

# Padma Bridge: Belittled yet elated nation

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THE drama with Padma Bridge finally seems to have ended, fortunately with a positive outcome. The reason I chose to say "seems to have ended" is because what started with an auspicious project promising to increase GDP by 1.2% and growth in the southwest, one of the most impoverished region of Bangladesh, by 3.5% was almost on the brink of collapse. The allegations of corruption, persistent denial by the government, consistent accusation by the WB, breaking down of talks, cancellation of loan agreement, revival attempts based on mixed signals, ambiguous position of the government, untenable positions of the ministers, advisers, and bureaucrats in question, and finally some smart diplomacy and lobbying by few ministers and adviser made it one of the most eventful projects in recent years.

Why is Padma Bridge so important and why are the stakes so high? Some of the key economic indicators, as revealed during the studies undertaken by the agencies, will answer the question in a nutshell. The proposed 4 mile bridge would link the underdeveloped south-western districts with Dhaka benefiting 30 million people, leading to a \$6 billion rise in GDP over the next thirty years. Economic benefits would peak around the year 2030 with an annual return of about \$300 million a year. Gross agricultural output in the region is expected to increase by more than 50% during the same time. The bridge will reduce poverty by

1.9% a year at the national level. The combined savings in utility crossings for electrical lines, fibre optic cables and gas pipelines would be \$271 million. It is an economically viable project with a net present value of around \$ 1.4 billion and an economic internal rate of return of 20%, well in excess of the economic opportunity cost of capital of 12%.

The numbers above alone give an idea of the enormity of the project in terms of the positive economic return it is expected to generate and the resulting social benefits it will accrue. When such high socio-economic advantages are embedded in a single project, one would expect a political government to be sensitive and careful in the management and implementation of the project. More so by a government which came with a popular mandate and had an election manifesto that had construction of the Padma Bridge as one of its electoral pledges. What happened in reality?

Responsibility of this key ministry was given to a man with a controversial past and dubious character as far as professional integrity and honesty are concerned. Given the public perception about this minister's background, from the very beginning many were skeptical about the government's

motives with regard to assigning him this vital ministry. As time progressed, the skeptics were proven right as the minister lived up to the same reputation he has been enjoying in the power sector as well for many years.

As pressure mounted on the government from the development partners led by the WB on taking appropriate steps against the concerned minister, for some unknown reason the government led by the prime minister seemed to be unusually steadfast

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in defending him. Inevitably, the question in the public domain was why was safeguarding this one individual so important? From where was this man deriving his strength against all odds so as to prevail, no matter what price the nation would have ended up paying? What could have explained the intransigency of the government with respect to this man who, much to the disappointment of the nation, was branded by the prime minister as a "patriot?"

From the beginning of the allegation of corruption and the negotiations between the government and the WB that followed to resolve the impasse, the brinkmanship that the government tried to play was ill-conceived, unsustainable, and in some cases outright foolish. For example, instead of taking a proactive role by reaching out to the Canadian authorities when they started investigation into SNC Lavalin's reported acts of corruption at the request of the WB, the government took a defensive position of

demanding hard evidence as a precondition before any action would be initiated against any of the persons who were on the WB's negative list. Similarly, trying to save the adviser till the end as the clock was ticking in Washington and WB was sticking to its demand and then

came the final exit, there was no need to optimise at a time when credibility had already been minimised and bargaining position weakened through successive acts of retreat and compromise forced upon the government by the WB.

From the vagaries regarding Malaysian investment to the silly act of raising local funds through forcing people in the name "patriotism;" from the contradictory positions of the prime minister and finance min-

ister, with the former making caustic remarks about the WB while boasting about self-sufficiency and the latter trying hard to revive the loan while explaining its vitality; it all looked messy, clumsy, and confusing to say the least. All this was played out under the watchful eyes of the international community and development partners to whom we not only lost our reputation but also our credibility. I was in Islamabad last week to attend the South Asian Economic Conference and it hurts when citizens of a country which has someone like Asif Zardari as its president, now have an opportunity to ask questions like: "Is corruption in Bangladesh so bad that the WB would cancel a loan and then force the country to bite the dust before deciding to give the money again?" The government owes an explanation to the nation as ordinary people have done nothing to earn this ignominy.

At the end, we are elated as this is an opportunity we could not let go as Padma Bridge is too important to be allowed to sink in the whims and wishes of the corrupt. At the same time, thanks to the largely inept handling of the government and might of the corrupt and controversial, we have never been so belittled in recent times in front of the global audience. We got what we wanted, but in the process we lost something which is more precious than the bridge -- the self-respect and dignity of a nation.

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## Getting Bangladesh Railway rolling

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THE railway network of Bangladesh which was inherited from undivided India is totally unsuitable for present traffic flow requirements. Minimum investment has been made to re-orient the railway network towards the capital city, shorten the distance between Chittagong port and other cities and connect Mongla Port or other areas where rail network does not exist. While the road network has increased significantly, no matching expansion of the rail network has been made. Due to lack of adequate maintenance budget rail tracks and other infrastructures and rolling stocks are in deplorable condition, resulting in poor performance of BR.

Roads have been given special attention and allocated maximum money (average 76% of total transport sector) for expansion and reconstruction since 1985 while nominal allocations have been made for railway (average 16%) and shipping (average 8%) only. The negligence over the decades has left the railway sector with a very poor capacity to serve the people. The slow release of funds has been a key factor in the stagnation of the sector while red-tape has put many projects on hold.

The challenge facing Bangladesh Railway is immense. The inherited colonial network does not suit the strategic transport needs of modern Bangladesh. Tracks, locomotives and rolling stock are relatively in poor condition, and a range of physical and institutional issue inhibits the realisation of full capacity of the existing network. At the same time, railways have in-built advantages over road transport for the carriage of containers and bulk commodities. Railway can offer safer and faster inter-city travel at more reasonable fare than road transport, and has the potential to play a major role in the context of regional transport and trade. Unplanned, piece-meal and economically non-viable projects should not be implemented.

The problems of the Bangladesh Railway include lack of capacity building, lack of proper servicing facilities and delay in finalisation of tenders. The performance of BR is unsatisfactory because of a number of reasons. The development projects are not implemented as per schedule due to lack of skilled and efficient personnel. It may be mentioned that BR could not recruit officials since long, resulting in shortage of manpower which affects the regular operation of the trains. It is impossible to implement the existing development projects with the present number of officials of BR. Due to delay in implementation of the projects the cost increases, which should be looked into. Passengers and freight fares were last updated in 1992 and in the mean time fuel and other operation costs have increased by about 45%.

The future of railway depends on a concerted intervention by the government to address the adverse economic, social and environmental consequences of road building and road transport operations. This intervention has to be policy-based, following an analysis of the economic and environmental costs of competing modes. A beginning has already been made by the present government which felt that there should be a stronger emphasis on rail and inland water transport, vis-à-vis road transport, but had received little support from the government and donors over the past several decades. Political intervention for piece-meal road construction should be stopped.

The vision of BR is to play an important and dominant role in an integrated transport system for the country by emphasising its strengths. The main strength of rail transport

vis-à-vis road transport lies in long distance travel and carriage of goods. Bangladesh is a relatively small country, and for railway to compete with road transport it must be part of a door-to-door service that is integrated with other modes of transport for access and egress. The vision of BR is: (i) to provide safe reliable, effective and efficient rail transport service in the country; and (ii) to maintain upgrade, modernise rail system of the country in a manner which supports government strategies for economic and social development whilst being environmentally and economically sustainable.

Bangladesh Railway is implementing donor driven programmes on the one hand and rehabilitation of tracks as well as minimum infrastructural programme supported by GOB fund on the other. Asian Development Bank signed a \$ 430 million loan to implement nine projects in Feb. 2007 for BR, but only one project has been implemented so far.

Recently, India signed an agreement to implement several projects for procurement of locomotives, coaches and wagons.

To overcome the present problems a master plan for the development of BR is need of hour, where infrastructural development and rolling stock should be given attention. The government should take necessary steps to

recruit manpower (from loco master to high officials) for operating rail transport efficiently and to implement ongoing development projects. If necessary, retired, experienced and skilled manpower may be appointed on contract basis. In addition, a project director (PD) may be appointed for each project and one PD should not be given two or three projects for implementation. Domination of suppliers in respect of procurement should also be looked into.

The potential of the railway in Bangladesh needs to be unlocked through planned investment in tracks, signaling, rolling stock, maintenance and human resources. Donor and supplier-driven projects/programmes should not be considered. The government should take initiative to prepare long-term Railway Master Plan to guide the overall development of BR in the foreseeable future. Once adopted by the government, it will allow BR to go for planned and systematic development. Implementation of the plan along with modern management and operating practices will allow railway to play its full role, not just in the transport system but in fostering the economic and social development of Bangladesh.

BR is still a government owned entity with budgetary support for both train operations and infrastructure investment coming from the government/donor agencies. As such, railway cannot be financially self-supporting either as public or private company. In order to create opportunities for bringing in efficiency as well as to attract more private sector involvement in railway, there is a strong argument in favour of separating infrastructure from operation. Reform of BR is one of the major conditions of donor for financial assistance in development activities and the creation of separate ministry may create problems in convincing donors for financial assistance.

The potentials are enormous. Given the fact that it is a bulk carrier of goods and passengers and also a safe mode of transportation, the railway should receive a high priority from here on. With the recent separation of railway into a full ministry, the nation expects a set of effective measures to restore it to its rightful place in a multi-modal transportation system. In the present world, railways play a vital role in fostering greater connectivity within a country as well as the region.

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ABDUL MATIN

IT is reported that genetic mutations were found in three generations of butterflies near the Fukushima nuclear plant that was crippled by an 8.9 scale earthquake followed by a 10-15 m high tsunami. Nuclear radiation released from the nuclear reactors spread all over the area and reached up to Tokyo, 200 km to the south. Tens of thousands of residents from the affected area within a radius of 20 km from Fukushima were evacuated to safer zones. Vast areas around the plant site were contaminated with radioactive materials. Plants and animals within the vicinity of the accident were exposed to radiations.

Nuclear radiations can damage the DNA and cause mutations. Genetic mutations are of two types: somatic and germ-line. Somatic mutations take place in non-reproductive body cells and hence cannot be inherited. Only the exposed person is affected by somatic mutations. Germ-line mutations occur in the

eggs or sperms and can pass from one generation to another. It may be mentioned here that all DNA damages may not create health problems. The body has a built-in immune system to repair the damage. The immune system, however, is not always effective. Normally, several mutations are needed to damage or kill a body cell. Germ-line mutations can affect fertility and cause abnormalities in future off-springs like what happened among butterflies around Fukushima. The mutant butterflies in Fukushima had shorter wings and damaged eyes.

Such abnormalities naturally raise questions whether similar mutations are possible among humans exposed to radiation. The news of the existence of mutant butterflies must be worrying the residents exposed to radiations in and around Fukushima. The likelihood of human mutation has been under investigation for a long time, particularly since the detonations of two atom bombs in Nagasaki and Hiroshima in 1945.

A 40-year study was conducted among 100,000 survivors of the two atom bombs and their 70,000 offspring. It revealed that "radiation exposure did not cause genetic damage that could lead to human mutations." According to researcher John Boice of the National Cancer Institute: "Ionising radiation is known to cause heritable mutations in many species of plants and animals, but intense study of 70,000 offspring of atomic bomb survivors has failed to identify an increase in congenital abnormalities, cancer, chromosome aberrations or mutational blood protein changes."

## Mutant butterflies in Fukushima: What's next?

The survivors' major health problem was cancer. It may be recalled that an estimated total of 90,000 to 166,000 victims died in Nagasaki and Hiroshima by direct blasts, burns, radiation, cancer and other long term effects. Children exposed to radiation had impaired growth. Referring to a report from Britain that "men who worked at a large nuclear fuel reprocessing complex near Sellafield fathered children who developed leukemia" Boice suggests that "other factors might be the cause of the leukemia cases near Sellafield."

After the nuclear accident at Chernobyl in Ukraine 1986, the area around the nuclear

reactor was evacuated. Four square kilometres of pine forest close to the reactor became "ginger brown and died, earning the name of The Red Forest. Some animals in the worst-hit areas also died or stopped reproducing." After evacuation of humans, the exclusion zone turned into a safe haven for birds and animals. Many species, not previously seen around the area,

also moved in and their populations have been thriving. No genetic abnormality among their offspring was detected.

High background radiation is found in the coastal belt of Karunagappally, Kerala, India because of the presence of thorium rich monazite sand. A study conducted in 1990s among the residents of the coastal belt showed no abnormal occurrences of cancer or leukemia.

Genetic mutation among the residents around Fukushima is most unlikely in view of the findings of the studies conducted in Nagasaki, Hiroshima and Chernobyl.

If there is an accidental release of radiation from any nuclear facility, immediate steps are taken to seal all paths of radiation leakages. Simultaneously, the affected area is evacuated as early as possible and the population is moved to a safe zone in order to minimise the exposure to radiation. The probability of cancer and leukemia cases among the civilian population thus remains very low.

Only a few cases of immediate radiation sicknesses were reported among the plant operators after the Fukushima accident though there was no fatality due to exposure to radiation. It is too early to say how many plant workers will suffer from leukemia or cancer. Even though the doses of radiation received by the workers were monitored carefully, the probability of such diseases among them cannot be ruled out.

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