

DOMESTIC CONNECTIVITY IN BANGLADESH

A story of significant progress

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The development of domestic transport and communication is a prerequisite of economic advancement of a country. In general, means of transport influences the distribution of both economic production and population. The physical geographical condition of a country in turn largely determines the nature of its transportation. Bangladesh is fortunate to be served by various means of communication - waterways, railways, roads, and airways - each having its own advantages and disadvantages.

Inland water transport

Bangladesh is a riverine country. It is crisscrossed by over 700 rivers, which include the mighty Ganges (Padma), the Jamuna (Brahmaputra), the Meghna, and the Karnaphuli and their innumerable tributaries and distributaries. These rivers have for centuries provided good means of water transport, but at the same time have made building of roads and railways difficult and expensive. The rivers provided excellent domestic communication in the past and are still one of the major means of transport today. There is however a wide variation in the length of navigable waterways during the rainy season when vast areas of the land are inundated and the dry season when many rivers are rendered unsuitable for navigation, especially for larger water vessels. The navigability of many rivers, including the major ones, has been significantly reduced due to the natural hydro-geographical dynamics, and human intervention both outside and inside the country.

Currently, 8433 km of waterways is navigable by large vessels during the rainy season and only about 4800 km during the dry season. Waterways serve both people and goods movement.

Despite problems of navigability, the volume of both cargo and passengers has increased significantly over the recent decades. The volume of cargo increased from only 5.69 million tonnes in 1994-95 to 35.86 million tonnes in 2011-12, a nearly six-fold increase in 17 years. The growth in volume of passengers was equally significant. It increased from 68.01 million in 1994-95 to 350.98 million in 2011-2012, also nearly a six-fold growth.

Dhaka, the capital city, is centrally located and enjoys excellent waterway connectivity to almost all major corners of the country. Large passenger water vessels with modern facilities travel through a number of routes. The more important popular routes are Dhaka-Barisal, Dhaka-Bhola, Dhaka-Patuakhali, Dhaka-Khulna and other southern locations. There are now tourist boats making journeys to the Sundarbans and to the coastal islands. There are also water-transport routes between Bangladesh water ports and Kolkata. Transit facilities for India have been introduced through Bangladesh water and land routes.

The cargo routes are numerous, well over 100 with similar number of river stations or *ghats*, and river ports, Dhaka, Narayanganj, Chandpur, Bhairab, Barisal, Bhola, Khulna, Chalna, Mongla, Patuakhali and Chittagong being the busiest ones. Chilmari, Fulchari, Bahadurabad Ghat,

Chhatak, Jagannathanj Ghat, Rajshahi, Sirajganj, Nagarbari, Bheramara, Aricha, Goalondo, Daudkandi, Madaripur, Gopalganj, Sandwip, Hatia, Barguna, Cox's Bazar, etc. are the other important river ports. The international ports, Chittagong and Mongla, also serve as inland ports.

Bangladesh railway is expected to experience a revolutionary expansion when the under-construction Padma Multipurpose Bridge is completed (hopefully in 2018), as it will also include a railway track and shall connect the hitherto unserved region in southern Bangladesh.

The inland water transportation is managed both by the public sector [Inland Water Transport Authority (IWTA)] and the private sector, which has a much larger share (over 90 per cent).

At one time the country had several hundred thousand country boats, most

of which have been converted as engine-driven boats, making life easier for the boatmen. The number of registered water vessels is over 9000. Some private water transport operators have floated very large vessels with capacity for over 1000 passengers in normal times and well over three to four times the capacity during Eid journeys. Travel safety at such times is a low priority.

Inland water transport is constantly facing problems of safe navigability due to siltation of the rivers. In certain routes, even in the large rivers, expensive dredging operations need to be carried out. Rivers like Teesta, Karotoa, Doodkumar, in the northern districts experience the closure of navigation routes. Major river crossings even along the major road transportation routes also suffer due to erosion of ferry *ghats* and lowering of draft level due to siltation. The Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100 is proposing large scale dredging for many of the rivers and to improve inland water transportation on a long-term basis.

Rail transport

The railway was introduced in the country by the British as early as 1862 (with a short length of 53.12 km between Darshana and Jagati in the south-west to be followed soon by a line between Narayanganj and Dhaka in the centre and another two lengths between Chittagong and Comilla and Laksam and Chandpur in the east). The basic structure of the railway system that exists in Bangladesh today was established during the British period, well within 1947. In 1951, the total length

of railways in the Bangladesh territory was 2616 km, of which 805 km was broad gauge (in the western region), 1773 km was metre gauge (east of the Jamuna River) and only 32 km was narrow gauge (in Khulna-Bagerhat). The narrow gauge railway was later converted to metre gauge. The total length of the railways increased marginally to 2791 km in 2011-12 of which 659 km was broad gauge, 1757 km was metre gauge and 375 km was dual gauge. With the construction of the Bangabandhu Multi Purpose Bridge (Jamuna Setu) in 2001, arrangement was made for dual gauge (both broad and metre gauge in the same track). The Bangabandhu Bridge has enabled a link between the western and eastern sectors of the railways. The railways provide comparatively safer and cheaper transportation of people and goods, than road transportation. The country is reasonably well-connected by the railway; the central focus is Dhaka although during the British era, rail routes (and also steamer routes) were oriented towards Kolkata, which was the principal port for export, particularly of jute from the present Bangladesh territory.

Bangladesh railway is expected to experience a revolutionary expansion when the under-construction Padma Multipurpose Bridge is completed (hopefully in 2018), as it will also include a railway track and shall connect the hitherto unserved region in southern Bangladesh. The railway today has some 443 stations, with a number of junctions.

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