



Book Review

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John Jacob Puthur, *The Untold Story of a Coast*. Bangalore, Star of Sea Publications, 2013, 290 pp., £9.99, ISBN-10: 1482531550; ISBN-13: 978-1482531558.

With the Supreme Court ordering the state of Tamil Nadu to clarify its stand on the controversial Sethusamundram project, following the Central government decision to pursue the project's implementation, the issue of the viability of this maritime mega-enterprise has taken centre stage again. Sethusamudram is, of course, the archetype of a maritime controversy, where scientific claims and counterclaims have been made regularly with equally passionate fervor. For those looking to get to the bottom of this enigma, or with a passing interest in other controversies related to maritime project building in India, *The Untold Story of a Coast* by Cdr (Retd) John Jacob Puttur could serve as the go-to book.

Cdr Puttur's is a story about India's Coast – a coast that stretches nearly 7500 km and came into existence nearly 165 million years ago. The author has seemingly devoted his entire professional life to the study of India's coastline and ports. The book is an extended critique of the many marine and coastal projects undertaken in India and one that pivots mainly on the author's expert analysis of India's ports and the scientific inferences that he draws from his own study of the subject. What

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surprises is not so much the fact that his findings upend conventional wisdom – as it is much to be expected – but the deep conviction with which he explains and substantiates his alternate theories. As a result, despite the initial skepticism, one ends up appreciating the heterodox viewpoint.

While the Indian Coast is indeed dynamic, the author claims it is poorly understood – especially the phenomenon of the Indian monsoon and the impact that has on sea state and siltation. The book's central idea is that port and coastal projects in India have been based on a series of myths and faux notions, and that a re-evaluation is needed to dispel the underlying fallacies. The revisionist approach does appear a bit presumptuous to begin with, but it must be said to the book's credit that by the time it ends, it ends up making a fairly convincing case.

The author's basic premise is that the real facts behind "siltation", in and around the coast, have been misunderstood (if not "misrepresented"), and that the actual process is a unique phenomenon that can only be understood if one looks at the coast, and the forces it is being subjected to, holistically. It is indeed a compelling theory and one the author uses effectively as a "story-peg". Yet, once he gets going, Cdr Puttur opens too many issues for re-examination, creating the impression that most of the coastal and marine projects undertaken so far have been without much critical analysis or even a considered evaluation of their implications for the coast.

Part novel, part travelogue and part text book, *The Untold Story of a Coast* is a genuine though un-refined offering fashioned as a "quest for the truth". In the author's words, "the aim of the story is to know the coast and how it works". He goes about doing so by explaining in simple terms the science behind the coastal phenomena; the models, methods and procedures used in assessing impact on the coast; the conventional wisdom (labeled "dogmas") that led to certain critical decisions in coastal projects; and finally the compelling rationale (which he calls "counter-evidence") that experts overlooked in their initial project evaluation. But in trying to explain the many intricacies of coastal phenomena and the tidal models, the author appears to rely heavily on his personal interpretation of the findings of later studies on other related subjects, which he extrapolates to vindicate his own claims.

The book consists of chapters covering a wide array of port and coastal projects. These are interspersed with long academic expositions of nautical phenomena such as sandbars and spits, wave friction, coastal sedimentation dynamics etc, doubtlessly of great use for a student of hydrography. Cdr Puttur's exceptional professional

knowledge is evident from the chapters on the dockyard expansion and underwater docks, and he comes across as someone nurturing an intense desire to tell his version of the story.

For the most part, he does tell his tale competently. It is only in the explanation of the scientific aspects that he falters by choosing a narrative style that focuses too much on the technicalities of coastal dynamics. To be fair, some of the scientific explanations are quite in order, for ultimately the book tries to demolish existing myths. Nevertheless, the long-winding theorizing and academic explanations only serve to break the narrative's brisk tempo that he effortlessly strikes in the first few chapters. Moreover, some of the grandstanding on issues that he believes he understands best appears exaggerated.

It is in the chapters on the "Marina Beach", "the Kakinada deep port" and the "Karanja harbour" that the author comes into his own, displaying his vast knowledge and deep understanding of the nautical peculiarities and phenomena that beset India maritime coastal projects, many of which, he claims, have been undertaken without a complete understanding of the forces at work. The author dwells on the issues facing Fort Kochi beach, problems with the Vallarpadam special economic zone (SEZ) and the Karwar project, also going on to explain the future of the "Sea Bird". While one does benefit from his competent analysis, the anecdotal parts are a drag, especially when pedantic accounts are presented in stark detail. So, all too often, the focus gets diluted and the reader has to strain to keep going. Thankfully, he gets the thread of his narrative back soon and the stories resume again, much to the reader's relief.

The most interesting bits in the book are about the puzzles that the author constructs and then proceeds to unravel in slow motion – like the "perishing pontoons" near Kamat Bay in Karwar, the "silting dockyard" in Mumbai and the "eroding coast" off Madras. Alas, a surfeit of technical details and needless scientific theorizing obscures the narrative.

Cdr Kuthur does not use any literary references or endnotes. The book sounds more like a testimony of an accomplished master – someone whose experiences and struggles are presumed to lend weight and credibility to his bold assertions. The writing mostly has a coarse feel to it, but makes for a fairly engaging account. The chapters on the specific projects are done in a snappy, down-to-earth style, but the rest proceed at a rather leisurely pace.

Despite its overt flaws, this is a good book, well worth one's time.