India's Congress Party buckles to Hindu Supremacists' communal campaign over Ram Sethu

Arun Kumar, Kranti Kumara
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The recent furor over the project to dig a shipping-canal in the narrow straits that separate India from Sri Lanka sheds much light on why and how the crisis-ridden Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is able to remain India's second largest political party, whilst promoting a reactionary socio-economic agenda and noxious Hindu supremacist ideology rejected by the vast majority of Indians.

As it has done on numerous previous occasions, the Congress Party, the dominant partner in India's United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, adapted to and conciliated with an obscurantist and communalist BJP campaign. So did the courts. And the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI (M)], the leader of the Left Front parliamentary bloc that provides the UPA with the parliamentary votes need to remain in office, gave its stamp of approval to the Congress' pandering to the Hindu right.

The Sethusamudram (literally ocean-bridge) project will shorten the travel distance for ships crossing from the western waters of the Indian Ocean to the eastern waters of the Bay of Bengal, by eliminating the need for vessels to go round the southern tip of the island of Sri Lanka.

The project envisages building a canal by dredging the shallow and narrow sea waters between southern India and northern Sri Lanka. Hailed by its promoters as India's Suez Canal, the Sethusamudram project was begun in 2005 and is scheduled to be completed in 2008.

While the UPA government has promoted the canal claiming it will bring large commercial benefits, there can be no doubt that the project also has a military motivation. The canal would give the Indian Navy the ability to deploy rapidly from one coast to the other and to effectively control these waters as choke points against any potential rival.

The project has caused widespread public alarm as it is certain to cause severe short- and long-term environmental damage. It is also will destroy the livelihood of impoverished fishing communities living along the Indian and Sri Lankan coasts. There are reports that the Indian navy has drawn up secret plans for a nuclear submarine base in these waters, which would add the danger of nuclear accident or the leakage of nuclear waste. The project is also believed to increase the potential for tsunami storms.

Over the past couple of months the BJP and its Hindu-fundamentalist allies have mounted a transparently opportunistic communal campaign against the Sethusamudram project. Although the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition government itself approved the project in 2002, it now condemns it, claiming that the dredging work will destroy "Ram Sethu" (God Rama's Bridge)—a Hindu-religious name slapped upon a natural chain of tiny sand shoals that visibly stretch from India's southern coast to northern Sri Lanka.

The belief in "Ram Sethu" is derived from the *Ramayana*, one of the two great ancient Indian epics and a story ritually taught to almost every Indian child.

Although there are numerous versions of this epic, the Hindu fundamentalists' claims concerning Ram Sethu are based upon a version written by a 16th century northern Indian poet, Tulasidas.

According to this version Rama (whose Hindi name is Ram) is considered as an earthly incarnation of Lord Vishnu, one of the three most important Hindu gods, and the *Ramayana* portrays his earthly deeds.

Rama is the king of a northern kingdom with its capital in the city of Ayodhya now located in state of Uttar Pradesh. According to the epic, Rama pursues his arch-nemesis Ravana, the king of a southern kingdom, to Sri-Lanka after Ravana kidnaps Rama's wife, Sita, and takes her there. Rama is aided in his pursuit by his monkey-devotee Hanuman, who gathers an army of monkeys to build a bridge between the waters separating India and Sri Lanka.

The Hindu right, with the BJP in the vanguard, are now opposing the Sethusamudram project with the absurd claim that the chain of tiny sand-shoals that pops out of the shallow waters of the Palk Strait is the ancient bridge referred to in Ramayana.

The hypocrisy and opportunism of the BJP and its allies becomes all the more nauseating when it is realized that when the BJP-led government approved the project in 2002, it was well aware that the approved alignment and course of the canal would indeed plough through "Ram Sethu." Yet not a sound of protest was raised at that time by any of the fundamentalist organizations that are now falling over each other to protect this "Hindu heritage."

On August 31 in response to a petition filed by a Subramanian Swamy, a BJP ally and the head of a Tamil Nadu-based party known as the Janata Party, India's Supreme Court issued an interim order to the government of India and the Sethusamudram Corporation directing them to carry out the ongoing dredging work without damaging "Ram Sethu." It further called upon the Indian government to respond in two weeks.

On Sept. 12 the Archeological Survey of India (ASI) submitted an affidavit in response. The ASI observed that "The petitioners [Subramanian Swamy and others] while seeking relief [not to damage Rama Sethu] have primarily relied upon the contents of the Valmiki Ramayana, the Ramcharitmanas by Tulasidas and other mythological

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texts, which admittedly form an important part of ancient Indian literature, *but which cannot be said to be [a] historical record to incontrovertibly prove the existence of the characters or the occurrence of the events depicted therein.*"[emphasis added]

The ASI further noted, "The petitioners have relied upon a series of maps of medieval and pre-Independence India, which admittedly do refer to the formation known as Adam's Bridge. However, a mere named reference cannot conclusively prove the fact that the formation is actually a man-made structure. The existence of human remains, whether in the form of bones, etc, or in the form of other artifacts, is primary to prove archaeologically the existence and veracity of a historical fact. No such human remains have been discovered at the site of the formation known as Adam's Bridge."

The next day, the BJP, as the self-appointed guardian of the Hindus, seized on the ASI's matter of fact observation that the *Ramayana* is a religious-literary, not a historical, text to initiate a virulent communal campaign against the UPA government.

Since falling from power in 2004, the BJP has been in almost perpetual crisis. Its has alienated important sections of big business, by failing to play the role of a loyal opposition and repeatedly disrupting parliament, and its repeated attempts to tar the government as "anti-Hindu," by, for example pointing to Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi's Italian-Catholic origins, have fallen flat.

Yet no sooner did the BJP launch its agitation over the Ram Sethu issue than the UPA government and the Congress leadership were in full retreat.

On the instructions of Congress Party leader Sonia Gandhi, Union Law Minister H.R. Bhardwaj hurriedly convened a press conference and repudiated the ASI brief, declaring "The existence of Rama cannot be doubted. 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."

Union Culture Minister Ambika Soni whose ministry oversees the ASI offered to resign. In comments to the reporters she said, "I will not take even a minute to relinquish my post if my leaders (Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Sonia Gandhi) ask me to do so."

While Ambika Soni was able to keep her job after meeting with Sonia Gandhi, she promptly turned around to make a scapegoat of ASI. She fired two high officials of the organization who did nothing other than to provide their scientific opinion against the reactionary obscurantist and communalist campaign of the BJP.

The Politburo of the Stalinist CPI (M) gave a resounding stamp of approval to this pandering of the communalists. In their statement they said: "The Government of India has taken an appropriate decision to withdraw certain paragraphs in the affidavit filed by the Archaeological Survey of India in the Supreme Court in the Sethusamudram case that were considered extraneous to the matter at hand."

The CPI (M) leader then added, with a forked tongue, "That said, it must be reiterated that there is no scientific evidence whatsoever that a manmade structure, the Adams bridge (or the Ram Sethu) exists in the Palk Straits."

The Stalinists did not explain why they consider the question of the historical existence of the characters or the actual occurrence of the events depicted in the epic is "extraneous" to the case when the only "evidence" to this being a man-made structure is derived from the *Ramayana*.

The BJP took full advantage of the political prostration of its Congress and Left opponents. L.K. Advani, the leader of the opposition in Lok Sabha (India's Lower House of Parliament) and the principal organizer of the campaign to raze the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya on the grounds that it is Lord Ram's birthplace, fulminated against the ASI and the government, saying "it had poured contempt on" the Hindus.

The BJP President Rajnath Singh similarly thundered, "The BJP demands an unconditional apology from the government for hurting the religious sentiments of the Hindus."

While the BJP and its communalist allies have made a cacophony of noise about "Hindu sentiments", "Hindu heritage" etc. they have expressed not a shred of concern either over the canal-project's devastating impact on to the livelihood of thousands of fishermen living along the coasts in India and Sri Lanka or about the potential for severe environmental damage.

Neither has the Congress Party. While the government was quick to conciliate the BJP communalists, it has shown utter indifference and even contempt to repeated appeals by various locally-based and environmental groups to reconsider the project.

While professing to uphold secularism, the Congress Party has a decades-long record of adapting to, and conniving with, the Hindu right. Since coming to power in May 2004, the Congress-led UPA has repeatedly used the powers of the constitution to place states under "president's rule" in pursuit of political advantage, but it has not acted against the Gujarat BJP government that presided over the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom and which continues to shield its perpetrators. Indeed, the Congress is preparing for the coming Gujarat state election by courting a group of BJP dissidents.

The BJP first came to national office in 1998 exploiting the popular anger over the neo-liberal reforms initiated by the Congress in 1991 and continued by the Stalinist supported United Front government that ruled India from 1996 to 1998. The BJP-led NDA then itself ruthlessly implemented pro-business and anti-working class economic policies and as a result suffered a humiliating defeat in the 2004 general elections.

Since then the party has lost its previous swagger and been consumed by infighting and finger-pointing. Yet it continues to stagger on thanks to the life-line provided it by the conciliation of the Congress and by the Stalinists' neutering of the opposition of the working class and toilers to the government and the agenda of capital.

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