolonial Indian imagination (Chatterjee, 2020). Island Studies has, in the past, discussed problems of projecting external epistemologies and methodologies on individual oceanic assemblages (Baldacchino, 2008), essentialising island histories (King, 2009), and reproducing Western or logocentric ideas (Pugh, 2013b; Nadarajah & Grydehøj, 2016). But the discipline is yet to make sense of the Ram Sethu’s uniquely unclassifiable geographical and geological forms and religious and sociopolitical symbolism. Given a large corpus of geopolitical epistemology, theory and aporia produced around the Sethu in the last twenty years or so, the controversial structure qualifies as, what Philip Hayward has termed, an *aquapelago* (2012a, 2012b) not merely in its formal classification but also as a sustained and dynamic performance, with local, national and global actors (even actants) and factors at play.

An oft-quoted metaphor in *Upanishadic* studies is that of the wave-in-the-ocean – only when the (personified) wave is shattered does it realise that it was only ever the water that produces the ocean; that it can and has only regained its purest spirit in that rupture.² Some tenets of Island Studies are compatible with this nondual worldview. Islands,

² *Upanishads* (or *Vedanta*) is the branch of ancient Indic spiritual, philosophical and psychological wisdom that comes at the end of the Vedas. Roughly, *Vedanta* is said to be composed of approximately 108 *Upanishads*, and are the cornerstones of nondual (*Advaita*) philosophy. Among others, the 7th century Hindu reformer and philosopher, Adi Shankaracharya, was a renowned Vedanta proponent, besides being integrally connected to Pamban Island and the Rameshwaram temple. The Vedantic metaphor provides a moral and philosophical foundation to critical examinations of Hindu sacred assumptions around the Ram Sethu. The metaphor, itself, or the critical analysis, can in no way be considered a promotion, endorsement or negation of any ancient religious system.

generally known as insular and isolated sea-borne landmasses have come to be reconceptualised as “assemblages” (Sheller, 2009), as interconnected and in some ways entangled (Stratford et al., 2011; Pugh, 2013a, 2013b), as a concept to be decolonised (Nadarajah & Grydehøj, 2016), and as “islandscapes” to be understood as co-constituted by social, political, natural and indeed non-human forces (Nimführ & Otto, 2020). Against this spectrum, Hayward’s (2012a, 2012b) concept of *aquapelagos* comes with strong undercurrents of entanglement, and quantum possibilities for islands as a whole. Simply put, an *aquapelago* is an “assemblage of the marine and land spaces of a group of islands and their adjacent waters” (Hayward, 2012a, p. 4). The portmanteau between the Latin roots, *aqua* and *pelagicus* (or the Greek *pelagos* or *pelagikos*) reemphasises the implicate oceanic foundation of islands. Semantically considered, *aquapelago* means something pertaining to water (in or on) water. Although the original definition elides its etymological import, a noticeable methodological shift occurs from ‘archipelago’ to ‘aquapelago’. In the latter we have an inner view of the doubling up of the implicate hydrosphere into seascape and landscape, as opposed to the logocentric (or geo-logocentric) view of the former which sees islands from outside, as geographical groups or clusters. *Aquapelago* explains the “significance of waters between and waters encircling and connecting islands” (Hayward, 2012a, p. 5). In more material terms, the *aquapelago* operates as “a social unit existing in a location in which the aquatic spaces between and around a group of islands are utilised and navigated in a manner that is fundamentally interconnected with and essential to the social group’s habitation of land and their senses of identity and belonging” (Hayward, 2012a, p. 5).

In the case of the Ram Sethu, the conception of *aquapelago* does not only help understand what potential epistemological conundrums one is led into within geological, geographical, historiographical and sociopolitical determinations of an assemblage in the absence of such a concept, but the concept itself is dialectically enriched by considering the evolving ancient and contemporary mythography and public discourse around the Sethu. Given India’s vast geographical diversity and administration across multidimensional terrains (from the Himalayas to the Indian Ocean), gradual epistemologies produced by colonial registers or ancient Indic myths and legends have bred a mainstream imagination of key Indian islandscapes; the Ram Sethu being one. Recent climatological, meteorological and hydrological data from the eastern coast of India identifies a monsoonal (seasonal) “river in the sea” hugging the eastern coastline of India, flowing in a north-easterly direction from the Indian Ocean to the Bay of Bengal. “The occurrence of this river in the sea along the eastern coast of India . . . arises from the peculiar geography of the northern Indian Ocean that results in both a massive inflow of freshwater into the semi-enclosed northern Bay of Bengal and in strong coastally trapped currents along the eastern coast of India” (Chaitanya et al., 2014, pp. 1901-1905). The finding suggests deeper spectral linkages along the Indian coastline stretching from Sri Lanka, to the Gulf of Mannar, the Eastern Ghats and draining into the Bay of Bengal. Although the data does not solely concern the Ram Sethu, it lends an important metaphor to our analysis. Just as the Vedantic metaphor finds a materialisation in this new discovery, the symbol of the “river in the sea”, underwrites the performances of the Ram Sethu’s *aquapelagicity* in India’s public and political discourse.

The Colonial Background

In lieu of Indic narratives of Adam’s Bridge and its enduring relation to Hinduism, a synopsis of its sacred mythography can be reproduced, piecemeal, by weaving together strands of British colonialist historiography, without losing much of significance. Contrary

to common sense – and contrary to the common colonial practice of denigrating Indian religious beliefs – colonial geological, scientific and technological discourses subtly reinforced the sacred mythology of Pamban. Citing the Indian epic *Ramayana* in his history of Ceylon, British civil servant Horatio John Suckling noted that Adam’s Bridge had been in “existence from time immemorial” (Suckling, 1876, p. 58). According to 17th century Dutch naturalist and author of *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën (Old and New East-India)*, François Valentijn, the association of a Biblical Adam with the Hindu epic *Ramayana* came through Portuguese nomenclature. The Portuguese believed that after Adam’s expulsion from Paradise, he set foot on southern Sri Lanka’s Adam’s Peak (also known as *Sri Pada* or ‘sacred footprint’). Perhaps the earliest known English account to outline the fabled nomenclatural, mythographical, historiographical and geological complexity of Adam’s Bridge is Robert Percival’s *Account of the Island of Ceylon* (1805), previously serialised in *The Monthly Review* (1803). It later became a source for Suckling’s history, among several other accounts of Ceylon and Southern India.

The name and situation of these banks of Adam’s bridge are connected with a variety of curious traditions among the natives. It is universally believed among them that Ceylon was either the Paradise in which the ancestor of the human race resided, or the spot on which he first touched on being expelled from a Celestial Paradise. Adam’s bridge is, with them, the way by which he passed over to the continent; and some imagine that the gulph of Manaar, like the Red Sea in scriptural history, closed after him to prevent his return. The opinion, however, is almost universally received that Ceylon at a distant period formed a part of the continent, and was separated from it by some great convulsion of nature. This account, though merely an unsupported tradition, is not altogether improbable; for when we consider the narrowness of the intervening space, and the numberless shallows with which it abounds, it cannot be denied that some violent earthquake, or, what is still more likely, some extraordinary irruption of the ocean, might have placed Ceylon at its present distance from the continent. (Percival, 1805, p. 76)

By Suckling’s time, the myth of Biblical genesis and Adam’s expulsion from Paradise had already started being downplayed in the British historical imaginary of the Sethu, without significant change to Lord Ram’s position in its sacred mythology. Although the attack on Hindu superstitions by British travellers, historians, chroniclers and scientists continued unabated in Victorian writings, references to the Ram Sethu in British accounts persisted with dispassionate regard, if not reverence. Small aberrations to this trend include a 1863 translation of the *Travels* (1510) of Italian diarist Ludovico Varthema, who visited India in the early 1500s. In a long footnote, the translator, J.W. Jones, wrote that “[t]he expedition of Ram to Ceylon, and his victory over Rhavan... king of that island, is one of the wildest fables of Hindu mythology” (1863, p. 185). Nonetheless, encyclopaedic works like that of Edward Balfour’s *Cyclopaedia of India* (1873) and scientific registers like *Memoirs of the Geological Survey of India* (1883) actively propagated the sacred Hindu mythology of Pamban Island and its sacred township, Rameshwaram (the site of an ancient Shiva temple and Ram’s key halt station before his supposed invasion of Lanka). The Geological Survey of India conflated its scientific reports with Hindu mythology most emphatically. Reporting on the submarine shoal bridge, it remarked that its “series of large flat blocks which so strongly resemble a series of gigantic stepping stones that it is impossible to wonder at the imagination of the author... of the *Ramayana* that the rocky ridge was really an old causeway of human construction” (*Memoirs*, 1883, p. 74).

In what may be the cause of chagrin for modern-day Indian scientists, the 1883 report of the Geological Survey even claimed that there was “no apparent reason why the proved upheaval of Rama’s bridge may not have taken place within the semi-mythical time preceding some invasion of the heretical Buddhist kingdom of Lanka (Ceylon) by the Brahmanical Aryans of the mainland and their Dravidian allies” (*Memoirs*, 1883, p. 74). Instead of denying the veracity of the sacred Hindu mythography around Adam’s Bridge, the report sought to trace the geoscientific underpinnings of the sub-aqueous “elevation” of the shoal bridge, which, as it added, when poetically observed, could “unquestionably be regarded as a miraculous event and be ascribed to superhuman agency, and the fervid imagination of successive Aryan bards may be easily credited with sufficient powers of invention to have evolved all the marvellous mythical details that have been superadded by way of embellishment” (*Memoirs*, 1883, p. 74). Besides its sacred Hindu mythography, what also spurred British colonial interests were the island’s rich and heterodox cultural history (ancient Islamic, Roman and Portuguese ties) and the prospect of canalising the shallow straits between India and (then) Ceylon, to facilitate quicker navigation between the western and eastern ports of India and Mannar. British geographer James Rennell had suggested dredging the portion of the Palk Strait which intersects Adam’s Bridge. Since then, until the publication of Major Sim’s report in the *Journal of the Royal Geographic Society of London*, in 1934, committees under the Victorian administration produced at least nine proposals. Beginning in the 1860s until 1922, ambitions of a continuously navigable stretch across the Palk Strait resurfaced in successive committees headed by Messrs Taylor, Dennison, Robertson, Code, Bristo, and others. The Sim report, perhaps the last important colonial report, held that canalisation around Adam’s Bridge would usher “great value and importance to Indian commerce”. Although it recommended caution on “the choice of place and on the means to be used” and “that every precaution ought to be taken to obtain the best possible advice on the subject” (Feagans, 2014, p. 2), the report elided over Pamban’s sacred mythography.

Meanwhile, British archaeological and railway developments around Pamban had maintained compatibility with Hindu beliefs. A “lasting monument” to British India’s nationalist imagination came in the Pamban Bridge, built in 1914, which “recapitulated the building of the Ram Sethu, from Dhanushkodi to Sri Lanka.” It was India’s first sea-bridge, and the longest, until the Bandra-Worli Sea Link was inaugurated in 2010. The legend of the Sethu was nearly materialised in the two-kilometre-long railway bridge, “an extended signifier of “India,” across the Indian Ocean, into Rameshwaram, *en route* to Ceylon” (Chatterjee, 2018, p. 112). While it is today seen as “the pride of the Indian Railways”, back in 1914, even Rudyard Kipling’s iconic ‘Bridge-builders’ would not have dared to construct “a bascule (openable) bridge with 143 piers, situated in the world’s second most corrosive waters, after Miami... India’s mythological geography was reified by the Raj, and the discourse of uniting diverse Indian geographies through the railways was, in turn, reified by Indian nationalism” (Chatterjee, 2018, p. 112, see Figure 5). The colonial scientific discourse, which was contented to see the Ram Sethu as a mythical precursor to the modern bridge, rather helped the prospering of Hindu myths. In *Hind Swaraj* (1910), M.K. Gandhi had hailed the brilliance of Indian technology and engineering that preceded British-built railways, including the road to “Rameshwar”—“Setubandh”—built by “farseeing ancestors” (Gandhi, 1910, p. 48). Thurston (1914) drew on the legend of the Sethu, remarking that the extinct route from Dhanushkodi to the Mannar Islands were visible in the indubitable “remains of a formerly elevated limestone flat, which has been more or less cut down by the sea to the low-tide level” (Thurston, 1914, pp. 32-34). Although British geologists and historians did not explicitly defend the Hindu mythography, they did not

express direct skepticism, either. After 1891, when the South Indian Railway Company was purchased by the British administration, it played a key role in consolidating Pamban’s spiritual geography. The Boat Mail, which plied between Dhanushkodi and Thalaimannar recapitulated, for many, Lord Ram’s mythical journey to Lanka. But for the First World War, the South Indian Railway would have built a 19 kilometre long bridge across the Ram Sethu (Turner, 1914). After the war, the *Illustrated Guide to South Indian Railway* (1926) affirmed “the spiritual contours” traversed by the Indian Railways, marking the importance of Devipatnam, Tinnevely-Tiruchendur, Rameshwaram, Thagachimadam, Vellurini Theertham (where Ram had halted for water), Sankaranainarkoil, Veerampatnam and others (Chatterjee. 2018, pp. 113-115). Although these snippets of Indian spiritual history were appropriated for a colonial determination (thus essentialising) of India, it paradoxically reinforced – for exceptional sites such as the Ram Sethu – the idea that the British colonial state could peacefully coexist with India’s sacred mythology. Even if the origins of the unfinished Sethusamudram lay in British India, colonial plans of canalisation almost successfully evaded religious controversy.

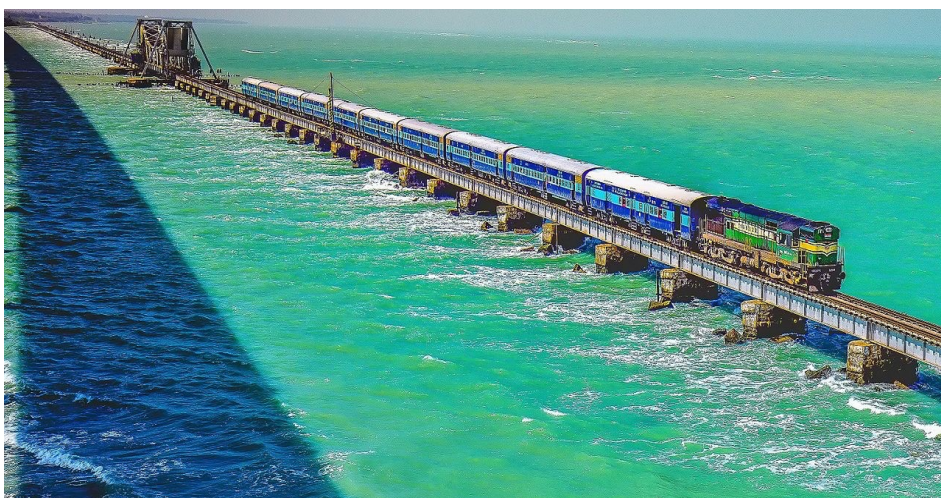


Figure 5 - Train crossing Pamban Bridge (photograph by Shaswat Nimesh. Wikimedia Commons.)

The Postcolonial Problem

In 1955, the first independent Indian government under Jawaharlal Nehru took the reins of that unfinished project to conceive the Sethusamudram Project Committee. A. Ramasamy Mudaliar, the committee chairperson, acknowledged the feasibility of canalisation, proposing the development of Tuticorin or Thootukudi as a key harbour on the eastern coast, after “cutting a channel at the approaches to the Adam’s Bridge” (Kumar, 1993, p. 95) to connect the Gulf of Mannar with the Bay of Bengal. The original idea of a sea-passage went through numerous iterations, given navigational hazards, the parallel desirability of an overland road between India and Sri Lanka and, last but not least, the anxiety of an assault on the integrity of the Hindu imaginary of the Ram Sethu, which even the British Empire had not trifled with.

India under the Atal Bihari Vajpayee administration (of the National Democratic Alliance led by BJP [Bharatiya Janata Party]) revived the Sethusamudram Project. Although the

same political party actively campaigned for the construction of a Ram Temple at the site of the erstwhile Babri Masjid, in Ayodhya, it seemed to take a slightly contrary stance on the Sethusamudram Project. Meanwhile, members of its alliance groups – the extended Sangh Parivar – staged fierce protests against the feared destruction of the Ram Sethu. The succeeding Congress-led United Progressive Alliance, which was at the helm of the Indian administration from 2003 to 2014, brought a decisive ideological shift to the Sethusamudram Project, by refocusing on developmentalism. In 2005, the project was reinaugurated by the Manmohan Singh administration, with the establishment of Sethusamudram Corporation Ltd. Besides building the canal, the Company’s objective was to promote industrial development and new economic opportunities for Tamil port towns around Rameshwaram, including the fishing harbours of Nagapattinam, Tuticorin and Rameshwaram. The two-way Sethusamudram canal was planned as 12-metres deep, 300 metres wide and about 170 kilometres long, sufficient to facilitate a maximum nautical speed of 8 knots, enabling the passage of ships of at least 215 metres in length and 33 metres wide. Once built, the canal was projected to reduce the travelling duration between the eastern and western coasts of India by nearly 36 hours. It was also supposed that local fishermen would greatly benefit from the canalisation as it would shorten their circuitous routes around the Adam’s Bridge; with the waters between India and Sri Lanka being administered better after canalisation, fishermen could be prevented from straying into foreign territory and being apprehended by the Sri Lankan navy or, the then operational terrorist organisation, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

In Madurai, on July 2, 2005, Prime Minister Singh announced that the project was slated for completion in 2009. Work on the project began in 2006 but had to be stopped midway. A saga of litigious hurdles had begun in 2002, when satellite images of the limestone and sand shoals of the Sethu captured by NASA were widely disseminated across the web “as evidence of the remains of the mythical bridge built by Rama” (*Frontline*, 2007). Back then, the Union Ministry for Coal and Mines, under the Vajpayee administration, had ordered a paleogeographic study into the origins of the Ram Sethu to be undertaken by the GSI (Geological Survey of India). From December 2002 to March 2003, the Survey carried out *Project Rameswaram*, overseeing reconnaissance, drilling at Dhanushkodi, depth measurements, sampling and sonar imaging of the seabed, and radiocarbon and thermoluminescence dating, which eventually revealed no clear premise to the theory that the Sethu was an artificial or manmade structure. Coral dating indicated that Rameshwaram Island itself was about 125,000 years old, that dated its origins to substantially less than 1.75 million years ago, when the epic was believed to have been set by some Sangh Parivar activists (Sen Gupta, 2007).

The formation of Rameshwaram Island and the Ram Sethu were credited to natural geological processes, tectonic shifts, windborne abrasions and marine activity. Paleogeographic evidence held that about 6,000-7,000 years ago the sea level near Pamban was 17 metres below the current state; about 10,000 years ago it was close to 60 metres below the current level; about 20,000 years ago, around the time of the last glacial maxima, the sea level may have been almost 120 metres below the current level. Going by the theory that the Sethu is the natural outcome of sedimentation of three major elements – sandstone, limestone and clay – the ASI (Archaeological Survey of India) held that the stretch of submarine shoals between Dhanushkodi and Thalaimannar emerged between 18,000 and 7,000 years ago: roughly the time when the sea level began increasing. Geologists proposed that the constituents of the supposed sedimentation were generated by wave movements ranging from Palk Bay and the Gulf of Mannar. In 2003, the Marine and Water Resources Group of the ISRO (Indian Space Research Organisation) used

Indian Remote Sensing Satellite data – IRS-P4’s Ocean Colour Monitor data from April 2002, and IRS-1D’s LISS-III camera data from March-May 2000 – to test whether the Ram Sethu was manmade or coralline. It was inferred that the Sethu, comprising 103 small and linear patch reefs, overlay organic coralline accretions. Its linearity seemed to imply that the Indian peninsula was once connected to Sri Lanka.

Other interpretations of the NASA images gave the scientific discourse a politico-religious angle in the Sangh’s inference that the Ram Sethu was, now even more, evidently manmade, given the unique curvature of the shoals. The Sangh launched a series of nationwide campaigns to protest against the Sethusamudram Project, especially after the termination of Vajpayee’s administration, while NASA rejected the notion that the Ram Sethu was a manmade structure. Mark Hess, NASA official, was reported as disclaiming “direct information about the origin or age of a chain of islands”, and, indeed, “whether humans were involved in producing any of the patterns seen”. He added that “images reproduced on the [pro-Sangh] websites may well be ours, but their interpretation is certainly not ours” (Kumar, 2007). The GSI and ISRO were also antagonistic to the idea of Ram Sethu being a manmade structure. However, the images were reproduced as part of petitions filed in Indian courts as evidence of the Ram Sethu being not only manmade but dating back to 1.75 million years ago, the time of Ram during the supposed Treta Yuga (according to Indian mythology). This was clearly at odds with the evolutionist dating of the origins of homo sapiens to about 200,000 years ago, and the first habitation of the Indian subcontinent about 100,000 years ago.

Several island chains and seamounts (including those in the Philippines and Japan resulting from subduction-zone volcanism; in the Hawaiian Islands owing to the lithospheric motion; in Icelandic mid-oceanic ridges; transform faults at Saint Helena; marine sedimentation in the Caribbean and Latin America) are common in geological annals. Many of these marine features have basaltic origins, as cooling consequences of igneous activity. However, the Ram Sethu is distinct in that no igneous or volcanic foundations are known to account for it. According to V. Ram Mohan of the Centre for Natural Hazards and Disaster Studies at the University of Madras, geological narratives of the Sethu were reliant on circumstantial evidence, rising sea-level sedimentation or coralling theory being the most plausible current explanation (Frontline, 2017). S. Ramachandran, Vice Chancellor of the University of Madras added that the dynamic processes of sedimentation are not a singular feature of the Ram Sethu, as they are common across the Atlantic Coast. Further, according to the noted geologist, N. Ramanujam, the evolution of the Sethu is a consequence of the dissociation of the Indian plate from southern regions, its collision with Eurasian terrain, and subsequent tectonic shifts and depressions, one of its results being the Cauvery Basin itself. Accordingly, ridge formations were followed by coralling and atoll-formations, which attracted deposits from Dhanushkodi and Thalaimannar spits, precipitating the submarine miniature island-like shoals of Ram Sethu. This roundaboutly erudite scheme of explanations was bound to prove knotty for the Indian masses (Frontline, 2017).

Marshalling the above data with ASI’s support, in early 2007, the Government of India filed an affidavit at the Supreme Court, stating that the Ram Sethu was, after all, the outcome of naturally occurring formations “caused by tidal action and sedimentation” (Frontline, 2007). Since, according to the coralling theory, the Sethu was not a manmade structure, the ASI argued that it could not be considered a historical or archaeological monument. It was therefore ineligible to be proposed as a protected monument under the Ancient Monuments Archaeological Sites and Remains Act of 1958 (Nanjappa, 2007). However, in

September, the government withdrew the affidavit from the Court. The Ministry of Culture had suggested removing at least three clauses in the affidavit, which could be seen as antagonistic to sacred Hindu beliefs; out of these only two were removed before the filing. One of the unremoved clauses concerned the *Ramayana*'s alleged lack of historicity, which soon became controversial. While the Minister for Culture offered to resign over the incident, the Minister for Commerce, of the same political dispensation, remarked that he would have resigned had he been in charge of the concerned ministry (PTI, 2007). The Hindu Munnani, a religious group, had been agitating for the conferment of national archaeological heritage status on the Ram Sethu, in opposition to the Sethusamudram Project. In 2007, the Madras High Court transferred three petitions filed by the Hindu Munnani to the Supreme Court, which led to a stay on the Sethusamudram. The ASI, being a “science and technology department”, advocated for a scientific approach, distancing itself from mythological beliefs. It continued to argue that “[t]he *Valmiki Ramayana*, the *Ramcharitmanas* by Tulsidas and other mythological texts, which admittedly form an ancient part of Indian literature, cannot be said to be historical records to incontrovertibly prove the existence of the characters or the occurrence of the events depicted therein” (Sharma, 2007). However, in the wake of protests by Sangh members and sympathizers, the government attempted a conciliatory approach, upholding the religious historicity of Lord Ram and his importance in the Hindu faith. The two members of the ASI who had drafted the affidavit were suspended after its withdrawal from the apex Court.

Praful Bidwai, a secularist commentator, was among several who criticised the government for “giving in to the idea that faith must always trump history, archaeology, even geology – which explains the existence of natural formations like Adam’s Bridge – and accepting that the project must be scrapped because of myths and scriptures, not fact” (Bidwai, 2007). In December 2008, a government publication, titled *Images India*, was presented in Parliament. Published by National Remote Sensing Agency, the book carried a foreword by the ISRO chairman, G. Madhavan Nair, with a remarkably different stance, overturning its erstwhile epistemological humility to tacitly supporting the claim that the Sethu “may be man-made [with] an echo in the ancient Indian mythological epic, the *Ramayana*”. Although research was “still on”, the book claimed that “the bridge is seen as an example of ancient history linked to the Indian mythology” (IANS, 2007). Prakash Javadekar, then spokesperson of the BJP (later Minister of Environment, Forest and Climate Change) effused that “science has prevailed upon the politics of Congress” that was now compelled to “accept not only Lord Ram but also Ram Sethu” (IANS, 2007). Nivedita Menon, a later observer of the controversy, noted strikingly that, “while the Indian state, invoking secularism, continually counterposed ‘religious belief’ to ‘scientific facts,’ the Hindu Right... was in fact insistent that the structure is ‘man-made’ and therefore amenable to historical proof, precisely that it is not mythical; that it is not natural, made by God” (Menon, 2013). For both religious protestors and secularists, salvation seemed to lie in science. While the ASI retained its claim that the *Ramayana* was no evidence for Ram Sethu, the BJP pursued the Lord’s footprints, occasionally citing science, and the government too “chant[ed]” the Lord’s name (Nagi, 2007), a new group of scientists and rationalists had begun protesting against the Sethusamudram project citing fears of ecological disaster along the Tamil Nadu coastline. Some vocal proponents of the Sethusamudram and the demolition of the limestone shoals, also joined the campaign to oppose the project on ecological grounds. Their caveat was that Adam’s Bridge was a potential fortress that had deflected the wrath of the 2004-tsunami that wrecked large parts of South and Southeast Asia. Although this group was largely opposed to the sacred mythography of the Sethu, its construal of the *bridge* as a natural formation—and all its attendant ecological assumptions—sought to

override erstwhile religious and secularist invocations of science-based historiography towards a discourse of ecological sustainability.

The (Epistemo-)Logical Conundrum

One of the questions posed by the Supreme Court, in April 2008, to religious agitators against the Sethusamudram, perhaps best defines the complexity involved in any acceptance or refutation of sacred grounds for the Sethu’s heritagisation. “Who does puja in the middle of the sea?” the Bench asked (Mahapatra, 2008), inadvertently implying that if, perchance, it was demonstrated that the *bridge* was ever – or could be – a consecrated ground where sacred rituals were – or could be – performed, it might as well constitute evidence of the *Ramayana’s* historicity, by implication. In a subsequent hearing, advocate Soli J. Sorabjee argued before the Bench, on behalf of the Hindu Munnani:

The issue before the Court is not whether this belief can be historically and scientifically established. The Court cannot sit in judgment over that belief. The Court’s role is to determine whether the aforesaid belief is genuinely or conscientiously held over a period of time by Hindus and if that be so it falls within the ambit of the freedom of religion guaranteed by Article 25. The right to worship and make offerings and perform rites at Ram Sethu is in pursuance of the integral belief of the adherents of Hindu religion; therefore, any State action which results in impairment or even partial destruction of Ram Sethu and leads to extinction or diminution of the right to worship at Ram Sethu as at present is per se violative of the guarantee of freedom of religion. (Venkatesan, 2008)

While the Bench retorted by questioning whether, by the same logic, the Himalayas, the Tirumala range, or the Goverdhan Hill in Mathura, which are all held as sacred by Hindus, could not therefore be touched by developmental activity, Soli’s peer, advocate K. Parasaran, complicated the epistemology of the Ram Sethu by associating its reverential rank among Hindus with that of the then proposed Ram Temple at Ayodhya (now under construction). In 1992, mobs, incensed by the memory of the alleged destruction of an ancient Ram temple at Ayodhya by the Mughal ruler Babur, demolished the Babri Masjid, which had stood there since 1529. Advocate Parasaran said that if the dredging affected the Ram Sethu, it might “cause a wound again in the minds of so many Hindus to leave a permanent scar”. An exasperated Sorabji added: “Without Lord Rama and *Ramayana*, Hindu religion will be a husk” (PTI, 2008).

The above exchange commands a literary analysis. The arguments of Sorabji and Parasaran anticipate the 2019 Supreme Court verdict on the Ayodhya Ram Mandir, which ruled in favour of the granting of 2.77 acres of disputed land to a trust under the Government of India for building the Ram Janmabhoomi Temple. As such, the Ram Sethu is inevitably entangled with the issue of Ram Janmabhoomi. More pertinently, on the question of the Sethu’s unmappable *aquapelagicity*, the above exchange subtly reworks the *bridge’s* epistemology. The sceptical secular judges are seen inadvertently equating the submarine shoal bridge to per se beginningless sacrosanct (ecologically sacred) mainland features like mountains and rivers in the Indian mainland, while deistic advocates inadvertently secularise the so-called manmade origins of the extraterritorial structure by invoking historical-materialist precedents and the constitutionality of sacredness. Moreover, while the Bench epistemologically inflects Adam’s Bridge as a hypothetical piece of mainstream Indian territory (which it is not), the advocates of the Hindu Munnani buttress the

discourse of scientific merit and historicity with a ‘genuine’ and ‘conscientious’ performativity of Hindu rights in commemorating the Ram Sethu. Ironically, the scepticism affords the strengthening of a legalised performance of this religiosity, while also reaffirming the place of the Sethu – otherwise a geographically faraway structure for a large part of India – in mainstream Indian consciousness.

In June 2008, the Supreme Court had asked the Government of India to consider an alternate route for the canalisation of the waters around the Sethu, without any damage to the structure, while proposing whether archaeological research could be carried out to establish the credentials of the *bridge* as a national monument. In July, the government instituted a committee headed by environmental scientist R. K. Pachauri to assess the prospects of an alternate route, retaining the Sethu’s historical and environmental dignity. The initial report of the committee, filed in March 2009, feared ecological hazards ahead of the alternate route. By November, the delay had prompted the Janata Party leader, and present Member of the Rajya Sabha, Subramanian Swamy, to move the court. Besides demanding heritage status for the Sethu, Swamy claimed that the government was suppressing details of the ecological unfeasibility of the new project. In February 2010, Pachauri informed the Court that plans of an Environmental Impact Analysis had been drafted by the National Institute of Oceanography. A year later, the Court adjourned its verdict, bringing the Sethusamudram Project to a halt. As summed up by Menon, science had been portrayed in three distinct roles: a developmentalist and secular debunker of the ‘myth’ that the Sethu was *not* manmade; a legitimisation of sacred Hindu mythography deployed by religious activists who claimed the Sethu *was* manmade; an ecological prism to refract the organicity of the coral reefs and their future sustainability, as deployed by environmentalists against both of the above.

It would be a mistake to read these contradictory narratives as the ‘misuse’ of Science by some parties as opposed to its correct utilisation by others. Rather, what we see here is Science’s ability to establish something as ‘Nature’, counterposing it to ‘created by humans’, in order to produce specific political effects. In one kind of scientific discourse, the demarcation of something as ‘nature’ opens it up to human intervention as passive, inert material whose sole purpose is the furthering of human good. In another kind of scientific discourse, the marking of something as natural on the contrary, protects it from human intervention in the long-term interests of survival of humans on the planet. (Menon, 2013)

Since 2007, by and large, the body of rationally or scientifically motivated criticism levelled against the detractors of the Sethusamudram has tread on anti-religious lines. “Science and rationality have taken a beating”, remarked an observer in the *Frontline* magazine (2007), criticising the Sangh’s protests. “The protests by the BJP”, the article goes on, “against cutting Ram Sethu... on the grounds that any structural change to Ram Sethu would hurt the religious sentiments of the Hindu millions of the country, is clearly dictated by political expediency with the agitation to preserve Ram’s heritage being now spearheaded by Hindu fundamentalist organisations such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Hindu Munnani” (*Frontline*, 2007). Steering the debate away from religion, Sri Lankan environmentalist Hemantha Withanage noted that anything between 35% and 70% of Sri Lanka’s fish stock is harnessed on the Indian side of the shoals – an ecosystem that would be destroyed by canalisation (Withanage, 2010). This argument was taken up ahead of the 2021 Tamil Nadu elections, by several Indian fishermen’s groups opposing the Sethusamudram, the proposed elevated sea corridor and desalination projects around the

canalisation which Tamil Nadu’s DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) government has dubbed as the “150-year-old dream of the Tamils” in spite of these dissenting coastal residents (Special Correspondent, 2021).

The vocabulary of Tamil fishermen’s protests and environmentalist critiques is not new (Rodriguez, 2007). In September 2007, Indian civil society groups, environmentalists, human rights activists, and academics made a statement, naming the BJP as the original exponent of the Sethusamudram Project, which was, apparently, formulated without considering key “ecological and human problems” hazards to “a rich biosphere reserve with 400 endangered species, including sea turtles, dolphins, dugongs and whales” and “the livelihood of 15 lakh [1.5 million] people who depend on fishing and allied areas in the waters where the canal will be dug” (*Communalism Watch*, 2007). In a letter to Prime Minister Singh and the Indian National Congress President, Sonia Gandhi, retired Indian Army engineer Major-General S.G. Vombatkere had echoed the environmentalist critique, lamenting that religionists had “gained media attention and those who have from the outset been opposing it on grounds of human displacement, ecological reasons and even on economic viability grounds have beenside-lined and forgotten” (Vombatkere, 2007).

Criticism on the economic viability of the Sethusamudram project also included doubts on the cargo capacity that the canal would be able to facilitate. “Very Large Crude Carriers (VLCCs) like Suezmax, Panamax and Aframax would not be able to pass through the canal” as “only vessels with capacity up to 30,000 Deadweight tonnage (Dwt), or mainly general purpose and mid-size ships” could pass through the Sethusamudram. “The proposed canal is no patch on the Suez, which can accommodate vessels up to a maximum capacity of 150,000-200,000 Dwt” (Zadoo, 2013). Touted as being “beyond the reach of large vessels above 50,000 Dwt” (Zadoo, 2013), the project became an albatross around the neck of the Singh administration. Critics added that the distance saved by the canal would be negligible (Warrier, 2007), considering the disqualification of heavy vessels and tonnage when seen against the massive costs of building the canal – approximately \$305 million USD. In September 2014, Shipping Minister Nitin Gadkari, under the new NDA-led Narendra Modi administration, announced that the government had tasked RITES (Rail India Technical and Economic Service) with finding alternative routes to the canal (PTI, 2014). Meanwhile, it was argued by the Tamil political party AIDMK (All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) that “Poompuhar Shipping Corporation vessels, which transported coal from the eastern ports of Pradeep, Haldia and Visakhapatnam could not pass through the channel”. The section of the canal “north of Tuticorin, would not even be beneficial to vessels leaving Tuticorin port towards south to European, central east Asian and south east Asian countries” besides the stated ecological and environmental hazards (Special Correspondent, 2014). Although the Sethusamudram envisaged saving at least a day’s time, critical estimates claimed that it would minimise travel by only about two hours. Besides the cost of canalisation, the recurring annual maintenance cost of the canal has been projected at about \$7 million USD, which has also come under scrutiny, owing to anxieties over new sedimentation and tidal activity, not to mention the historical vulnerability of the region to cyclones and tsunamis. One such incident, indelibly etched on the Indian consciousness, took place in 1964, when a cyclone on Pamban Island destroyed the Pamban railway bridge, connecting mainland India with Pamban. A train full of passengers was engulfed by the cyclone. None survived, nor could their bodies be recovered.

(Re)Territorialising Ram

Returning now to the iconic question raised by the Bench – who prays “in the middle of the sea?” – and the circumvention of the question of the Sethu’s geological evolution, reveals an epistemological tension arising from a nomenclatural void. It is hard to geographically classify the Ram Sethu for the lay observer. It is neither a piece of territorial land nor oceanic territory; neither an archipelago nor an island. Since the *bridge* stretches between India and Sri Lanka, who has territorial rights over what part of it can only have vague answers. In international fora, the Hindu right to a sacred mythography cannot possibly imply India’s territorial right over the Sethu’s geographical expanse. This is precisely the argument raised in a petition filed in February 2021, by A. Ramasamy, president of the Dravidian Historical Research Centre, arguing that even “the Supreme Court has no powers beyond the Indian borders” (Legal Correspondent, 2021). Back in 2013, the Pachauri committee’s findings reported that the Sethusamudram project was economically and ecologically unfeasible. Although the Congress-led UPA government decided to override the findings, the NDA led by the BJP adopted the idea of deepening the Pamban pass. In the process, the Ram Sethu controversy stayed alive. In July 2020, T.R. Baalu, the Lok Sabha Member from Sriperumbudur constituency and leader of the DMK appealed to Prime Minister Modi to conclude the Sethusamudram Project before 2024, raising alarms of an Indo-China conflict over economic influence in Sri Lanka, which has, in the past decade or so, become a stronghold of Chinese economic investment and developmental programmes.

Besides fears of China’s economic pace, there are also concerns over the pace of international media and what its response would be on Ram Sethu’s historicity. In March 2017, the Indian Council of Historical Research, a flagship institution of the Ministry of Human Resource Development, had announced that it would carry out the Ram Sethu Pilot project. The Council’s chairperson, Y. Sudershan Rao was quoted as saying: “We have seen that the Greek mythology of Helen of Troy is in fact proven to be true. So, we will speak about ‘Ram Sethu’ after the collection of evidences [sic]” (Gohain, 2017). However, by April 2018, the Council members went from being consenting to dissenting participants in the debate. The newly appointed chair, Arvind Jamkhedkar, refused to take the Ram Sethu Pilot forward. “It is not the work of historians to carry out excavations... For that, there are apt agencies such as the Archaeological Survey of India”, he added (PTI, 2018). Though Indian historians were loath to explore the history of the Sethu, American scientists were not. On December 11, 2017, the Science Channel (owned by Discovery Communications) leaped into the fray with a two- and-half-minute promotional video for its series titled *What on Earth*, claiming that scientific explorations into Ram Sethu had revealed partial traces of a manmade bridge. Citing NASA’s satellite images, scientists and geologists from Indiana University Northwest, University of Colorado Boulder, and Southern Oregon University, the video created a furore among Indian believers and sceptics, alike. Its clinching evidence revolved around the observation that the rocks atop the sand shoals were 3,000 years older than the 4,000-year-old sand beneath, which implied that the former was possibly nonlocal. The words that resonated the most in the religious Indian mind were: “building such a long bridge [thousands of years ago] would have been a super human achievement” (as cited in Krishnan, 2017). Alan Lester, a geologist from the University of Colorado, Boulder, Erin Argyilan, a geoscientist from Indiana University Northwest, and Chelsea Rose, a historical archeologist from Southern Oregon University made up the cast of the documentary. C.P. Rajendran, an Indian professor of geodynamics from Bangalore commented: “it’s not clear from the commentary what the dating methods and their error margins were” (Rajendran, 2018). Casting further doubts on the views of the

panel, Rajendran added that its members:

may be experts in their own areas but they may not be specifically conducting scientific research on the topic of discussion itself – as Erin Argyilan admitted to this author in an email. She further stated in her response that the show is not intended to reach a definitive conclusion on the science but only aims to present it in an intriguing way. None of the experts featured in the video makes any claim on the Ram Sethu as a human construct nor does this video cite any published scientific results. The validity of any result can only be evaluated through rigorous peer review. However, what has been presented in the video has no scientific content and therefore no conclusion can be drawn on the origin of the Ram Sethu based on the commentaries and visuals in it. (Rajendran, 2018)

Underscoring cyclonic activities that occurred in the Pamban region in 1480 and 1964, Rajendran suggested that the erosion of the isthmus and redeposition of coral boulders from neighbouring marine and submarine assemblages could also have affected the present composition of the *bridge*, terming the euphoria around the so-called evidence of it being a manmade structure as retrograde “post-truth” that had abducted the “transformative power of science” (Rajendran, 2018).

Nevertheless, the Ram Sethu had been re-introjected into the public imagination. In late 2018, the Government of India issued works on a new broad gauge railway track between Rameshwaram and Dhanushkodi, the latter being the coastal town from whose shores the Sethu emerges. It was hoped that the new railway connection would resurrect the ghost-town of Dhanushkodi, which has remained largely abandoned since the 1964 cyclone. In addition, the plan mentioned the building of a new vertical-lift bridge alongside the 104-year-old iconic Pamban Railway bridge, which had been recently closed to traffic (Dash, 2018). In February 2019, the Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation Limited launched its Ram Sethu Express-Tamil Nadu Temple Tour to cover as many as 18 temples in eminent Tamil temple towns, at a fare of less than Rs 5,000 (\$67 USD), in a bid to offer a “unique tour package” (Prasad, 2019). In embodying the name of the mythical *bridge*, the railway service was bound to double up in the public imagination as a mnemonic for Ram Sethu’s sacred mythography. In August of the same year, the Minister for Human Resource Development, Ramesh Pokhriyal Nishank, made headlines while addressing the 65th annual convocation of the Indian Institute of Technology (Kharagpur). The Ram Sethu, he remarked, was built by Indian “engineers”, exhorting the graduates to carry out research into the history of the structure (and Sanskrit, the language in which Valmiki’s *Ramayana* was written). “If we talk about Ram Sethu, was it built by engineers from America, Britain or Germany?” he asked in the same breath as labelling Sanskrit “the first language in the world”, or “*Dev-vaani*” (the word of God) (Special Correspondent, 2019). Nishank’s comments were probably in response to an old statement by the DMK leader, M. Karunanidhi, who passed on in August 2018. Back in 2007, when he was the chief minister of Tamil Nadu for a fifth consecutive term, Karunanidhi had controversially remarked that protests against the Sethusamudram had been hijacked by “communal forces”. Speaking at Erode, in September that year, Karunanidhi asked, rhetorically: “Who is this Raman (as Lord Ram is referred to in Tamil)? In which engineering college did he study and become a civil engineer? When did he build this so-called bridge? Is there any evidence for this?” (Express News Service, 2007).

Karunanidhi’s statement, which the BJP has still not “forgotten” (Special Correspondent,

2020), was made days after the Government of India withdrew its affidavit from the apex Court. Karunanidhi had asserted that the DMK’s stand was “that the Centre should not succumb to these communal elements”, creating a storm in public sentiments by calling the *Ramayana* nothing but “a piece of fiction that allegorically represented the conflict between Aryans [Ram’s army] and Dravidians [Ravana’s Lanka]” (Express News Service, 2007). However, in March 2014, the AIDMK leader and succeeding Tamil Nadu chief minister, J. Jayalalitha, previously a supporter of the Sethusamudram, asserted her and her party’s opposition to the project—thus her opposition to the DMK—citing environmentalism and risks to the “livelihood of hapless fishermen”, besides the \$100 million USD which had been “wasted” on a commercially unprofitable stagnating project. Within this growing (epistemo-)logical conundrum, another strong voice, that of Swamy, has continued to resonate in legal and parliamentary debates. Having opposed the Sethusamudram on sacred grounds since at least 2007, Swamy’s campaign to have Ram Sethu declared a national heritage site has been retarded by complex legal and parliamentary procedures. Although the government has clarified its stance on the project—that canalisation would not tamper with the shoal *bridge*—its stance on the veracity of the Sethu’s sacred mythography remains equivocal. In October 2020, an exasperated Swamy questioned Prime Minister Modi on why the government had delayed conferring heritage status on the Ram Sethu, although both leaders embrace the same ideological dispensation. “I don’t need the credit”, said Swamy, referring to his one-and-half-decade-old campaign, “Lord Ram does!” (Times Now Digital, 2020).

Considering Swamy’s high ranks in the NDA and Rajya Sabha, his argument, that of restoring the moral and intellectual “credit” of architecture or *authorship* of Ram Sethu to the Lord, is an appeal to the emotion of the masses to, once again, anthropomorphise the Hindu deity, thus strengthening the demands of cognitive and intellectual justice for Hindus. Attempting to prioritise the canalisation project over the sacred mythography, in December, another commentator remarked that the Sethusamudram was “slowly dying due to litigations in the Supreme Court... due to litigations” (Shivakumar, 2020). Ram Sethu and Sethusamudram have never been shy of controversy in the 21st century. In this relentless conundrum of arguments and rejoinders involving political leaders, legal experts, economists, environmentalists, human rights activists, civil society groups, religious activists and, last but not least, the public imagination itself, religious discourse has tried reterritorialising the Ram Sethu (a geographically de-territorialised entity) by anthropomorphising Ram; secularists and developmentalists have deified capitalist development (at times even irrationally); environmentalists, ecologists and geologists have sought to reterritorialise evolutionary and ecosystemic discourses, inadvertently consolidating the reterritorialisation of ‘Ram’ (who or what is perhaps now the elusive signifier of the bridge to this conundrum).

Transcending (Geo-)Logocentrism

Uncritical or non-dialectical understandings of either geological or religious theories seeking to establish the genesis of the Sethu elide over the rich performativity of the structure in public discourse and memory. Both the geologist’s and the religionist’s conception of the genesis story can become logocentric, relying excessively on littoral or literal evidence from the ancient writings (formations) on the earth’s surface, as it were, or passages of the *Ramayana*. If the Sethu is, and simultaneously is not, the Lord’s own bridge, it is because of the collectivisation of its performance as an *aquapelago* in the Indian consciousness, whether in secular, environmentalist or religious terms. What this means is

– as Felicity Greenland and Philip Hayward observe in the context of the Japanese cryptozoological giant sub- Antarctic humanoid conceived by 21st century Internet users (Greenland & Hayward, 2020) – that the discourse around the Ram Sethu continues to draw on ancient folkloric themes and emotions while reconfiguring them as contemporary media-loric discourses. In that regard, the Sethu or *bridge* is not necessarily (only) a precise geographical location, of militating theo-geological histories, but an *aquapelagic* imaginary. Such an imaginary transcends the logocentric this-worldliness (what is empirically observed) or that-pastness (what is scripturally or orally remembered) in perceptions of the aquatic assemblage in question.

The Ram Sethu is an *aquapelagic* zone, not merely in geo-historical terms but also in psychological ways, that is largely experienced in the Indian consciousness through the evolution of ancient folkloric motifs in contemporary media-loric polemic. As an *aquapelagic* imaginary, or indeed a performed *aquapelago*, the Ram Sethu is sustained by “aggregating meanings from its various articulations and being able to sustain multiple interpretations and deployments” (Greenland & Hayward, 2020, p. 148). This epistemological plurality or transcendence of (geo-)logocentric meanings is an inevitable function of *aquapelagic* imaginaries, even more so of the Ram Sethu, which is reproduced by multiple determinate negations of religion (negating ambitions of economic development), developmentalism (negating themes of environmental sustainability), and environmentalism (negating majoritarian discourses of what constitutes the sacred). The controversy around it, then, is not just vibrant, but also vital. Without positing the veracity or primacy of narratives of myth over capital, capital over man, man over nature, or nature over divine, this study has tried to demonstrate that the *aquapelagicity* of the Ram Sethu sustains it in public memory as an autonomous assemblage – “a river in the sea” of sacred, secular and evolutionary genesis myths – performed as a symbolic entity that is far away and discrete from the submarine shoal bridge represented as a dotted line on satellite images and survey maps. As the Government of India and the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research plan a major archaeological exploration in the Pamban region to trace the origins of the Ram Sethu, beginning this year (Marar, 2021), the elusive *bridge* poses a unique challenge to Island Studies practitioners, warranting further research and theorisation in this area.

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