

Ram Setu': UPA's Calculated Capitulation to Saffron Agenda

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The BJP's covert roll back of its opposition to the Indo-US Nuke Deal had exposed its own surrender on the question of defending the nation's sovereignty. In the wake of this surrender, the BJP has sought to shore up its sham of 'nationalism' by whipping up a storm over the so-called 'Ram Setu' bridge. The UPA Government, instead of boldly confronting the BJP's obscurantist saffron agenda, has instead surrendered to it and lent it legitimacy.

The Sethusamudram Ship Canal Project off Rameshwaram in Tamilnadu proposes a shipping canal across the Gulf of Mannar, Palk Bay and the Palk Straits to link the Arabian Sea with the Bay of Bengal. It was in fact the NDA Government which in 1999 had announced that it would complete the project in three years, and which in its 2000-01 Budget had allocated resources for the feasibility study of the Sethusamudram Project. The NDA Manifesto in 2004 also promises speedy completion of this Project. Serious objections to this Project had been voiced by fisherpeople and environmentalists, on grounds of its impact on marine ecology and fisher people's livelihood - which the NDA and UPA Governments alike ignored.

The BJP has now conveniently discovered that the 'Ram Setu' is the selfsame bridge to Lanka built by the Monkey Army at the behest of Ram that finds mention in the Ramayana - and is opposing the Project on these grounds. A petition was moved in the SC against the Project quoting the Valmiki Ramayana and Tulsi's Ramcharitmanas to claim that the 'Ram Setu' is historical and cultural heritage. In its affidavit filed in response to this, the ASI quite correctly remarked that these texts, while of undeniable mythological and devotional value, however "cannot be said to be historical record to incontrovertibly prove the existence of the characters or the occurrence of the events, depicted therein." The affidavit also cited studies that proved that the so-called 'Ram Setu' "was not a man-made structure, but actually comprised 103 small patch reefs lying in a linear pattern with reef crest, sand cays and intermittent deep channels."

Faced with the BJP's hue and cry reminiscent of the Ramjanmabhoomi issue, the UPA Government cravenly withdrew its affidavit, and suspended two ASI officials responsible for it. It is one matter to hold that the ASI affidavit could have tactically avoided the issue of the historicity of mythological characters, and focussed instead on the fact that there is no textual or archaeological evidence to prove that the 'Ram Setu' is indeed a man-made bridge. But the UPA Government as well as its 'secular' allies have instead sought to play to the Hindutva gallery by declaring 'matters of faith' to be beyond the court's purview. None less than the Union Law Minister Bharadwaj has declared, "Lord Rama is an integral part of Indian culture and ethos and cannot be a matter of debate or subject matter of litigation in court...As Himalaya is Himalaya, Ganga is Ganga, Rama is Rama. It is a question of faith. There is no requirement of any proof to establish the existence based on faith." What are the implications of this position for the Babri Masjid issue? The Sangh Parivar claims that a particular spot is in fact the birth place of Ram that needs no historical ratification since it is an article of faith. Historians maintain that Ram is a mythological figure, likely to be a composite and idealised figure, possibly based on many actual kings and intended to represent ideal values. In this sense Ram is different from Jesus or Mohammed whose existence is backed by historical record;

whether they are prophets or not is a matter of faith. If the Law Minister of the land declares Ram to be equivalent to the self-evident Himalayas and the Ganga, needing no historical evidence, then it follows that Ram's birthplace or bridge too must similarly be taken as self-evident. And that implies that the UPA Government, jettisoning the Indian Constitution and secular rational norms, is accepting the notions of VHP's 'Dharm Sansad' instead! Laloo Yadav, the self-styled messiah of secularism who boasts of having stopped Advani's Rathayatra in its tracks, too has gone on record with similar sentiments. An institution like the ASI is being penalised for merely having stated the norms and methods followed by every serious historian and archaeologist. This is nothing but pragmatic saffronisation by the Congress and UPA.

Even the CPI(M) spoke in many voices on the issue of the Ram Setu affidavit. On the one hand the CPI(M) issued a statement supporting the withdrawal of the affidavit on the grounds that the references to Ramayana's historicity were extraneous to the issue. Veteran leader Jyoti Basu however condemned the withdrawal of the affidavit as being a calculated roll back with an eye on the elections. At the same time CPI(M) politburo member Sitaram Yechury went to extent of seeking 'stern punishment' for those 'guilty' for the affidavit!

Further, the real issues of livelihood and environment at stake in the Sethusamudram Project are being drowned in the noise over a non-issue. Environmentalists have pointed out that the reef known as 'Ramar Setu' had cushioned the impact of the 2004 tsunami; that the Gulf of Munnar is quake-prone; and expressed the apprehension that the destruction of this reef entailed by the Project might make the coast more vulnerable to tsunamis. Fisher people have opposed the Project on the grounds that the reef known as 'Ramar Setu' is crucial for maintaining marine life, and its destruction would destroy their means of livelihood and survival. There had also been no proper cost-benefit analysis that showed any significant saving in costs or increase in trade through this Project. The Supreme Court's track record on such matters is notoriously poor – as witnessed in the Sardar Sarovar Project. The SC seems willing to give credence to the Sangh Parivar's superficial saffron objections while ignoring the substantial issues at stake. Such a failure on part of a Government whose secular pretensions are its principal *raison d'être*, on part of self-proclaimed secular parties, as well as democratic institutions to boldly uphold and defend secular and rational norms can only legitimise and strengthen the saffron agenda of the Sangh Parivar.

P.S.

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