

Adani Vizhinjam: Boosting India's maritime credentials

Given the lack of adequate port infrastructure to handle Mother vessels in the south, the upcoming seaport could be a real gamechanger



Last leg of the journey The mega project is nearly 80 per cent complete, after a series of unexpected delays

VINSON KURIAN

The ₹7,525-crore deep-water, multipurpose, international seaport and container transshipment terminal at Vizhinjam, near Thiruvananthapuram — being constructed by Adani Vizhinjam Ports Pvt Ltd (AVPPL) — will go to entrench India's position in the maritime world.

The project has acquired significant geopolitical credentials, given the growing influence of Chinese and Pakistan interests in the neighbourhood. It also goes to address India's glaring lack of a massive seaport with the required draft for Mother Ships — large ships — to call in the south. And, it is just 10 nautical miles (NM) from the international sea route, linking the Far-East with both the Middle-East and Suez Canal. Colombo is 28 NM away from this route.

Competition

Vizhinjam could offer significant competition to the transshipment ports of Colombo, Singapore and Dubai that annually divert 5 million TEUs (twenty-foot boxes) of cargo for lack of a comparable port infrastructure in India. Being able to handle the traffic in Vizhinjam can prevent huge time and cost overruns for

businesses here, as one can move containers to the destination the same day by rail or road. Indian ports annually lose nearly \$220 million of potential revenue on transshipment handling of cargo originating/destined for India.

The mega project is nearly 80 per cent complete after a series of force majeure events delayed work past the original commissioning in December 2019. Construction started on December 5, 2015, but cyclone Ockhi in 2017 followed by the century's worst floods in 2018, a near-encore in 2019, and the Covid pandemic in 2020 forced developers to go back to the drawing board several times. "The AVPPL and implementing agency Vizhinjam International Seaport Ltd are trying their best to expedite the project," says Rajesh Jha, CEO, AVPPL.

A narrow corridor of five to six months from October to May is all they get for work, after two disruptive monsoons. But AVPPL is pushing itself with a target to commission the first phase by December 2023 and the second by December 2024, he said. For Mother Ships sailing on the international sea route, the natural draft of 18-20 metres at Vizhinjam is a godsend.

They can now hope to berth and find an adequate turning radius in the tranquil waters, bounded by

what will be a nearly 3,000-metre-long breakwater.

Advantage Vizhinjam

If the current capacity of Mother Ships ranges between 18,000-22,000 TEUs, trade and logistics circles are animatedly discussing those of 24,000-28,000 TEUs. The nearby Thiruvananthapuram International Airport too has come under Adani management. The international airport and the domestic and international seaport are so close to each other; a unique feature which Vizhinjam boasts.

AVPPL hopes to give a superior value proposition to customers. The port will have an initial capacity of 0.6 million TEUs and progressively 1 million TEUs. The capacity is sought to be raised by adding berths which will entail further environment clearance. Nanao Vishwanadhan, a Dubai-based expert in maritime law, says that Vizhinjam has the potential to take on rivals, subject to development of a niche ecosystem across related domains. The timing could not have been better too, with India emerging as a credible alternative to China as a manufacturing and logistics hub. The flip side is that it could eat into the business of the Valarpadam International Container Transshipment Terminal, 176 NM to the North along the same coast.