

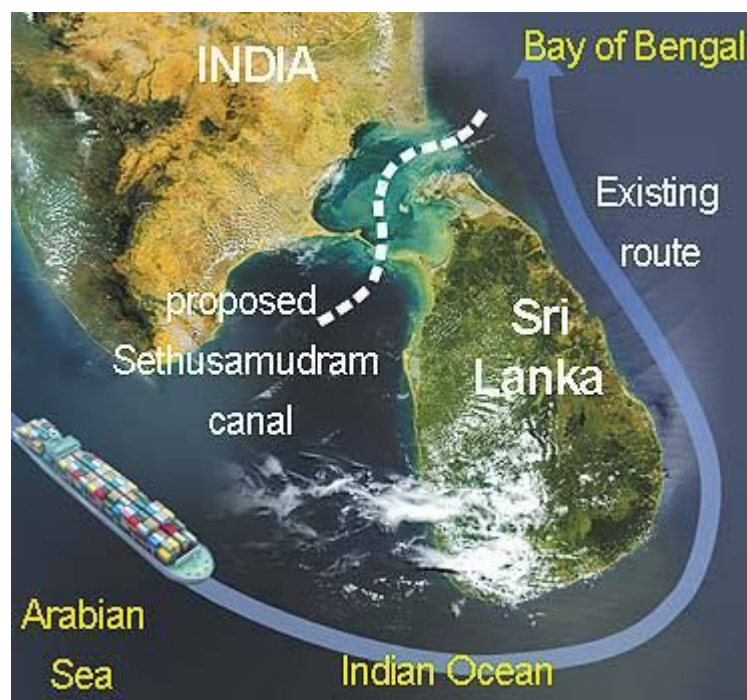
## The Ram Setu

### Why in news?

The Ram Setu chain of shoals off the southeast coast of India that many believe is the bridge to Lanka has once again popped into limelight.

### What is the Ram Setu?

- **Location-** The Ram Setu, also known as **Adam's Bridge** and **Nala Setu**, is a 48-km chain of limestone shoals.
- It is located between Rameswaram on India's southeast coast and Mannar Island near Sri Lanka's northwest coast.
- **Nature of the bridge-** Scientists believe Ram Setu is a natural structure formed due to tectonic movements and sand getting trapped in corals.
- However, over the years, evidence has been offered to claim that the bridge is man-made.
- **Geological theories behind the origin-** Sri Lanka was a part of Indian landmass and that the calcareous rectangular blocks are testimony of Lanka breaking away from the mainland about 1,25,000 years ago.
- Hindus believe that this bridge was built by Lord Ram and his army to cross to Lanka and fight Ravan.
- As per Islamic legend, Adam used this bridge to reach Adam's Peak in Sri Lanka.



## What is the Sethusamudram project about?

- The depth of the sea along the bridge varies between 3 feet and 30 feet, making navigation by sea-worthy vessels impossible in this stretch.
- At present, ships bound for India's eastern coast have to circle around the entire island of Sri Lanka to reach Tuticorin, Chennai, Vizag, Paradip and other ports.
- Therefore, a project titled Sethusamudram Shipping Canal Project was mooted by the Government of India.
- In 1997, the Government decided to go ahead with the project but only finalised it in 2005.
- The successful completion of the project is expected to cut travelling by about 350 nautical miles and will save 10 to 30 hours' sailing time.
- Plans were also drawn up to develop 13 minor ports in India, and fishing harbours and other infrastructure in both India and Sri Lanka.

## What were the challenges in implementing the project?

- **Legal challenges-** The Archaeological Survey of India, in an affidavit in court, rejected the existence of the Ram Setu.
- It has contended that the contents of mythological texts cannot be said to be historical record to undoubtedly prove the existence of the characters or the occurrence of events.
- Later, the affidavit was withdrawn and two ASI officials were suspended.
- **Communal overtone-** The project took on a more communal colour leading to conflicting theories and disputes.
- **Ecological issues-** It was claimed that the project will harm the aquatic flora and fauna of the area.
- The dredging of the line of shoals could make India's coast more vulnerable to tsunamis.
- **Economic viability-** The project is expected to cut down the time by 8 hours for ships travelling from Europe, Africa or West Asia which account for 65% of ships sailing in these waters.
- There are also apprehensions that only ships with tonnage up to 30,000 tonnes would be able to use the canal.
- **Others-** NASA has clarified that the age, substratum, geological structure or anthropological status of the ocean bed in Palk strait cannot be determined by the astronauts' photographs.

## What is the current status?

- **Sethusamudram project-** In 2018, the Centre told the Supreme Court that the Ram Setu will not be affected in the execution of the Sethusamudram Shipping Canal project.
- **Underwater exploration project-** The central advisory board on archaeology, which functions under the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has approved a proposal for an underwater exploration project.
- The study will be conducted by the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) and National Institute of Oceanography (NIO), Goa.

- It will focus on the process behind Ram Setu's formation and also whether there are any submerged habitations around the structure.
- The agency's research vessel named **Sindhu Sadhana** will be deployed to collect samples of sediment from 35-40 metres below the water level.

*Sindhu Sadhana is an indigenous exploration vessel which can stay underwater for up to 45 days.*

## References

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