

TRANSIT FOR INDIA

# Viable use of inland water transport

DR. ABU REZA

BANGLADESH is categorised as one of the least developed countries in the Saarc region. India's seven states across Bangladesh in the North East can be classified at par with Bangladesh or, perhaps, a bit lower in terms of their socio-economic advancement.

Thus for the region's socio-economic conditions to improve rapidly, it is important that the transport cost is kept to a minimum, affecting their trade and commerce. The river system in Bangladesh has a great potential, as the unit cost on inland water transport (IWT) provides the most cost-competitive option, compared to the road or the railways.

Perhaps in recognition of this comparative advantage and, indeed, as a gesture of friendship and cooperation towards India, Bangabandhu had approved the continued operation of a "Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade" in 1972, allowing India to make use of the six designated inland water transport routes for transit of India's freight traffic across Bangladesh.

The protocol, however, required India to pay for transit fees for maintenance of the river navigability and use of Bangladesh vessels. The protocol was subsequently renewed in the early 1980s during Gen. Zia ur Rahman's administration. It, thus, reflects a measure of bipartisan stance in Bangladesh for the use of its inland waterways for transit.

India has now made additional demand for a broad-based multi-modal transit transport operation across Bangladesh, utilising all modes of transport, and the sea and river ports. In the context of Bangladesh, there is a genuine desire to extend cooperation to India but, at the same time, there is concern as to how to realise and recoup the overall cost of the investment to be made, and to meet the recurrent cost of operation and maintenance of the facilities yet to be created.

To this end, expert committees have submitted their recommendations to the Tariff Commission, Ministry of Commerce. It may be worth while, all the same, to clarify and add to the issues which may be considered by both the countries for their mutual benefits.

The "transit" proposal currently being considered is very comprehensive, calling for utilisation of Bangladesh road, rail, inland waterways and the sea and river ports. This would entail multi-modal transport operation at Chittagong, Mongla and Ashuganj ports and for onward clearance of traffic both by road and railways.

What may not have been considered yet is the estimated overall total future traffic, its origin/destination, commodity composition or its technical configuration, based on which one could make optimal allocation of traffic as between modes and routes, whereby the concerned parties, espe-

cially the relatively backward seven north eastern states of India, could make maximum economic gains. It is important to recognise that cost of transportation needing inter-modal and/or multiple transfer facilities is inevitably more expensive.

"The Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade" allowed India to make advantageous use of the lower cost mode of 'transit' operation on as many as six inland water routes through Bangladesh. The

should be seen to have great legitimate interest in maintaining the navigability of the Bangladesh rivers which it can help accomplish by:

- Augmenting the flow of water on all the international rivers, such as the Ganges, Teesta, Brahmaputra etc., and
- Through undertaking the needed dredging.

Besides, being already adversely affected due to climate change, the Bangladesh prime minister herself has been championing the cause of the country in all international fora. Already some rise in the sea level, combined with the adverse effects of Ganges and other barrages on international rivers, are contributing to increased salinity in the river water in Bangladesh; causing loss of agricultural land, fisheries and fona.

Unrestricted flow of water through the international rivers is virtually the only way to avert a human catastrophe in Bangladesh. Therefore, in the impending meetings with India, the water issue should be given top priority. India should be requested to address not only the critical importance of the navigability of the Bangladesh rivers -- thus allowing for a much higher level of Indian "transit" traffic through a viable waterways system -- but also help save Bangladesh from the encroaching salinity from the sea, an outcome of climate change, but significantly resulting out of India's withdrawal of water from international rivers during dry season, and its disproportionate amount of hydro-carbon emission in the region.

In fact, during the Indian foreign minister's visit to Bangladesh, a helicopter ride over the affected region can be arranged for him to see first hand as to how Bangladesh, as a lower riparian country, is adversely affected due to the disproportion withdrawal of water from the international rivers.

It is thus incumbent upon all the concerned authorities to initiate a comprehensive study to look into the overall needs for the Indian transit through Bangladesh with the aim of securing the optimum benefit for all, including the Indian states which are located in geographically disadvantaged northeastern region.

Also the proposal for the use of the Ashuganj river port should be subject to a full feasibility study which would examine and establish the port's overall expansion potentiality, and its ability to meet the future needs of the Bangladesh's own requirement.

Indian transit needs, too, in relation to the cost of the needed infrastructure facilities, and the issue of alternative IWT mode, which may prove more cost effective, should be the subject of the proposed feasibility study; keeping in view that the goal is to optimise economic benefits for all the concerned people.

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ZAHEDUL I KHAN

**India should be requested to address not only the critical importance of the navigability of the Bangladesh rivers but also help save Bangladesh from the encroaching salinity from the sea, significantly resulting out of India's withdrawal of water from international rivers during dry season, and its disproportionate amount of hydro-carbon emission in the region.**

traffic performance indicates that India has been making the most successful use of the Bangladesh inland water transport (IWT) facility, as the manifold increase in India's 'transit' traffic through Bangladesh since 1972 will bear out.

This is so because the IWT is a less costly mode of transport compared to road transport or the railway.

A recent study on "Revival of Inland Water Transport: Options and Strategies" undertaken by World Bank suggests that unit cost of Bangladesh IWT is significantly lower than Road or the Railway. It is estimated that while road transport cost per ton km is Tk.4.5, on IWT it is Tk.0.98. It is therefore important that the concerned Indian authorities should be apprised of the potential for even further transport cost reduction if larger capacity vessels are employed.

In fact, given capability in ship-building, Bangladesh can help build the suitable vessels for India. IWT operation was popular even during the Bengal River Services (BRS) operation on the comparable routes during the British days. IWT operation can be further enhanced if the related river channels are regularly dredged, an exercise for which the prime minister of Bangladesh has laid great emphasis.

India has also expressed its interest to participate in the required dredging operation. Indeed, India

## IN MEMORIAM

### Prof. Mosharraf Hossain:

#### A loving tribute from a former student and colleague

DR. ABDULLAH SHIBLI

PROF. Mosharraf Hossain, the eminent economist, professor, and scholar, passed away in Dhaka on February 21, 2013. He was a role model for scores of economists and other social scientists who worked with him in the government, and/or at Dhaka and Rajshahi Universities. It would not be an exaggeration to state that he left legends of passionate admirers, where those who entered the economics profession before and after Bangladesh's Independence acclaimed him for being universally respected for his brilliance, uprightness, and wisdom for more than half a century.

I came to know Professor Mosharraf Hossain when he was in the faculty of the Economics Department of Dhaka University where he taught me Development Economics. His classes were a great draw for his erudition, passionate delivery, and the great enthusiasm with which he covered each topic in this course.

Our classes would meet in a big classroom located on the third floor of the Arts Faculty building in Nilkhet. The first thing that caught our attention was his very friendly and broad smile. We already knew of him from his work during the War of Liberation with the Mujibnagar Government, and his subsequent tenure as one of the founding members of the first Bangladesh Planning Commission.

I was torn between taking Development Economics and International Trade as my fourth subject for my Masters Program. In the past, Development Economics class was avoided by the MA class because of its fluid curriculum, and con-

trovery between the different schools of thought in the discipline. But, when I registered for his class I was not disappointed. Prof. Mosharraf Hossain brought to bear in his lectures not only his practical experience, but also his grasp of the issues and a sense of critical openness to the views of the various camps.

His classes were both challenging and exciting, since it was sprinkled with constant jokes, and mostly, due to his ability to present difficult issues with a sense of humor -- his big booming laughs always kept us energised while engaged.

In a big class, it is often easy to get lost, but "Mosharraf Sir," as we used to call him, knew each of us by name, and took a personal interest in our studies and career interests. I remember that one day when I dropped by his office for an informal chat, to seek some guidance on my career path, he was very honest and insightful about my skills and knack, and ended by saying, "I think you will do well in research."

It took me by surprise that he not only correctly guessed about my area of interest but also was willing to offer his opinion in such a forthright fashion.

Prof. Mosharraf Hossain was also my boss in my first professional job. He hired me as a Lecturer right after we finished our MA final exams. It was then the practice at DU to publish the results of the exams a few months after the last paper was over. After our



Prof. Mosharraf Hossain

MA exams were over, I and another classmate got an invitation from Prof. Hossain as the Chairperson to join the Economics Department as a Lecturer while we were waiting for the results to be announced.

During my brief tenure at Dhaka University, he was a very good mentor and generous colleague. I also had the good fortune of knowing his wife Inari who was a faculty member of the English Department, and his sons who were at Udayan School with my youngest brother Salek.

It was indeed an honour to have been Prof. Mosharraf Hossain's student and colleague: A very warm person, who was unstinting with his friendship, and always ready to greet you with his very heart-warming smile.

The writer lives and works in Boston, USA.

## SHIFTING IMAGES

### Compartmentalising adversity



MILIA ALI

I am still reeling from the after-effects of a friend's unannounced visit last week. She is someone I see, perhaps, two or three times a year. But she always manages to leave me with a lingering feeling of gloom. You know what I mean -- the kind of person who can be best described as the "harbinger of doom." The moment she walks in through the front door, she brings in a whiff of negativity that settles so persistently that no amount of positive thinking can dilute it for days at end.

My friend is convinced that our entire world is moving towards a precipice. The United States is on the verge of an economic disaster and we are soon to see the effects in increased crime rates, loss of jobs, political upheaval. As for Bangladesh -- according to her it's already "over the brink." The Middle East is an active volcano spewing religious extremists, cruel dictators and disgruntled masses. China is moving too fast for its own good; and India too slow for anyone's good. No amount of reasoning or counter argument can deter her from ranting over a future doomsday scenario!

Had her complaints been confined to the wider world outside, one could stay detached and calm. However, she has no compunction in invading the private space. In her perception, it's not only the earth that is heading towards an apocalypse; our personal lives are supposedly in disarray and set on an irreversible course of collapse!

Let me step back and digress into a generic discussion on the impact these negative people have on those around them. Like it or not, the human mind tends to absorb negativity like a sponge. Unfortunately, we cannot completely escape negativity because it's difficult to totally shirk people who spread negative energy. According to a study, "eight out of 10 people have had a toxic friend in their lives -- yet 83% say they've hung onto them because it's too hard to sever ties." So, why is it difficult to shed

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off these people who make our lives miserable? Partly it's empathetic, but mostly it's because we are unable to demarcate our private space in the social milieu.

The core question that piques me, however, is why some people continue to complain about life while others remain content with whatever they have. I concede that few people intentionally spread negative vibes and individuals are negative due to external circumstances or personal experiences. Most often a negative perspective is a side effect of some trauma that a person has suffered or problems they may be countering. Airing complaints is a coping mechanism since venting one's emotions reduces the level of frustration. If this were a temporary situation, it could be excused.

However, what becomes tiresome for others is when a friend is a habitual complainer and uses negativity as a means of attracting attention or as a social crutch. Even worse are the cynics who believe that they are being intellectually superior by picking on flaws or taking the contrarian position. In a way I feel sorry for these people because they are constantly on high alert and miss out on the pleasure of feeling good about life.

Of course, we also have another category -- people who romanticise negativity. The type of character immortalised by Shakespeare's Jacques in "As You Like It" -- who can "suck melancholy out of a song as a weasel sucks eggs." I don't want to put a Freudian label on these individuals but they are the eternal pessimists and may be beyond redemption, because they love being "the" miserable, tortured souls!

Research suggests that human beings are, to a large extent, genetically predisposed to being happy or sad. But the important issue is how much of this temperament can be fine-tuned by will power or changing external conditions. I believe that people can change their attitudes. For instance, I have an elderly friend who cares for an emotionally challenged adult child and a husband suffering from Parkinson's disease, but manages to remain happy and cheerful most of the time. She tells me that the secret is to compartmentalise: to confront adversity with a degree of acceptance but not to miss out on the simple happy things that life offers.

She provides a simple prescription for countering negativity: "On a pleasant evening, with the chai flowing, the samosas sizzling, the music playing and a few loved ones around, my mind can fly on wings and sing with joy. I get recharged and am ready to take the hard knocks that fate has sent my way." Her *joie de vivre* has convinced me that contrary to what most of us may believe, positivism and resilience can be cultivated -- they are not simply genetic traits.

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.