

RAM SETU AND DELUSIONS OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL GRANDEUR:

The Politics of Obscuring a Sacred Geology

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ABSTRACT: This article discusses the Indian film *Ram Setu* (2022) against the backdrop of 21st century public discourses, geological debates, legal proceedings and the general surge of politics revolving around the eponymous tombolo – Ram Setu/Adam’s Bridge (understood by geologists as a stretch of 103 patchy reefs or shallow shoals connecting India’s Rameswaram Island with Sri Lanka’s Mannar Island). It is important to question the *locus standi* of not only the filmmakers but also the film’s widespread critics. The bulk of the criticism against the film converged around the notion that the filmmakers had attempted to pander to growing Hindutva-oriented sentiments in India. What is more concerning, however, is that both the filmmakers and the film’s critics have remained silent on the tombolo’s aquapelagicity. While the film’s emphasis on archaeology as a methodology of reconstructing the tombolo’s past signals delusions of grandeur, the continued absence of a voice to highlight its geological history is equally disingenuous. Seen through the critical lenses of Island Studies, the film *Ram Setu* is seen to obscure holistic perspectives of the sacred aquapelago of Rameswaram Island, Dhanushkodi, Thalaimannar and Mannar Island and its entanglements with questions of Tamil fisher’s livelihoods and environmental heritages of the Sethusamudram region.

KEYWORDS: Ram Setu; Adam’s Bridge; India; Sri Lanka; aquapelago; Anthropocene

Introduction

Milord! To protect a symbol of Bharat’s historic loss of prestige—the Qutb Minar – the metro railway network had to be rerouted; although the monument symbolises loss, we still see it as our historical heritage. The epitome of global artistic excellence, indeed the wonder, that some people also call the ‘symbol of love’ – the Taj Mahal – was protected by rerouting the Taj Corridor and by shutting down the factories around it that were said to emit pollutants that could tarnish the monument’s white marble ... But why is our government so zealous about breaking apart the oldest symbol of love and monument to a woman’s self-esteem – the Ram Setu? Milord! Why did the Taliban bomb Bhagwan Buddha’s statue in Afghanistan? Was it because they wanted the stones for decorating their homes? The fact is that Bhagwan Buddha was indeed a great obstacle for the Taliban, because his presence in the territory would continue to signify the ancient cultural links between India and Afghanistan. When the Bamiyan Buddha was despoiled, the entire world protested, because Bhagwan Buddha belongs not only to India but the entire

world. Likewise, breaking Ram Setu is a blatant attempt to smear the global legacy of Shri Ram, because as long as the monument remains untouched, it will remind the world that whenever someone tries to sully a woman's self-esteem or oppress her, a Lord Ram will cross the ocean with his vanar sena [hominoid army] to destroy the Ravans. There may be hundreds of thousands of Ram Temples in the world, but there is only one Setu. Only a Talibanist mentality can seek to plan the destruction of the Ram Setu. Milord, no archaeologist or scientist can be opposed to the Sethusamudram Project, at large. All we need to do is find an alternative route. However, the kind of progress, that comes at the cost of desecrating cultures and civilisations, should be anathema to governments. (Aryan Kulshrestha, in the film *Ram Setu* [2022]; translation, mine).

This excerpt is from a courtroom speech delivered by the eccentric, though brilliant, government archaeologist – of the Archaeology Society (not Survey) of India – Dr. Aryan Kulshrestha, performed by Akshay Kumar in the Bollywood film, *Ram Setu* (directed by Abhishek Sharma) which was released on the Diwali of 2022. Kulshrestha finds himself in the middle of a plot involving large nefarious capitalists, members of the judiciary and the state machinery to supposedly destroy the Ram Setu (also known as Adam's Bridge) – the 48 kilometre-long narrow strip of shoals connecting Dhanushkodi in India's Pamban or Rameswaram Island with Thalaimannar in Sri Lanka's Mannar Island (See Figures 1 & 2).

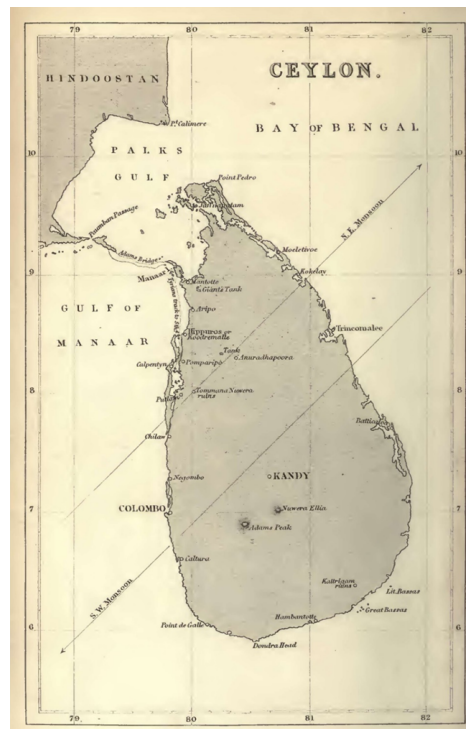


Figure 1 - Map showing Adam's Bridge (top left) by James Stuart (1862).



Figure 2 - Ram Setu/Adam's Bridge between India and Sri Lanka as seen from space shuttle *Endeavour* during STS-59, 16th April 1994. (National Aeronautics & Space Administration, Wikimedia Commons).

The scene that the excerpt in the epigraph refers to represents one of the most vital narrative fragments of the film and is loosely based on real Indian courtroom proceedings from the early 21st century, when complex questions regarding the historicity of Lord Ram and the geography of Ram Setu were discussed by eminent jurists, historians, and public intellectuals, never to be wholly resolved. The resemblance of the protagonist's employer's name with the Archaeological Survey of India (founded in 1861) is, also, not incidental. Similarly, the film's veiled allusions to the Sethusamudram Shipping Canal Project, whose construction was halted by judgements of the Supreme Court of India in judgments delivered in 2008 and 2013, also recall controversial aspects of recent Indian history. It is widely believed that the project's halting was due to religious sensitivity attached to the Sethusamudram region (the marine territory between India and Sri Lanka) across which the proposed Indo-Lankan shipping canal route was purported to lie. Between 2005 and 2007 – the time that dredging for the shipping project was still operational – Hindu religious activists, affiliated to the Hindu cultural organisation, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), raised fears that the sacred tombolo was going to be destroyed. Ram Setu/Adam's Bridge is believed by Abrahamic lore (based on Arab, Portuguese, and Dutch legends) to have been the bridge through which Adam crossed over into India from Ceylon after being cast away from Paradise.¹ Meanwhile, Hindu legends drawing from the *Yuddha Kanda* ('Book of War')

¹ It is generally held that the tombolo came to be associated with the Adamic legend with the 17th century Dutch Calvinist Minister, Philips Baldaeus, who in turn claimed that the legend dated back to the arrival of the Arabs at least as far back as the 13th or 14th centuries. Following this, Sri Pada in the central Sri Lankan highlands came to be called Adam's Peak (simultaneously venerated as the footprint

of sage Valmiki's epic *Ramayan* (c. 500-100 AD) see it as the bridge that Lord Ram's hominoid allies built to help him secure a passage to Lanka and defeat Ravana, the abductor of Ram's wife, Sita. In secular terms, the structure is understood by geologists as a stretch of 103 patchy reefs or shallow shoals connecting India and Sri Lanka.



Figure 3 - *Ram Setu* (2022) Film Poster (Presswire 18 - Creative Commons License).

Archaeology as Religious Evidence?

It is probably in accordance with the secular definition of the tombolo that the film introduces Kulshrestha as a staunch advocate of atheism and scientific empiricism. However, by the end, he turns into a believing Hindu – an ideological position that is well within the purview of his unquestionable constitutional rights. Following his spiritual and cultural conversion, as it were, his courtroom defence of the Puranic, symbolic, cultural and soteriological greatness of Ram Setu appears laudable and eloquent enough to rouse devotees and agnostics to powerful emotions. Several aspects of the film are indeed either based on documented recent and old pasts of India or on seemingly ecumenical intentions. However, its sum is greater than its parts – especially these commendable parts. In foregrounding Kulshrestha as an archaeologist-turned-nationalist, integral aspects of the tombolo are either left shrouded in mystery or made more obscure than before. Under the lens of a populist version of archaeology, and the flawed epistemology of the ‘archaeologist’s’ histrionic legal testimony, the geological provenance of the ‘bridge’ is elided over. Kulshrestha’s fervent appeals to an emotional acceptance of the historicity of Lord Ram (from the *Ramayan*) make the scene “one of the moments in the film that speaks to the public acceptance of a new role that archaeology is assuming in courtrooms in India”

of Adam, Buddha, and Lord Shiva), while the shoal bridge between India and Sri Lanka came to be referred to as Ram Setu or Adam’s Bridge (See Field, 1903, pp. 39-40; Parnavitana, 1958; Patrick, 2019, p. 47; Dunnett, 2019). Interestingly, Alberuni, the Iranian polymath who visited India in the early 11th century, spoke of the tradition of venerating the tombolo as the “bridge of Lord Ram” (See Alberuni, 1910, p. 209, 307).

(Varghese, 2023, p. 110). Archaeology is generally defined as “the scientific study of material remains (such as tools, pottery, jewellery, stone walls, and monuments) of past human life and activities” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). However, recent Indian political debates have often taken recourse to archaeology to settle matters pertaining to the pursuit of God and faith that are beyond the human realm. This new role of archaeology as an unimpeachable *scientific* discipline to settle religious matters was bolstered by late 20th- and early 21st Indian cultural movements revolving around the clarion call to determine Ayodhya as Ramjanmabhoomi (the birthplace of Lord Ram) through archaeological evidence.

Given the rise of Hindutva ideologies (i.e., political Hinduism), as Indian electoral agendas over the last four decades or so, archaeology in India is often seen as a political instrument to settle contesting ownership claims over sites, monuments, and other national assets between predominantly Hindu and Muslim antagonists. A classic and oft-cited example is that of the site of the newly constructed Ram Temple at Ayodhya. The temple site was awarded to Hindu plaintiffs by a Supreme-Court verdict in 2019. This was almost twenty-seven years after a nearly five hundred year old mosque, the Babri Masjid (named after the Mughal emperor Babur), was destroyed by mobs affiliated to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The cause for the illegal destruction of the mosque was that the mobs believed that the site of the Babri Masjid belonged to that of an ancient Ram Temple, since Ayodhya was said to be better known to Hindu devotees as Ramjanmabhoomi. In their supposed hagiography, Lord Ram was not only the sacred name of an intense soteriological and spiritual concept but indeed a historical personage. By that logic, relics of his kingdom and key places in the itinerary of his lifetime were to be considered Hindu monuments, *ab initio*. This list was, eventually, bound to include the legendary bridge said to have been built by Lord Ram’s hominoid allies, comprising Sugriv, the monkey king; Hanuman, the monkey commander; and Nala, the architect under whose watch a *setu* (causeway) connecting ancient Bharatvarsh and Lanka was constructed in five days, according to *Valmiki Ramayan*.

Confusing Epistemes

Ram Setu was disparaged by multiple influential reviewers. More surprisingly, the film also failed to recover its gross budget despite being released on a key Hindu festival that commemorates the symbolic return of Lord Ram from Lanka to Ayodhya, after his victory of the evil forces of Ravan and his golden kingdom. Be that as it may, it remains important to rethink the *locus standi* of not only the filmmakers but also their widespread critics.

The bulk of the criticism against *Ram Setu* seems to converge around the notion that the filmmakers had attempted to pander to growing Hindutva-oriented sentiments in India. More concerningly, both the filmmakers and almost all the film’s critics have continued to remain disturbingly silent on – if not ignorant of – the tombolo’s longue durée geological and cultural history. Here emerges a fascinating epistemological question, or a fallacious conundrum, depending upon one’s perspective. Is the *setu* (bridge) to be treated in a court of law as a monument of human construction (considering that Lord Ram was the human incarnation of Lord Vishnu)? Or is the tombolo meant to be seen as a natural feature that evolved in an era before or after the onset of the Anthropocene (considering that Lord Ram’s hominoid army may well have been ancient allegorical representations of the power of nonhuman elements)?

Seeing Lord Ram as a historical personage humanises his divinity, without necessarily retaining his grandiose religious stature. Accordingly, the right to religious freedom and beliefs safeguarded by the Constitution of India is affected by this stance, and studying the bridge under the lens of archaeology, then, perhaps significantly undermines the metaphysical magnitude of the religious. If Lord Ram is not seen as a historical personage, but as the invocation or the name of a divine phenomenon or anthropomorphised force, then his 'bridge' could be considered divine, and, by definition, not amenable to archaeological study. Disturbingly, enough, the film *Ram Setu* confuses the different epistemes. What may have been geological and paleontological questions to begin – given the quest to determine the history and historicity of the Ram Setu – get suddenly morphed into questions of archaeology that resemble the template of legal interrogations revolving around Ramjanmabhoomi discourses or the “hybrid episteme of archaeology-as-legal-evidence” (Varghese, 2023).

Despite *Ram Setu*'s ostensible commercial mediocrity, its discursive power and shelf-life are powerful enough to generate a populist conception of the tombolo. Within that view, it is seen not only as a human construction but also as one constructed during the *Ramayan* era – tentatively from 2 million BCE to 8,60,000 BCE – notwithstanding how incongruous such a dating sounds for an 'archaeological' feature. The visual and narratorial semiotics of *Ram Setu* establishes a nearly irreversible cognitive prototype to determine the questions one might seek to ask of a feature like Ram Setu/Adam's Bridge. Ultimately, *Ram Setu*'s choice of the courtroom – a proscenium of post-Enlightenment European rationalism – as the site of resolving communal and epistemic contentions around the tombolo signals methodological disarray and fallacious intermeshing of cognitive models. Choosing the discipline of archaeology to determine the historicity of Ram Setu/Adam's Bridge is not only insincere to the professional practice, but also the allegorical hermeneutics of the soteriological text(s) from which the legend of Ram Setu is derived. Hence, the film's emphasis on archaeology as a methodology of reconstructing the tombolo's past signals delusions of grandeur. Meanwhile, the continued absence of a voice to highlight the precolonial and colonial cultural and geological attention given to Ram Setu/Adam's Bridge is equally disingenuous. We shall return to this last point towards the end of the article.

Elisions of Aquapelagicity

A key methodological bias that archaeology tends to bring to the study of a tombolo like Ram Setu/Adam's Bridge is what is identified in island studies as a “strong terrestrial focus” (Hayward, 2015, p. 84). Ram Setu/Adam's Bridge – as I have previously argued – is an aquapelago (Chatterjee, 2021; 2024).

An aquapelago is an “assemblage of the marine and land spaces of a group of islands and their adjacent waters” (Hayward, 2012a, p. 5). The portmanteau of the Latin roots, *aqua* and *pelagicus* (or the Greek *pelagos* or *pelagikos*) underscores the implicate oceanic underpinnings of islandic spaces. Semantically reconsidered, aquapelago means something pertaining to water-(in-on)-water. Simultaneously, 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 view of the former which sees islands from outside, as geographical groups or clusters. The concept of the 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"; aquapelagos are therefore "performed entities" (Hayward, 2012a, pp. 5-6). Attached to this understanding of aquapelagos are also aspects of "micronationality" and "peninsular 'almost islandness'" that often inform the identity of aquapelagic assemblages (Hayward & Konishi, 2017, p.74). It should be acknowledged that the concept of the aquapelago has had a contested career in island social sciences. Nevertheless, scholars have also tried to expand on its ramifications in redefining it as "the interactive nature of sea and land environments in island life," challenging the "over-privileging of *land* spaces," wherein "the air above islands and sea, with its species, weather and climate are equally part of the aquapelago" (Hayfield & Nielson, 2022, p. 193; 195); where "the marine-side of integrated dynamics involving human and non-human (inter)relations in-between, throughout and with islands, their shores, seabeds, and waters" that also compel our focus (Dick, 2015, p. 2); as a metageographical concept that fosters "idea of a continuum rather than a binary between human and environment" (Bremner, 2016, p. 284; 287); and as a political concept that implicates "a critical component of dispossession" in islandic spaces that are seen by corporate powers as proprietary spatial units (Vandenberg, 2020, p. 104). As may be evident from these miscellaneous voices on aquapelagic assemblages, what inspires my identification of Ram Setu/Adam's Bridge as an aquapelago is its multifarious narrative registers that include themes ranging across the human, nonhuman, interspecies battles, fisheries and livelihood concerns, geological complexity, oceanic vagaries, and geopolitical volatility.

Seen through the critical lenses of Island Studies, it transpires that despite *Ram Setu's* ecumenical ambitions, the false dichotomies – of religion versus science, secular versus sacred, religious faith versus environmental calamity – revived in Indian public discourse obscure holistic perspectives on the aquapelago's sacredness. Its sacred attributes are constituted by the special geography of the Pamban Island, Dhanushkodi, Thalaimannar, and Mannar Island, and its entanglements with questions of Tamil fisher's livelihoods and environmental heritages of the Palk Bay and Gulf of Mannar. As this study reemphasises, it is vital to the history of Ram Setu/Adam's Bridge to be seen within an aquapelagic framework of actors, actants, and signs, rather than superimpose the affective semiotics of folklores of central, northern, or mainstream India onto this peripheral islandic terrain for the sake of narratorial, cultural, and ideological expediency.

Distortions of *Locus Standi*

Before the film's release, the producer, Vikram Malhotra, recalled the years of "multi-faceted research... spanning history, geography, and science" that went into making the film. For *Ram Setu's* director, Abhishek Sharma, the film was informed by the concern to scientifically represent the reality of an icon of Hindu beliefs. "Through their imaging," as Sharma claimed, somewhat misleadingly, "NASA [National Aeronautics and Space Administration] showed that there is a bridge that exists [but] no in-depth expedition has ever been commissioned underwater on Ram Setu" (Etimes.in, 2022). Back in 2002, and later, NASA released satellite images of Adam's Bridge that were widely circulated by Hindu rights activists as the proof of a divine bridge on the sea. This compelled NASA officials to clarify, in 2007, that they possessed no "direct information about the origin or age of a chain of islands," nor could they confirm "whether humans were involved in producing any of the patterns seen" and that "images reproduced on the [Hindu rights] websites may well be ours, but their interpretation is certainly not ours" (Kumar, 2007). Another NASA disclaimer read

that “to interpret our response as a scientifically rigorous conclusion as to the nature of the Palk Strait islands is both a misinterpretation and misreporting of our response and is inappropriate considering the limitations of our data” (Kumar, 2007). Given these disclaimers, the filmmakers’ assertions on the scientificity of the theory of a manmade/divine bridge were evidently inaccurate.

As Sharma added:

To me Ram Setu, the film, is a convergence of science, history, geography, and the Ramayan. In the film, we have shown – in a way that it appeals to the audience – how carbon dating is done on rocks and fossils under the sea. (Etimes.in, 2022).

As the director’s own admission reveals, his vision was to represent complex scientific acts like carbon dating and complex objects of study like submarine rocks and fossils. Therefore, the choice of the profession of archaeology for the chief protagonist, Kulshrestha, was a bending of scientific and disciplinary boundaries in a field that might have been more amenable to geology, palaeontology, microbiology and zoology. *Ram Setu*’s privileging of archaeology presents the prehistoric object of its study as a scientifically knowable form, readily comprehensible to human senses. A film that otherwise traces the 180-degree transformation of an atheist archaeologist turned believer imposes eternal unchangeableness and immovableness on the submarine ‘bridge’ that it seeks to historicise. The scholarly aura attached to the film persona of an archaeologist as the objective and nonaligned soothsayer is projected as the dominant template to conceive and train future archaeologists. Ironically, archaeology might not just be political, but also lacking in adequate *locus standi* to make scientised pronouncements on the geological foundations of Ram Setu/Adam’s Bridge, despite its hallowed affiliation to the Archaeological Survey of India.

Gazing on the Periphery

The questionable *locus standi* of a discipline that evades the geological, littoral, and environmental facets of Ram Setu/Adam’s Bridge contravenes the tombolo’s aquapelagic essence. Its aquapelagic nature – manifest in its fluidity, precarity, liminality, and amorphous nature – is shaped by exigencies of environmental instability, where disruption and flux constitute the praxis of human and nonhuman experiences, and of humans experiencing the nonhuman. This is acutely reflected in the lives of Pamban island’s fisherfolk, the drowned and sinking islands of the Sethusamudram region, and the 4,000 species that constitute the ecosystem of the Gulf of Mannar and the Palk Bay, many of which, like *Dugong dugon*, are on the verge of extinction. An uncanny example of the influence of climatic quirks and the ephemeral topography of the tombolo on the lives of Tamil fishers can be seen in Ramakrishnapuram, near Rameswaram. Seasonal shifts cause water currents to sway the sandbars of the tombolo southwards, in turn leading pelagic fishes – otherwise likely to get trapped in beach seines – to circumnavigate Ram Setu/Adam’s Bridge to another village, whose villagers intercept them before they can reach Ramakrishnapuram. Such aspects of the region’s aquapelagic nature are suppressed by grand narratives like the one that *Ram Setu* seeks to propel. Aligned to this is another kind of history, that of the suppressed tale of endangered fishermen who protested against the Sethusamudram Shipping Canal Project. When the project was eventually halted, religious activism became the canonically accepted reason for its termination, while the fishermen’s protests that erupted in Tamil

Nadu's island communities in 2007 were relegated as marginal and largely undocumented cogs in the historical wheel.

Accordingly, *Ram Setu* casts a condescending gaze (that of investigators from a central Indian governmental organisation) on a peripheral islandic territory that is unproblematically coopted into a mainstream Indian cultural milieu. Questions of Tamil fishers' precarious livelihoods due to capitalist incursions into their aquapelagic territories, ethnic tensions between Indian and Lankan Tamils and Lankan Tamils and Buddhists, and unsustainable dredging in the Sethusamudram region, are deemed as abject themes. Worse still, even critical appraisals of the film's flawed 'archaeology' marginalised the tombolo's aquapelagicity. This begs scrutiny of the critical gaze the film attracted, and how much the critics themselves knew about *Ram Setu/Adam's Bridge*.

Hasty "Homecoming"

At the stroke of its release, critics began framing *Ram Setu* as a reprisal of "films like *Raiders of the Lost Ark*," marrying the realms of "fiction, myth, history, and religion, with adventure" (Chopra, 2022). Aryan Kulshrestha, the atheistic hero – born in a Hindu family of privileged caste and trained as an archaeologist who listened to science and reason over religion and superstition – soon earned tags of India's "budget Indiana Jones" (Desai, 2022) or "Amar Chitra Katha-cum-Indiana Jones" (Gupta, 2022).²

Viewers had great expectations from *Ram Setu*, which was anticipated to be "a throwback to the Hollywood capers from a generation ago, when Harrison Ford or Nicholas Cage would go on a globetrotting adventure to uncover an ancient archaeological secret" (Mathur, 2022). Very few reviewers found something worthwhile to laud in the film besides the resemblance it had with the *National Treasure* genre of films. Among the rare acclaims that the film received was that it was "uncompromisingly Hindu" and could "be considered as the first serious good adventure movie made for young generation – kids and early teenagers" (Neelakandan, 2022). This was not very flattering considering that the filmmaker intended to convey historical truths, built on a budget of INR 1,500 million, to a highly diverse society of 1.4 billion people, whose average age hovered around 30.

Ram Setu's release immediately attracted critics to deconstruct its hero's name. 'Aryan' refers to a superior race of people believed to have brought Hinduism to India, and 'Kulshrestha' is an upper-caste Hindu surname, the word literally meaning "the best of the clan" or "the one with great powers" (Sharma, 2022). Kulshrestha is introduced to us during an archaeological excavation in Afghanistan at a site resembling that of the Bamiyan Buddhas. The excavation of a fictitious reclining Buddha ends in a gunfight between Afghani security forces and Taliban agents, before Kulshrestha and a Pakistani archaeologist return

² Directed by Steven Spielberg, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) features Harrison Ford in the role of the fictional celebrity archaeologist, Indiana Jones (partly modeled on the German medievalist, Otto Rahn), who is out to discover the Ark of the Covenant in Egypt before the Nazis can lay their hands on it. Amar Chitra Katha, founded in 1967, is an Indian comic book publisher and series operating out of Mumbai, and is famous for its comics based on Indian epics, religious legends, folklore, historical biographies, and cultural trivia. Besides the obvious trope of the archaeologist, and labyrinthine subterranean passages, what immediately drew parallels between Indiana Jones and Aryan Kulshrestha was the stereotypical torch borne by both characters, as a symbol of illuminating dark corners of the world (See Figure 3, right). Also see Purandare (2021).

the precious find to Afghanistan. Seen as an ideal trope for *ghar wapsi* (homecoming) (Pal 2022) – the unofficial name for the recent Indian movement geared to reconvert people back to Hinduism and Hindu cultural ways – Kulshrestha’s journey begins as a defendant of the theory that Ram Setu is a natural tombolo. Soon, that journey becomes a “conversion narrative, one in which Kumar’s character’s own conversion plays a key role” (Gehlawat, 2024, p. 107). Upon his return to India, Kulshrestha is awarded a promotion and becomes the director of the Archaeological Society of India (although that is something that would be nearly impossible in an Indian governmental organisation). Kulshrestha and his family are harassed by religious activists because of his scientific theories. This leads him to become stauncher in his quest to prove his theory. He aligns with Indrakant, a business magnate and proprietor of Pushpak Shipping, the company that plans to build a canal between India and Sri Lanka, which would involve demolishing the tombolo.

By the middle of the film, Kulshrestha discovers a large 7,000-year-old pumice stone, supposedly a relic of the ‘bridge’ built by Lord Ram’s army as endorsed by the film’s ideology (See Figure 3; left). Rather inexplicably, this otherwise shiny exhibit is taken to correlate with the ancient *Ramayan*-era. It leads Kulshrestha to radically alter his hypothesis to accommodate mainstream Hindu religious faith supporting the notion that Ram Setu/Adam’s Bridge is a man-made or artificial construction. Kulshrestha is accompanied by the environmentalist, Dr. Sandra Rebello (played by Jacqueline Fernandez), and AP (played by Satyadev Kancharana), a Sri Lankan tour guide, who is later revealed as an embodiment of Lord Hanuman. The trinity of characters loosely represents Lord Ram’s bonds with his wife, Sita, and his brother, Lakshman, and his trusted monkey commander and devotee, Hanuman. This modern allegory, reprising parts *Valmiki Ramayan*, was not necessarily a problem for most critics. In fact, it was even acknowledged that “*Ram Setu* has a brilliant story at hand – where does science end and faith begin? Can literature, just because it has years on its side, be declared history?” (Mukherjee, 2022). The problem, however, seemed to be that the film answered all these questions in the affirmative, rather hastily.

IMAX-Hindutva

The impulsive reaffirmation seemed to be dramatised at a time when India’s political elite was exploiting Hindutva agendas. Many critics immediately felt the film to be “a Hindutva project pretending to be scientific” (Vetticad, 2023), behaving as a “propaganda machine for the political and ruling elite” to promote the latter’s “bombastic ideological argument” (Sharma, 2022) and the visual aesthetics of “IMAX-Hindutva” (Gehlawat, 2024, p. 108). In the film’s standout scene, when Kulshrestha goes underwater in the Adam’s Bridge region and emerges from the ocean, he seemingly walks on water (Figure 1, left), carrying a large stone, accompanied by the chanting of the slogan “Ram, Ram, Ram, Ram” on the soundtrack. Meant as the resurrection of the relics of the bridge built by Lord Ram’s army, this scene emblematises what was seen by critics as the “immersive IMAX experience” typified by a “blue hued hyper-realism aimed at generating ‘an illusion of material presence,’” an “aura or ‘fauxra’” of “visual wonderment” meant to “immerse the viewer in a Hindutva-ised seascape” and its “attendant myths” (Gehlawat, 2024, p. 109). In this pivotal scene, the film’s politics of interpreting *Valmiki Ramayan* and the tombolo’s possible origins are rendered vulnerable to being compared with recent archaeological excavations and geological explorations at another historic Indian religious site, Dwarka.



Figure 4 - Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi performs meditation underwater, in the region believed to be the site of the ancient city of Dwarka, while he is accompanied by professional divers. (Prime Minister Narendra Modi's official X-handle.)

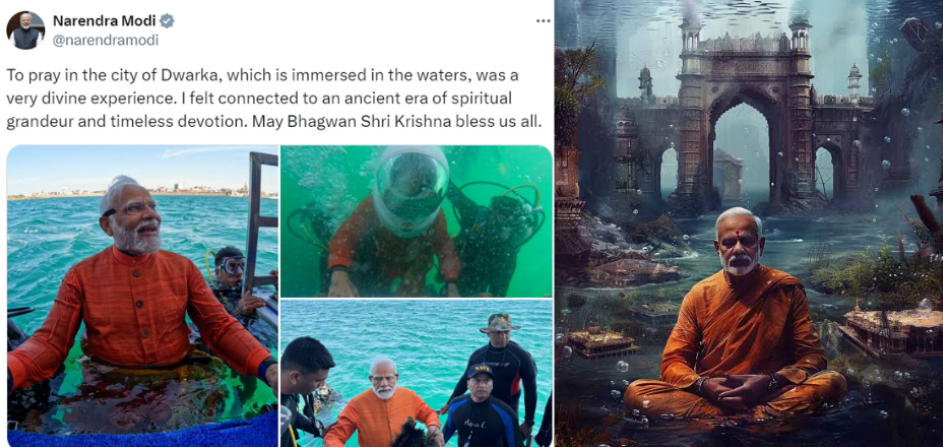


Figure 5 - Left: Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visits the ancient city of Dwarka. Courtesy: Prime Minister Narendra Modi's official X-handle. Right: Prime Minister Modi is represented as performing meditation underwater without an exosuit, in a region depicting the drowned city of Dwarka. (*Satyaagrah*).³

Believed to be a ruined civilisation, that sank about 5,000 years ago, Dwarka is recognised in the Hindu pantheon as the kingdom of Lord Krishna, another avatar of Lord Vishnu. In February 2024, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi – affiliated to the BJP – was seen to undertake an underwater journey to the site considered as the drowned city of Dwarka. The

³ <https://mail.satyaagrah.com/india/india-news/3709-sudarshan>

Prime Minister's submarine itinerary revolved around his inauguration of the Sudarshan Setu, India's longest cable-stayed bridge (2,320 metres), connecting the Beyt Dwarka island and Okha, in Gujarat.

Prime Minister Modi's announcement on his X-handle spoke of timeless devotion and the simultaneous unfolding of history (See Figures 4 & 5, left). Pictures shared by the Indian media from the Prime Minister's X-handle and later modified, with the help of artificial intelligence, projected him as a yogi performing meditation underwater (See Figure 5, right). Prime Minister Modi's underwater visit to submerged Dwarka may appear incidental to the history of Ram Setu/Adam's Bridge but is certainly not incidental to the interpretation of the film *Ram Setu* and its endorsement of IMAX-Hindutva.



Figure 6 - Aryan Kulshrestha (played by Akshay Kumar) diving into the Indian Ocean in the Adam's Bridge region, in an exosuit. *Ram Setu* (2022) (screenshot from the film).

The Prime Minister's visit to Dwarka came about a year and a half after the release of *Ram Setu*. As such, the former can be said to be an example of life imitating art. This correlation might seem tenuous, on the surface. But, as Indian viewers might instantly recognise, Prime Minister Modi and Akshay Kumar have had a well-known public relationship. Before the 2019 general Indian elections, Prime Minister Modi agreed to be interviewed by Akshay Kumar. It became a famous light-hearted apolitical interview, as questions ranged from the Prime Minister's preferred method of eating mangoes to the ideal number of times food should be chewed for proper digestion. Given this extratextual backdrop, narrative and interpretative parallels between Kulshrestha's underwater exploratory dive near Ram Setu/Adam's Bridge (see Figure 6) and Prime Minister Modi's underwater pilgrimage at Dwarka are bound to arise. Both Kulshrestha and Prime Minister Modi represent the conflation of political Hinduism with technocratic and scientific Hinduism; both represent the expansion of India's political and cultural frontiers to beyond its territorial borders into littoral peripheries; and both represent the extension of the temporal frontiers of Indian civilisational glory back to prehistoric times. The choice of aquapelagic terrains for their exploratory ventures is also not incidental but very much a part of India's current push towards encouraging strategic ties with small islands, and islands in general, of the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia.

WhatsApp University-Wisdom

The major problem in these representations of India's marine territories, and specifically Ram Setu/Adam's Bridge, are not Hindu cultural themes but their lack of sophistry and complexity. Critics pointed out that the film singularly failed to underscore "India's cultural hegemony, history and religious heritage" by getting carried away by its foregone, though badly plotted, conclusions (Angadi, 2022). For millions of viewers in India, "the idea of diving deep to unearth the reality of Ram Setu – the bridge that Lord Ram built with the help of his *vanar sena*, to fight Ravan, the demon-king of Lanka, and bring back his abducted wife Sita – is an engrossing story" to witness on the big screen (Kotwani, 2022). The filmmakers failed to realise the tale's truest contemporary potential. While *Ramayan*, the "ancient epic is one of the greatest adventures ever told, with thrilling characters, breathtaking set-pieces and intricate moral standoffs," it was suggested that the filmmakers "while riding the wave of Hindu revivalism in mainstream Hindi cinema" failed to "even deliver a smidgen of that experience" (Mitra, 2022). The film was written off like a vessel drowned in "the famous Pamban waters" (Thaivallapil, 2022).

The criticism was not simply owing to the predictable religio-political conclusion that the film offered, but the rapidity with which it did so. Though *Ram Setu* occasionally cited "books and other sources of knowledge," it ended up postulating "a convenient conclusion about the *Ramayan*, Lord Ram and *Ram Setu* that smacks of WhatsApp university-level wisdom" which could have conveyed in "a detailed WhatsApp message from the makers" (Chatterjee, 2022). This is evident, *inter alia*, in a sequence where Kulshrestha is seen reading Henry Parker's book, *Ancient Ceylon* (1849), republished as *Ancient Sri Lanka* (Figure 7). To any unsuspecting viewer, it might come across as most natural for the modern Indian archaeologist to study a treatise from colonial South Asia, especially to convey the flavour of going back in time. Ironically, however, Parker's book does not even discuss Adam's Bridge or Ram Setu or even *Ramayan*. Like Kulshrestha's deep dive into the Indian Ocean, the scene of him reading Parker's book is an empty signifier, as neither reveal any special reliable information, while both signal the Indian public discourse's fascination with the underwater discoveries and fragmentary historical forays.

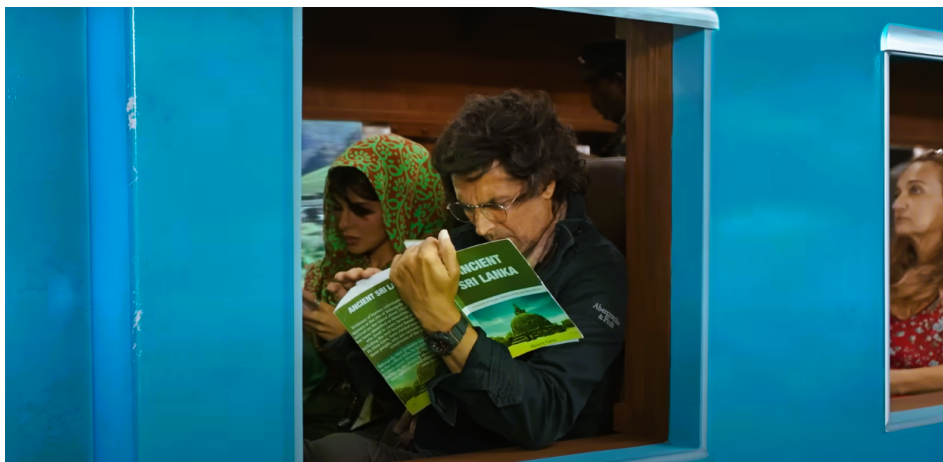


Figure 7 - Aryan Kulshrestha (played by Akshay Kumar) reading *Ancient Sri Lanka* by Henry Parker. *Ram Setu* (2022) (screenshot from the film).

Besides the flaws in narrative devices and tropes, another key factor behind the criticism levelled against the film was that there was “no credible progression in the script from the Aryan [Kulshrestha] who initially decried religion to the Aryan who later casually blurs the distinction between mythology, literature and history, to make arguments that are nothing but a slightly polished, insidious version of the propaganda floating around on WhatsApp and Twitter these days” (Vetticad, 2023). Reprimanding the film’s populist aspirations, reviews that termed *Ram Setu* “a lopsided argument on mythology versus history” also added that “Lord Ram doesn’t need a salesman or films acting as Instagram influencers for him” (Vyavahare, 2022).

Ultimately, what was perhaps most disconcerting from a pedagogical standpoint, was that the history of Ram Setu/Adam’s Bridge was once again embroiled with the history of the Ramjanmabhoomi. The film made it possible for critics to latch on to the fact that Kulshrestha “is deeply disturbed by the burning of the Jaffna Public Library in 1981, along with the blowing up of the Bamiyan Buddhas”; however, “about the destruction of another monument in India in 1992 [the Babri Masjid], Aryan, and this film, have nothing to say” (Ramnath, 2022).

As the subsequent parts of this article will contend, Ram Setu’s history and historiography can indeed be substantively told, without being subjugated to the semiotics of Ayodhya’s Ram Temple. This can be achieved by the aquapelagic matrices of Ram Setu/Adam’s Bridge. As the following reflection on the colonial history of Ram Setu/Adam’s Bridge indicates, the *Valmiki Ramayan’s* episode of the building of the Ram Setu is not to be seen, merely, as scriptural dogma meant to be believed unquestioningly but, simultaneously, as an allegory of the Anthropocene. Furthermore, it adds a new dimension to aquapelagicity, that of remembered, dismembered, and disremembered histories. While the film *Ram Setu* sets up a dialectic between colonised and nationalistic lenses of viewing Indian heritage, historical evidence suggests that successive colonial regimes in India were instrumental in shaping Hindu nationalistic and anthropomorphic views of Ram Setu/Adam’s Bridge. The following section might appear like a detour, but its relevance will become clearer in the following section.

Anthropomorphising Geology

The English-speaking world came to know Ram Setu as Adam’s Bridge largely through James Rennell, the first Surveyor General of Bengal, and his *Map of Hindoostan* (1782) and *Memoir of a Map of Hindoostan* (1783).

Europeanising Ram Setu

Rennell named the tombolo ‘Adam’s Bridge’ following Dutch maps, including Johan Nieuhof’s *Map of Southern India* (1682); Philip Baldaeus and Adrian Reland’s early 18th century *Map of Ceylon*; François Valentyn’s *Map of Southern India* (1724-26); Homann Heirs’ German *Map of India* (1733); Guillaume de L’Isle’s French map, *Carte des Côtes de Malabar et de Coromandel* (1745) and Giovanni Maria Cassini’s Italian *Map of India* (1797). Meanwhile, Pieter van der Aa’s Dutch map, *L’Inde de ca Le Gange Suivant les Nouvelles Observations* (1700), and the British maps, Emanuel Bowen’s *Map of India* (circa 1747), *A New and Accurate Map of Coromandel, Malabar, Bengal, & c.*, and Thomas Kitchin’s map of India in Andrew Dury’s *A New General and Universal Atlas* (1761), stayed poignantly silent on the naming of

the shallow straits, although each of them recognised the island of Rameswaram or Ramancoil.

Between Baldaeus and Rennell, several English registers, seemed to lay equal credence on Abrahamic and Hindu lores associated with the tombolo. These included Herman Moll's *Atlas Geographus* (1712), the Scottish East India Company captain Alexander Hamilton's *A New Account of the East Indies* (1727), John Lockman's *Travels of the Jesuits* (1743), and John Dunn's English translation of Claude-Francois Lambert's *A Collection of Curious Observations* (1749-50). Some exceptional ones like Scottish cartographer John Hamilton Moore's *A New and Complete Collection of Voyages and Travels* (1778) made exaggerated claims like believers in the Ram Setu legends being "gross idolaters" and denizens of a "savage nation" with "numerous" temples and backward homes (673). Examples like Andrew Brice's *A Universal Geographical Dictionary* (1759) also criticised the lores of "ignorant Natives [Ceylonese under Luso-Portuguese influence] that Adam was here created and buried" at Adam's Peak—a belief dating back to, at least, Baldaeus (304). There was another strand of commentaries on Ram Setu/Adam's Bridge that saw the structure purely in utilitarian and navigational terms. These included Captain Cope's *A New History of the East Indies* (1754), the English translation of French cartographer Jean Baptiste Bourguignon D'Anville's *A Geographical Illustration of the Map of India* (1759), William MacKay's *Dictionary of Religious Ceremonies* (1787), the Scottish covenanter William Guthrie's *An Improved System of Modern Geography* (1789), Jedidiah Morse's *The American Universal Geography* (1793) and John Malham's *The Naval Gazetteer* (1795).

Orientalist Interventions

Charles Wilkins' phenomenal discovery of an inscription at Monghyr led to his piece, 'A Royal Grant of Land: Engraved on a copper plate bearing the date Twenty-Three Years before Christ' (1781), that claimed that the belief that Ram Setu was constructed by friends of "Raam [Lord Ram] in his wars with Raabon [Ravan]" (260) was prevalent much before the Christian Era. Wilkins' fellow Orientalist, Thomas Maurice, in his *Indian Antiquities* (1793, p. 131) asserted that "sir Will. Jones contends, [Adam's Bridge] should be entitled Rama's bridge." Jones himself, the principal Orientalist voice of this time, held that Ram Setu, "which the Muselmans or the Portuguese have given the foolish name of Adam's (should be called Rama's) bridge" (1792, p. 324; parenthesis in the original). Thus, in *The History of Hindostan* (1798), Maurice calmly proclaimed that "innumerable battalions of apes, or mountaineers, ha[d] constructed a bridge of rocks one hundred leagues in length," and the "miraculous bridge" was then navigated by Lord Ram "at the head of no less formidable a body than 360,000 apes, commanded by eighteen kings, each having under him 20,000" (1798, pp. 241-242). Orientalism endowed a new lifelike character on Ram Setu/Adam's Bridge that was manifest in subsequent British perceptions. Examples include Reverend John Robinson's *Modern History, for the Use of Schools* (1807), Maria Graham's *Letters on India* (1814), William Ward's *History, Literature, and Religion of the Hindoos* (1817) and Robert W. Pogson's *A History of the Boondelas* (1828), which made the *Ramayan* legacy as the ur-text for understanding the tombolo.

Surveying in the Sethusamudram

After the Dutch East India Company's trade in southern India and Ceylon ended, in 1824, the British East India Company sought to revisit Rennell's unfulfilled dream, that of finding a navigable marine passage between India and Ceylon. The Ceylonese administration surveyed the straits throughout the 1820s, in expeditions by Sir Arthur Cotton of the Madras

Engineers, Captain Dawson of the Royal Engineers, and Captain James Steuart, a master attendant at Colombo. Their findings culminated in an account by the Inspector General of Madras Engineers, Major Sim entitled the *Report on the Straits which separate the Ramnad province in the peninsula of India from the Island of Ceylon* (1829). The report cautioned that although dredgers could “obtain anywhere through the straits a channel sufficiently deep for all classes of ships ... the practicability of opening such a channel, and of keeping it open, is very doubtful” (Sim, 1834, p. 9). Sim reiterated Dawson’s view that “any opening through Adam’s Bridge” would be swiftly sealed “or rather brought back to its present state, by the storms which usually prevail at the commencement of the monsoons” (Campbell, 1843, p. 87).

A few decades later, Commander A.D. Taylor of the Indian Marine testified before a Select Committee at the House of Commons, on May 22, 1862. He noted that the Sethusamudram region was particularly vulnerable to “fearful” cyclones and hurricanes, which could easily “overturn the prospects of canalizing” (*Report from the Select Committee* 31). Sim’s and Taylor’s reports were reprised in June 1873 issues of *The London and China Telegraph*, in addition to reports by Major Townsend (1861) and Messrs. Stoddart and Robertson (1872), that confirmed that dredging in the Sethusamudram Sea was doomed *ab initio*. Although the administrations of Madras and Ceylon were anxious to start shipping activity on the Pamban Channel, to “save 700 miles of distance” and reap “handsomely from the first month” (“The Paumben Channel,” June 9, p. 376), every known contemporary survey advised against Ram Setu/Adam’s Bridge as a dredging site. Even later surveys like the South Indian Railway Company’s survey of the Palk Strait (1902) and Madras Government Harbour Engineer Robert Bristow’s survey (1921-22) suggested dredging around Rameswaram island, instead of Ram Setu/Adam’s Bridge (Natarajan, 1967, p. 1).

Ramayan in the Anthropocene

Very little of the Anglophonic reading sphere was perhaps unexposed to the legend of the Ram Setu by the end of the 19th century. In 1880, American journalist Thomas Wallace Knox retold the narrative of Lord Hanuman building the fabled bridge from “ten mountains, each measuring sixty-four miles in circumference,” as among the “miracles in Hindoo mythology” (1881, pp. 56-57), just a year before the American *Library of Universal Knowledge* recalled the fable of Ramasetu (1880, p. 127). Previously, the English civil servant Robert Needham Cust had styled Lord Ram as the Indian “Hercules,” probably based on views of the Italian Indologist, Gaspare Gorresio, who, back in 1854, had termed the island of “Ramesurum” as “the pillar of Rama, of as great repute and renown as the pillars of the Western Hercules” (Cust, 1880, p. 100; Gorresio, 1854, p. 209-210). The phrase “Ram Setu” was popularised in cartography, as well, with French geographer Elisée Reclus’ (1876-94) maps terming the tombolo as the “Bridge of Rama” in *The Earth, a Descriptive History of the Phenomena of the Life of the Globe* (1886) and *The Universal Geography: Earth and its Inhabitants* (1876-1894). Popular British and American authors propagated awareness on how the expenditure on dredging Ram Setu/Adam’s Bridge “will be so great, that great as would be the convenience to commerce, it will not be done for some time” (Pratt, 1892, p. 130). It also became usual for surveyors and geologists, since the late 19th century, to acknowledge “the theory that Paumben Passage was once blocked by an artificial causeway, over which millions of pilgrims came to visit the sacred Rameseram” (Cave, 1905, p. 429). Colonial geologists began redefining the tombolo as a “former land connection” between India and Ceylon that “appeared indubitably to be the remains of a formerly elevated limestone flat, which has been more or less cut down by the sea to the low-tide level” (Sedgwick, Kerr, Judd, et al., pp.

400-401). Even the discipline of zoology threw its hat in, with the Madras Government biologist James Hornell claiming, in 1916, “that the geological phase existing in the Gulf of Mannar and Palk Bay region antecedent to the present condition was that of a land barrier stretching continuously from India to Ceylon in the region now known as Adam’s Bridge” (Hornell, 1916, p. 120). Submarine stretches of Rameswaram, Ram Setu/Adam’s Bridge, and Ceylon were, thus, believed to have emerged from a continuous aquapelago of chank beds.

This epistemic shift from Ram Setu/Adam’s Bridge being seen as an obstacle to Indo-Ceylonese navigation to an ancient South Asian geological heritage overlays a diversity of intellectual thought that revolved around perspectives of this enchanted structure even in the heyday of the British colonial regime. Far from undermining Hindu cultural folklore, it only sought to enrich it with multiple cross-scientific explanations and discourses. The discursive career of Ram Setu/Adam’s Bridge reinforced Wheeler’s theory, from the *History of India* (1867), that sage Valmiki’s vision of the bridge to Lanka was a metaphorical “idea of a bridge from a contemplation of the physical geography of the locality” (p. 358). In Charlotte Speir’s words, the “vestiges of Rama’s bridge” (1867, p. 117) were the witnesses to antiquity’s heroic bridge builders. The *Ramayan* legacy inspired the British administration’s quest to join mainland India with the Pamban Island through a 2,065 metre cantilever bridge. During its inauguration, in 1914, the governors of Madras and Ceylon, and the Managing Director of the South Indian Railway Company recounted the “mythological fact” of “the [original] bridge miraculously built by Hanuman” (“Opening of Indo-Ceylon Railway” 1914; “The Indo-Ceylon Railway” 1914), while the railway company celebrated the Pamban Bridge as a recapitulation of “the building of the Ram Setu” (Chatterjee, 2017, p. 112). The *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* dialled the clock of the proposed Indo-Ceylon railway line back to “mythological times,” recognising Lord Ram’s monkey army “with having constructed [the ‘bridge’] thousands of years ago” (“Railway Connection Between India and Ceylon,” p. 525). This proved to be a curious case of the colonial reimagination of Ram Setu, when the prehistoric agents of the *Ramayan* legacy ceased to be seen as aquapelagic agents. Subsequently, the aquapelagicity was refashioned as human or anthropomorphised agencies, leading to the epistemic confusion that tends to see geological events in human history as being amenable to archaeological studies.

Monument or Aquapelago?

In 1964, fifty years after the inauguration of the Pamban Bridge, and seventeen years after India’s independence, a devastating cyclone hit Dhanushkodi and the Pamban Bridge, destroying both. The Dhanushkodi became a ghost town, forever. However, the bridge was restored and rebuilt by the independent Indian administration. Even at the time of the writing of this article, the bridge is undergoing renovation, and remodelling works, that promise to catapult India into the 21st century’s global modernity.

Obviously, the Pamban Bridge and the tombolo’s colonial history do not constitute themes of the film *Ram Setu*. However, they vociferously inform the film’s silences and elisions. The colonial period in the history of Ram Setu/Adam’s Bridge signals, at least, three substantive developments. First was the proliferation of cartography, especially in the 17th and 18th centuries, which tended to Europeanise and, therefore, Abrahamise, Ram Setu/Adam’s Bridge in the Western consciousness. This led to a utilitarian view of the tombolo that saw it as an obstruction to Indo-Ceylonese navigation. Meanwhile, a parallel episteme of viewing Ram Setu/Adam’s Bridge as a sacred Hindu structure and a continuous land-route between India and Ceylon was also promoted, especially by the Orientalists. This view became

sharper as colonial surveys revealed the imperviousness of Ram Setu/Adam's Bridge to plans of dredging and canalisation. Finally, by the end of the 19th century, and in the early 20th century, the colonial dream of a sea passage between India and Ceylon was remodelled as an overland railway bridge between mainland India and Rameswaram Island, which could have been extended to Ceylon had the First World War not intervened. In the events leading up to the bridge's construction, and especially during its inauguration, the colonial administration paid rich tributes to the very cultural and religious legacies that the administration and its cartographers were previously consciously or inadvertently opposed to.

It would be churlish to see the colonial administration's laudatory stance towards the *Ramayan* legacy as a sign of pure benevolence or validation of Hindu legends. Rather, it was a case of hijacking the semiotics of the geological and aquapelagic in the interest of an anthropomorphic iconography. It refashioned the agency of the geological and aquapelagic to superimpose their powers on the colonial regime, which, retrospectively, claimed to have reprised the feats of an ancient Hindu demigod. Whether or not the colonial regime marked the birth of the present geological age, it certainly claimed for itself the power of geology that has come to belong to humans in the age of the Anthropocene. *Ram Setu's* Kulshrestha refashions the problematic semiotics of the Pamban Bridge as that of Ram Setu/Adam's Bridge in attempting to situate the latter as a monument of human construction.

Left to itself, the tombolo transcends the formal confines of a 'bridge' – in the utilitarian, transactional, transportational, and militarist senses – as it is organically intertwined with the ecosystem of the Sethusamudram region, the Palk Bay, and the Gulf of Mannar. Even if it is admitted that the structure was engineered in prehistoric times – by a semi-human army for the benefit of a semi-divine emperor – that does not discount the fact that the tombolo has become a permanent feature in the lives and experiences of the region's fisherfolks, nonhuman species, and the coralline stretches that form the underbelly of the fragile islands of the ecosystem. This multidimensional sacred aquapelagicity is obscured and silenced in modern day conceptions of the structure as a monument of the order that an 'archaeologist' like Kulshrestha may seek to explore and discursivise in religious and nationalist terms.

Moreover, the diverse and multidirectional matrix of discourses – cartographical, theological, geological, hydrological, zoological, paleontological and architectural – that informed the British imperial regime's intellectual history of Ram Setu/Adam's Bridge obfuscate boundaries between colonial time and the kind of decolonial praxes that the film *Ram Setu* purports to uphold. The latter presents itself and its protagonist as key arbiters of knowledge production and dissemination on India's enchanted "bridge" of antiquity, with the convenient assumption that the Sethusamudram Shipping Canal Project could be halted only if it is proved that Ram Setu is not a natural formation but man-made with divine underpinnings. This assumption ignores the fact that more than century of colonial surveys in the Sethusamudram region revealed the sheer unsuitability of dredging in the Palk Strait on geological and environmental grounds. The film's perception of Ram Setu/Adam's Bridge is monolithic, while, evidently, different cultures, religions, and various species have interacted with it at different times. Therefore, the fact that *Ram Setu* makes the tombolo the subject of only one kind of (dis)possession – that is Hindu religious (dis)possession – is reductive and ambiguous. This article's recourse to aquapelagicity as a more helpful register redefines the sacred in terms of the environmental, geological, and interspecies, rather than foregrounding religions of the Anthropocene and anthropocentric ambitions.

Nevertheless, the responsibility of *Ram Setu*'s adverse elisions cannot be shouldered by the film alone but ought to be shared by several of its critics who dismissed it as a project desperate for Hindu attention. Where *Ram Setu* failed to factor in the aquapelagicity of the islandic space, its critics were not far behind in ignoring or discrediting the possibility of a natural primitive land connection between India and Sri Lanka, which may well have been rebuilt with human agency over the centuries as a rudimentary causeway. Both the film and its critics based their conceptions of the sacred – whether to establish it or dispute it – on anthropocentric grounds, egregiously blind to the fact that sacredness is not a monopoly of humans but extends well into the domains of the nonhuman, the biotic, and the abiotic.



Figure 8 - Painting at Wat Phra Kaew or the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, Bangkok, depicting characters or scenes from *Ramakien*, possibly Hanuman (or Nala) whose back is shown in the form of a living animistic conduit. (Photograph by Iudexvivorum - Creative Commons License.)

One might argue that this article has taken an approach far too idealistic that is not to be expected from a Bollywood film. Naturally, one does not walk into a theatre playing a multi-starrer Hindi motion picture, expecting to see an immaculately researched documentary, featuring some avatar of David Attenborough handholding us past the minutiae of the evolution of nullipores, micro-algae and coralline accretions. Such accretions, however, do make up the Sethusamudram region's ecosystem and aquapelago. If not *Ram Setu*'s execution, at least its lack of commercial and critical success might better alert us towards the tombolo's aquapelagicity. We might also be wiser to look into Thailand's hagiography revolving around the *Ramakien* – the Thai version of *Valmiki Ramayan*, that also drew heavily from the *Vishnu Puran*, *Hanuman Nataka* and Buddhist influences. Rewritten after the Burmese siege, under the guidance of King Rama I, the first monarch of Siam's Chakri dynasty of Siam, *Ramakien*'s epilogue highlights the dangers of delusion and the ubiquity of impermanence. Accordingly, mural paintings at Wat Phra Kaew or Bangkok's Temple of the Emerald Buddha illustrating scenes of Lord Ram's army crossing the Sethusamudram Sea

feature not a bridge of human construction but the back of Lord Hanuman (or Nala) or some nonhuman hominoid agent that doubles up as “a living animistic conduit” (Chatterjee, 2024, p. 183) for the forces of civilisation (Figure 8). This spirit of animistic aquapelagicity – of affective relations and *bridges* between the human, nonhuman, and the planetary – gets censored in the delusions of archaeological grandeur that underwrite films like *Ram Setu* or the nationalistic rhetoric surrounding Indian maritime frontiers, in general. Redefining Ram Setu/Adam’s Bridge as an aquapelago gives us a new aphorism: *Human vision should run deeper than religion, Or what are the oceans for!*

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