

An Indian Theocracy?

They are back in business—the saffronites. As they cannot build a Ram Temple at Ayodhya they can always build a Ram Sethu by selling emotive mythology. So they are out to cash in on Sethusamudram. After all they need issues for the next general election. And finally the leadership of Congress has apologized for the affidavit filed in the Supreme Court in the case pertaining to the Sethusamudram project. This project which was set off by BJP led NDA regime, aims to make a canal from Palk Straits to Gulf of Munnar. It involved dredging of Adams Bridge, also called Ram Sethu. The affidavit mentioned that the said bridge is not a man made structure and also the Ram is a mythological, not historical figure. This affidavit set the emotive political streams rolling their political chariots, and hue and cry that this statement of the Government is an act of blasphemy.

Different agitations are on to oppose Sethusamudram project linking Gulf of Mannar with Palk Straits. Dharam Sansad (religious Parliament, a VHP initiative) has been mobilized around 'faith', on the ground that this project will destroy Ram Sethu, the one which was built by Vanar Sena (Army of Monkeys) to help Lord Ram cross over to Lanka to rescue Sita. The project was supported by most of the political parties in the past including NDA alliance Government. When complete, it will cut short the long journey of the ships from east coast to the west coast, and vice versa. Like Panama Canal it has been conceived to promote the transport, employment and to improve trade. Half way now, it has been facing two oppositions. The one is from the environmentalists, who are worried about the destruction of flora and fauna and the dangers of silting in the canal. These are the arguments which need to be taken seriously.

The other ground, is simply based on faith. RSS and its affiliates are promoting a view that building this Sethusamudram will involve the destruction of Ram Sethu which will be detrimental to hindu sentiments. The story goes that Ravana, the King of Lanka had abducted Sita to avenge the insult meted out to his sister Shurpanakha. Assisted by his loyal devotee Hanuman, the Lord mobilized monkeys and built this bridge. It is claimed that this bridge is a marvel of engineering achievements of the Indian engineers of that time. The assertion is that it shows the acme of technological achievements of this land, and that there are other noteworthy achievements like the advances in aeronautical technologies like aeroplanes, missiles to name the few.

As far as Lord Ram's story goes there are several versions of Ramayana. Some of these are very popular like Valmiki Ramayana and Tulasidas Ramcharitmanas. Surely the most popular one currently is the one from Maharshi Ramanand Sagar's mega serial which captivated the nation for couple of years. There are other versions, which have been undermined and attacked mostly for political reasons. Sahmat exhibition on different versions of Lord Ram's story was attacked few years ago. Some politically motivated people could not bear one of the versions presented in this exhibition. It showed that according to Jataka version of Ram Katha, in post-Brahminical Buddhist Dashrath Jataka Sita is described both as sister and wife of Ram. As per this version Dashrath is a King not of Ayodhya but of Varanasi. The marriage of sister and brother is part of the

tradition of glorious Kshtriya clans who wanted to maintain their caste and clan purity. This Jataka tale shows Ram to be the follower of Buddha. Similarly in Jain versions of Ramayana project Ram as the propagator of anti-Brahminical Jain values. What do both Buddhist and Jain versions have in common is that in these Ravana is not shown as a villain. Many people dispute that the Lanka mentioned in Ramayana is not the current Sri Lanka. Since mythology does not require any proof it can be modulated and constructed into a faith for political purposes. Recently in the Shabri Kumbh held in Dangs in Gujarat, the mythology was modulated into the service of politics. It was said, and that too with great amount of precision, that a particular hillock, which was earlier called Chamak Dongar, which adivasis used to worship as Shivar Deo (protector of crops), was the precise place where Shabri had offered berries to Lord Ram. It was rechristened and a Shabri temple was built on the spot. Nearby, a river six kilometers away, Purna was named as the one where Guru Matang rishi used to take bath. On the mountain on the stone there were three marks which are being presented as the marks where Laxman had sharpened his arrows.

This Ram Sethu has been shown to be the pre-human structure, called *tombol*, a sand deposition due to natural process. The Geological Survey of India ruled out its being the manmade (or monkey made), construction. Same way the inference from NASA satellite pictures is that it is due to sedimentation of clay and lime stone. It is *tombol* in NASA language, connecting one land with another, and that it is from times when human habitation is doubtful.

It is easy to construct a fly over to the future but difficult to prevent the formation of mythological bridges of the past. Mythology can easily be constructed and planted in the peoples psyche as it is driven by political goals and rides on horse of emotion. □

[Contributed]