

Rama's Bridge: A Bridge Built By Monkeys

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In the great Indian epic of Ramayana, penned several thousand years ago, author Valmiki speaks of a bridge over the ocean connecting India and Sri Lanka. The epic poem, that stretches for nearly 24,000 verses, narrates the life of the divine prince Rama and his struggle to rescue his abducted wife Sita from the demon king Ravana, the ruler of Sri Lanka.

Rama, the crown prince, was forced to relinquish his right to the throne and go into exile for fourteen years. During his stay in the forest, his wife Sita was abducted by the evil demon king Ravana and taken to Sri Lanka. Rama organized an army consisting of monkeys and led them to Sri Lanka, where a lengthy war broke out. In the end, Ravana was defeated, and Rama returned home with his wife to be crowned king.



In the story, when Rama's army reaches the ocean across which lies the island of Sri Lanka, the apes construct a floating bridge across the sea by writing the name of Rama on the stones and tossing them into the water. According to the legend, the stones didn't sink because they had Rama's name written on them. Rama's army then used the bridge to cross the sea towards Sri Lanka.

If you look at satellite photos of this region today, you will notice a faint hint of a connecting strip between the two countries. This so called Rama's Bridge or Rama Setu, also known as Adam's Bridge, is a long, twisting stretch of shoal and sandbank connecting the Indian island of Rameswaram, off the southeastern coast of Tamil Nadu, to Mannar Island, off the northwestern coast of Sri Lanka. The

bridge is about 50 km long. Much of it is under water today, but centuries ago, it formed an intermittent, but otherwise solid, connecting link between India and Sri Lanka. The causeway existed as late as the 15th century and was passable on foot, as per records kept at the Rameswaram temple, until it was flooded in a storm.

The existence of the bridge has been known in India as well as Sri Lanka since ages, as evident from the legend perpetuated by the ancient epic of Ramayana. For as long as anybody could remember, the sea separating the two countries has been called Sethusamudram meaning "Sea of the Bridge". The 9th century Persian geographer, Ibn Khordadbeh, mentioned the bridge in his *Book of Roads and Kingdoms*, referring to it as Set Bandhai or "Bridge of the Sea". The name "Adam's Bridge" is an early-19th-century British invention—a reference to an Abrahamic myth that Adam used the bridge to cross from Sri Lanka to India.



Rama's army of monkeys building the stone bridge to Sri Lanka.

Many orthodox Hindus consider the existence of the bridge to be an unshakable proof of Ramayana itself, and the stories described in it. Pseudo-scientists, conspiracy theorist, and theologians believe that the bridge was actually built by Rama and his army of monkeys. When a NASA photograph of the region showing a meandering causeway disappearing into the distance was released in 2002, online conspiracy theorists went off on a wild goose chase trying to prove it was a man-made structure.

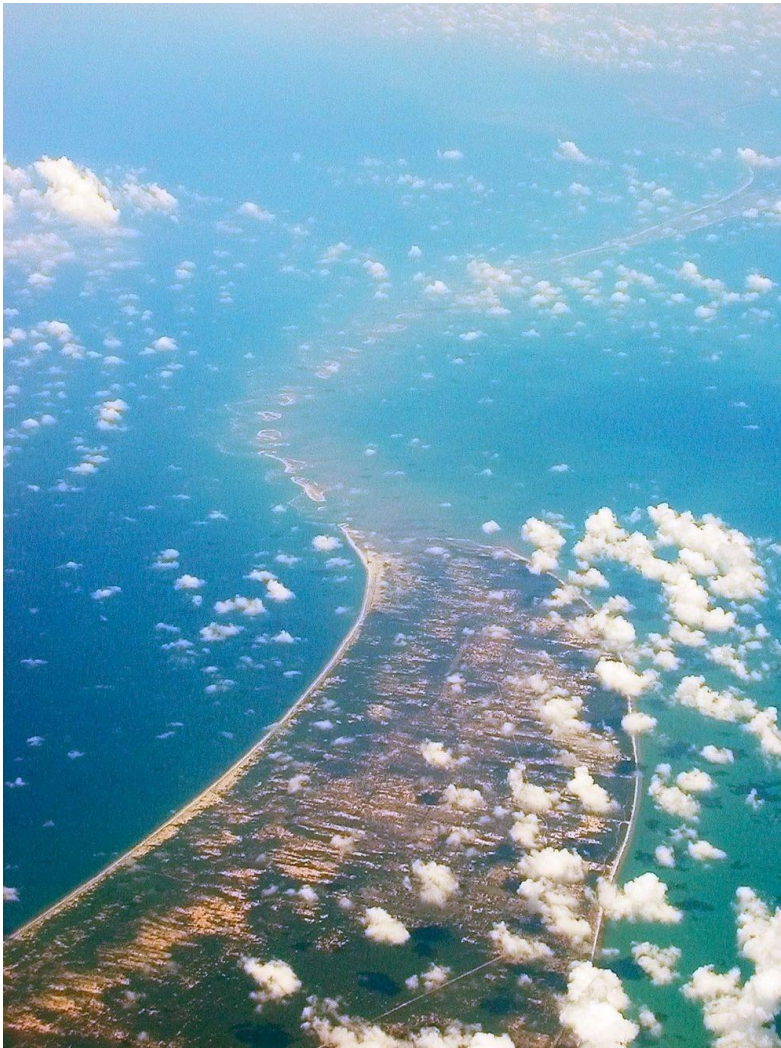
Although geologists have repeatedly tried to debunk the myth, there is still a diverse range of opinion and confusion about the nature and origin of this structure. There are some half a dozen different theories that attempt to explain the structure. One attributes it to continuous sand deposition and the natural process of sedimentation leading to the formation of a chain of barrier islands, while another suggest that the bridge may be an old shoreline, implying that the two landmasses of India and Sri Lanka were once connected. Studies have variously described the structure as a chain of shoals, coral reefs, a ridge formed in the region owing to thinning of the earth's crust, a double tombolo, a sand spit, or barrier islands.

Things got a little heated when the Government of India proposed dredging through Rama's Bridge in order to create a shipping route in the shallow straits between India and Sri Lanka. Right now, ships trying to move between India's west and east coasts have to go around Sri Lanka. A long deepwater channel connecting the Palk Strait with the Gulf of Mannar would cut over 400 km off the voyage saving both time and money. But ultra-right wing Hindu organizations strongly opposed the project saying that the bridge is a “religious monument” and should not be destroyed.

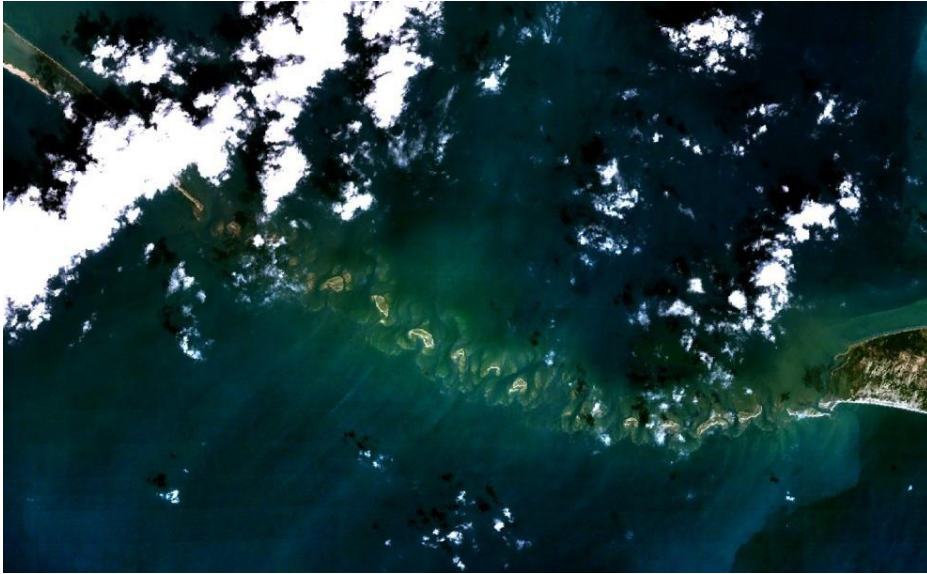
The project is currently on hold, but for more coherent reasons. Environmentalists say that dredging a channel would destroy corals, while also harming the fishing reserve in the area, throwing the ecology in the region off balance. Besides, the sandbank provides natural protection against tsunami waves traveling from the east to the west coast and vice versa. The government is now considering an alternate route that doesn't involve destroying Rama's Bridge.



A carved stone relief at Prambanan Temple, on the island of Java in Indonesia, shows monkeys helping Rama by bringing stones for building the bridge. Photo credit: [Margery H. Freeman](#)



Aerial view of Adam's Bridge, taken while flying over Sri Lanka looking west. Photo credit: [PlaneMad/Wikimedia](#)



Landsat 7 Imagery of Adam's Bridge. Photo credit: [NASA](#)