

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- Later, the affidavit was withdrawn and two ASI officials were suspended.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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