



UN 2023 Water Conference Side Event

Ram Setu: The Bridge of Lord Ram

[3/26/23, 8-11 am, Virtual]

Organized by: Oxford Centre of Hindu Studies

Background on the event

Ram Setu is a land bridge connecting the nations of India and Sri Lanka across the ocean. Its name is derived from the Hindu epic *Ramayana*, where Rama, legendary prince of Ayodhya and avatar of the god Vishnu, marches to Lanka to rescue his wife Sita from the clutches of Lanka's king, Ravana. The bridge is a nexus point of religious and cultural beliefs and has been embroiled in the politics of economic and environmental conflict. It bears a critical role in the protection of water systems, the cooperation of multiple spheres of society regarding the management of water resources, and the rights of the people who are intimately connected to spaces of water. This side event promoted awareness and understanding of the Ram Setu and its intersectional importance, placed Ram Setu's situation within the framework of UN Sustainable Development Goal 6, and provided an outlook for its future.

Water Action Agenda

Regarding the Water Action Agenda, the key goal is to make sure that policy drivers are optimized alongside the belief that powers political participation to protect water rights, resources, and reserves. It becomes necessary to find ways to apply the strength of such protections elsewhere – where they are urgently needed. Water exists as a gateway to achieving goals in other sectors, and these connections can be utilized to funnel support from them into water goals and employ water as a support mechanism for such external initiatives. This specifically has occurred at the IUCN's International Conference on Human–Wildlife Conflict and Coexistence, where I engaged in multi-stakeholder collaboration to connect the frameworks within UN SDG 6 with IUCN goals through the ecological footnotes of biodiversity conservation. I strongly affirm that the connections established were conducive to matters on both ends.

Key Issues discussed

- Positioning of the Setu and its contexts to intersect between multiple UN Sustainable Development Goals
- Potential applications of international law (UNCLOS, High Seas Treaty) in Indian/Sri Lankan transboundary co-operation over the Setu
- The Setu's richness in biodiversity and geodiversity: the stability of such systems and the utility of conservation
- The religious heritage of the Setu and the use of religious power to protect such environments
- Military and economic imperatives regarding the dredging of the Ram Setu (Sethusamudram Shipping Canal Project)
- Political will and the representation of the people - the guiding attitudes and agendas that envelop the discourse of the Setu
- Colonial legacies left during British occupation of India that related to the historical status of the Setu

Key recommendations for action

- Adopting military strategy to delegitimize the supposed benefits of dredging the Setu
- Utilizing Environmental Impact Assessments over development initiatives in the area of the Setu
- Bolstering policy protections to defend the biosphere reserve in the Gulf of Mannar
- Harnessing religious power inherent to the Hindu collective consciousness to guard the Setu
- Finalizing the issue of the Setu's official sanctity by granting it national heritage status
- Fostering international cooperation in remediating current concerns over the Setu