

JAMUNA BRIDGE

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1994: During the visit of the then Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia to Japan, the Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge financing agreement was signed, in presence of the then Prime Minister of Japan Mr Hosokawa MP, by the then Bangladesh Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman, and the then Japanese Deputy Premier and Foreign Minister Mr Sutomo Hata MP.



April 10, 1994: The then Prime Minister and BNP Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia delivering her speech as chief guest at the foundation laying ceremony of Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge.

Jamuna Bridge: A Glorious Feat of National Integration

by M M Rezaul Karim

IN the contemporary political history of Bangladesh, it is a rare phenomenon to come across an important national project on which people from all walks of life and professing diverse political opinions, are in full agreement on its propriety, urgency and efficacy. Jamuna Multi-Purpose Bridge, which is going to be inaugurated on the 23rd of this month, is the lone and proud venture of that category. Incidentally, this happens to be the largest single project ever undertaken in our country, be it in any part of East Pakistan or a part of British India.

Why is it such a rare phenomenon? Is it because of the record-breaking mammoth size of the project, the unique architectural and engineering feat it embodies, the shorter time that would be needed for transporting the two east-west divides of the country, the relief to be enjoyed by the people from the mammoth and indefinite wait at the Aricha ferry, the greater availability of energy, gas and telephone services across the Jamuna in the west, the environmental balance it would ensure, or, finally, the infinite economic, agricultural and industrial boon it would entail to the people, specially of the north-western region? The answer is, indeed, so, all combined and some more. This additional element is represented by the fact that all political regimes in the country since late sixties did participate, in varying degrees, in the plan and action of this proud undertaking. Let us analyse.

It may sound surprising to many but it is true that the original idea of building a bridge across the mighty Jamuna was first mooted, with some measure of seriousness, during the Pakistan time. I still recall that the Doyen of Bangladeshi diplomats, the late Khwaja M Kaiser, told us how passionately he had sat down with Chinese officials and experts, physically examining the map of the Brahmaputra basin for exploration of putting up a bridge across the Jamuna. This happened during his first bout as

Ambassador of China in the last days of old Pakistan. But the matter did not progress much due to lack of initiative and support from the Islamabad regime.

Then, after the creation of Bangladesh, the issue was raised again, this time with Japan, since our official links with China remained suspended for more than three years till her recognition of Bangladesh. Japan, the richest nation of the East, has always been willing and able to provide funds for such projects designed to promote material progress of developing nations such as Bangladesh. Accordingly, JICA, Japan International Cooperation Agency, planned to make a preliminary feasibility study. But due to lack of inexplicable earnestness on the part of the then regime the issue was not pursued much further. The martial law regime that followed witnessed little activities in this regard. Following restoration of parliamentary democracy by Shaheed President Ziaur Rahman the issue came to surface once again, but the efforts were confined mainly to raising it during his visits abroad to muster general support for the cause.

The Jamuna Multi-Purpose Bridge Authority was set up which was manned in succession by able civil servants. A levy and a surcharge were imposed on a variety of goods and services in order to establish a fund which was to be needed later to defray part of the cost of the bridge from out of nation's own resources.

The lion's share of the work relating to the construction of the bridge was, however, initiated, undertaken and completed during the BNP regime of Begum Khaleda Zia from 1991 to 1996. The Project Proposal was first approved by the government at its ECNEC meeting in May 1991. A series of high level visits to Bangladesh by officials and experts from the World Bank, ADB and Japan, crowned by the visit of the World Bank President Louis Preston in 1993, finally approved the feasibility of the project, with commitment of sharing the

cost. In February 1994 an agreement was signed with the IDA, the long term soft loan window of the World Bank, for a sum of \$ 200 million for this purpose. The next month, a similar agreement for another amount of \$ 200 million was concluded with the ADB. An agreement for Japanese funds again to the tune of US\$ 200 million was signed during the visit of Prime Minister Begum Zia to Japan on the 29th March 1994.

Having arranged funding for the project, actual construction of the bridge was taken in hand. Land had already been acquired on both sides of Jamuna for embankment and road construction, rehabilitation of displaced persons were made, contracts were awarded and the actual construction of the bridge commenced after the foundation stone was laid by Prime Minister Begum Zia on the 10th April 1994. It may be recalled that the then leading opposition party, which is the present ruling party, called hartal on that day in a futile bid to disrupt the occasion. Subsequently, due to Awami League's non-cooperation and disruption of various forms resulted in the suspension of work on the bridge, with an estimated loss by way of escalation of cost to the tune of Taka 100 crore. In spite of that, over 60 per cent of the construction work was completed by the time Begum Zia relinquished her authority in 1996.

The gargantuan project is a 5.8 km long four lane road bridge, with the accompanied facilities of a meter gauge rail road, a gas pipeline and a 230 volt electricity grid. The bridge itself was designed to have a slight curvature in order to avert strong beams of incoming trains and to break potentially dangerous monotony of drivers of vehicles. Although the road bridge construction is complete, railroad will be seen to have been commissioned with two dummy railway stations on either end of the bridge. Similarly, the way to approach the bridge from Tangail side is still the narrow old road with post holes and needed to upgrade it

to a national highway. Despite the levy and surcharge amounting to a sizeable sum of Taka 506 crore, the tariff for vehicles plying over the bridge has been put too high for the common people to bear and is in stark contrast to the tariff charged by the ferry. A revision, therefore, is urgently called for.

These shortcomings reveal the inadequate and uncoordinated planning on the part of the government. Over and above, the news of a crack on the bridge and the breakdown of the long and heavy span, the event before commissioning of the bridge has raised one's eyebrows and caused concern about the standard of work in the construction of the project itself. Many wonder if the quality of some work had to be sacrificed at the altar of meeting the time schedule for the pomp and grandeur of the inaugural ceremony for the project itself.

Finally, the present government has taken upon itself the responsibility of changing names of important projects. There was no exception in this case also. The bridge which had been known as the Jamuna bridge over the past decades was all of a sudden named last year as Bangabandhu bridge. The government has, indeed, the prerogative of taking any such action, since no one can challenge their decision effectively under normal circumstances. But, the preceding regimes were also endowed with the same prerogative to name it after any one of their choice, but they refrained themselves from changing the name from its natural and popular nomenclature.

Yet, the Jamuna Multi-Purpose Bridge has come to stay as a proud symbol of nation's achievement, as a shining example of international collaboration in the field of infrastructural development and, above all, as a veritable and highly desired tool in the process of effecting national integration by forging greater unity in the political, economic, social, cultural and administrative fields of a nation having hitherto been divided by its own mighty rivers.

The Jamuna Bridge: A Milestone of Success for BNP

by Ahmed Nazir

A well-developed communication system is the main precondition for the development of a Nation. A better communication system is not only essential for economic development but it also eases transportation system. Keeping these issues in mind, Begum Khaleda Zia's government, after assuming power in 1991, attached top priority to the development of the communication system. So, in her five-year tenure, thousands of miles of pucca roads were built. BNP government constructed more than five thousand bridges including Mahamada, Meghna-Gumti and Buriganga second bridges. In fact, a revolutionary change took place in the communication system during her regime.

The Jamuna is one of the longest rivers in the world. This river has divided Bangladesh into two parts — east and north-west. Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani, at first demanded a bridge over the Jamuna for overcoming this natural obstruction. In 1950s and '60s he raised this demand many times. In 1957, Moulana Bhasani again demanded this bridge from the peasant conference organised by him in Phulchandi Ghat.

Because of the Jamuna, development of eastern and western zones of the country was imbalanced and unequal. Begum Khaleda Zia's government took all-out and realistic steps to construct a bridge over the Jamuna for a balanced socio-political, economic, administrative and cultural development of these zones. It is true that, before her regime, it was thought of, but none took any realistic and effective step.

In May 1991, the government of Begum Khaleda Zia approved the PP of the Jamuna Bridge in a meeting of ECNEC. In response to her government, a study team of the World Bank studied the economic and technical feasibility of the bridge. But the team reported that ERR of the bridge will be less than 12 per cent. So, the fate of the bridge became uncertain. Under the circumstances, the government carried out economic feasibility study of the bridge. Four eminent economists were engaged in the study. They reported that this bridge will be viable economically and the ERR will be 22 per cent.

At this stage, BNP's communication minister Col Oll Ahmed explained to the World Bank and other development agencies about the feasibility of the Jamuna Bridge Project. Later, in Sept. 1993, World Bank, ADB and OECF (Japan) jointly studied the project. The economists of the World Bank reestimated the ERR at 14.85 per cent. From this study the economic feasibility of the Jamuna bridge was reestablished. Then the Prime Minister, Begum Khaleda Zia, instructed the concerned authorities to implement this project as a priority one. In the Fourth Five Year Plan Tk. 2,200 crore was allocated for this project. Moreover, as part of its preparatory work the government acquired 4,300 acres of land. The work of flood control system and road construction was completed in 1993 by a local firm.

In Sept. 1992, tenders were invited and in June 1993, tenders of four firms were accepted. In December 1993, the cabinet approved the recommendations of the bridge authority. In the meantime, action plan was finalised for rehabilitation of affected people and environment. Then the communication minister and finance minister along with the representative of the Bridge Project Authority visited Washington and Japan. They had long discussion with the officials of World Bank, Asian Development Bank and OECF and they were able to convince them about the economic feasibility of the project.

When the BNP government had been trying to convince donors, a vested interest quarter was trying to obstruct the implementation of the project and had been trying to distract the people. This branded political quarter did not want the Jamuna Bridge. So, after the finalisation of the Jamuna bridge project they voiced for constructing Brahmaputra Barrage. But there was no feasibility study over the barrage. Moreover that barrage will cost three to four times more than the Jamuna Bridge. After three years of concerted efforts by the government of Khaleda Zia, three separate agreements were signed with the World

Bank, ADB and OECF for financing the project. In February 1994, a US\$ 200 million loan agreement was signed with the World Bank, in March a US\$200 million agreement was signed with the ADB and in June another US\$200 million loan agreement was signed with the World Bank, in March a US\$200 million agreement was signed with the ADB and in June, another US\$200 million loan agreement was signed with OECF. After these agreements, four selected construction firms were given work order.

Laying the foundation stone of the Jamuna Bridge: On completion of all important formalities of the project, Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia laid the foundation stone at Shimulia of Sirajganj district on the west bank of the Jamuna and at Sharnashall of Tangail district on the east bank. That very day, the Awami League called a dawn-to-dusk hartal all over the country. But, ignoring that call the representatives of the donor agencies, members of the diplomatic missions, leaders of the political, social, business organizations and professional groups and lacs of people attended the foundation laying ceremony. All the people, who attended the function, were jubilant.

After laying the foundation stone, the work of the Jamuna Bridge Project went on in full swing. A jetty was constructed on the eastern bank of the Jamuna. A platform was constructed about 15 to 20 feet high. The contractors stored their construction materials on that place and sheds were constructed for the employees. 70 per cent of the construction work of the vital guide dyke was completed during the BNP regime. Moreover 25 to 30 per cent construction work of the main bridge was also completed in BNP regime. This is the BNP government, who also decided to install rail-lines on the bridge. Originally, it was planned to open the bridge in the first half of this year. Then the opposition party, the Awami League started non-operation and blockade. At that time the construction work was suspended for three months. It cost more 100 crore taka. The

people have to shoulder this burden.

After assuming power in June 12, 1996, the Awami League government resumed the work of Jamuna Bridge. Although the donors and the people of the country rejected the new name, but the government did not listen to it. Moreover the AL Prime Minister laid the foundation stone of the Jamuna bridge once again. After laying the foundation stone and completion of 60 per cent work it is not only ridiculous to lay a foundation stone again, but also a shameful deed.

It was necessary to supervise the construction work of its every stage very carefully. But the present government completely failed to supervise. For that reason, in the final stage, so many errors were detected in the bridge. Recently, the five km long gas pipeline broke down. The pipeline cost 36 crore taka. Experts opined that replacing this pipeline will take at least six months' time. Without replacing this pipeline, the bridge is going to be opened formally on June 23.

We are proud that, the BNP government under Begum Khaleda Zia completed 60 per cent work of the longest bridge of the country. Whether the AL government agrees or not, the donors and the people of the country know that only the BNP government can claim the credit for the Jamuna Bridge. AL did not want a bridge across the Jamuna. So, they opposed everything concerning the bridge — from financing to laying foundation stone.

On the occasion of the inauguration of the Jamuna Bridge, we congratulate the concerned engineers, technicians, general workers and the countrymen. We are also grateful to the World Bank, Asian Development Bank and the Government of Japan for their contribution to this engineering achievement.

Revitalising the agro-based economy, installing gas and electricity-based industries in the northern region were among the objectives of the Jamuna Bridge. After opening the bridge, in northern area essential goods will be cheaper, marketing will be easier and the farmers will be benefited. In the greater interest of the people the tolls should be refixed in consistency with other bridges.

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Khaleda debunks hartal call

SRAGGANI, Apr. 10 (Press) Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia today (Sunday) rebuffed a call for a hartal (strike) in support of the proposed construction of the Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge. She said the strike would be a self-inflicted wound on the country and would not help the project.

"When the entire nation demands the construction of the Jamuna Bridge, a hartal is not only a self-inflicted wound on the country, but it also shows a lack of confidence in the government," she said.

She said she would not be deterred by such calls and would continue to work for the completion of the project.

Long-cherished dream to be fulfilled: Khaleda

SRAGGANI (Sriagani), Apr. 10 (Press) Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia today (Sunday) said that the long-cherished dream of the people in the north-western region of Bangladesh to have a bridge across the Jamuna river would soon be fulfilled.

"I am happy and proud to announce that the long-cherished dream of the people in the north-western region of Bangladesh to have a bridge across the Jamuna river will be fulfilled in the near future," she said.

She said the bridge would bring economic and social development to the region and would be a landmark project in the history of Bangladesh.

Dawn-to-dusk hartal observed peacefully

SRAGGANI, Apr. 10 (Press) A dawn-to-dusk hartal (strike) was observed peacefully in the north-western region of Bangladesh today in support of the proposed construction of the Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge.

The hartal was observed from dawn to dusk in various parts of the region. The people observed the hartal peacefully and there was no violence or disruption of public order.

The government expressed its appreciation for the peaceful observance of the hartal and said it would continue to work for the completion of the project.

Hasina greets people for observing hartal

SRAGGANI, Apr. 10 (Press) Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed today (Sunday) greeted the people for observing a dawn-to-dusk hartal (strike) in support of the proposed construction of the Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge.

"I am glad to see that the people are observing the hartal peacefully and in support of the government's project," she said.

She said the government would continue to work for the completion of the project and would not be deterred by such calls.

দৈনিক ইত্তেফাক

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সম্মত নির্বিশেষে উন্নয়ন প্রচেষ্টাকে জোরদার করুন: প্রধানমন্ত্রী

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