

A story of significant progress



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 17

Dhaka, Chittagong, Comilla, Akhaura, Barisal, Sylhet, Iswardi, Rajbari, Parbatipur, Jessore and Khulna are some of the important railway stations. The three Chittagong Hill Districts are not served by railway.

The volume of railway passengers has increased from 39.47 million in 1994-95 to 66.13 million in 2011-12, but the volume of freight has recorded decline over the years, such as from 3.28 million tonnes in 2007-08 to 2.19 million tonnes

in 2011-12. The loss of freight by railways seems to have been compensated by its increase in the road and waterway sectors. The recent thinking in the government is in the favour of expansion of the railways, both in terms of mileage and quality. High speed inter-city train services between Dhaka and other major destinations are being thought about. Rail transportation is a fully public sector operation and characterised by poor governance. Some examples of its recent introductions are the

Demu service between Kamalapur/Dhaka and Narayanganj. The Dhaka-Kolkata Friendship Train has been a fairly successful venture.

Roads

Being a delta and crisscrossed by innumerable rivers, some of which are several kilometres in width with shifting courses and experiencing annual flooding, building roads has not been easy in Bangladesh. Floods even wash away existing roads and bridges. Indeed there were only a few *pucca* roads, even as recent as in 1947, when the total length of such roads was only 480 km, the longest stretch being the 56.32 km road between Sylhet and Tamabil in the north-east. The total length of *kutcha* roads at that time in the whole country was 36000 km. The situation had improved somewhat by 1970, when the country (or the province of the then East Pakistan) had 3860 km of *pucca* roads. But the situation has changed dramatically in the last four decades since independence. The war ravaged road infrastructure was not only fully restored but in fact radically transformed. There was policy support in favour of road transportation, over railways and waterways. There was also pressure from the growing private sector and foreign motor vehicle companies and their governments. People in general also seemed to prefer road transportation, speed and accessibility being prime factors. Roads, *pucca* or semi-*pucca* (brick soled) or at least *kutcha* roads now connect almost all (80,000 more or less) villages in the country. Motorable *pucca* roads connect all 490 Upazila headquarters and nearly all (of the 4550) Union centres. The few which are not accessible by road (in the southern districts) are reached by waterways. Indeed, Bangladesh today is said to have one of the highest road densities (mileage against unit area of land surface), although it may not enjoy a high ratio of length of road to population.

Because of geomorphologic reasons road building is expensive in Bangladesh, but a kilometre of road in Bangladesh serves a higher number of people than in a country of thin population density (such as USA, Canada, Australia or Saudi Arabia). Public roads in Bangladesh are developed by either the Roads and Highways Department (RHD) or the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED). Roads are of several categories depending mainly on crest-width. RHD is responsible for building national highways (12.2 metre in width), regional highways (11.0 metres) and Zila roads (7.3 metres), while LGED is responsible for Upazila roads (7.3 metres), Union roads (4.9 metres) and village roads (3.7 metres). All national highways, regional highways and nearly half of the Zila roads are bituminised and the rest are brick-soled. The total length of roads in Bangladesh today is over 354,890 km, with 3813 km of national highways, 4247 km of

regional highways, 13,242 km of Zila roads (of RHD), 39,756 km of Upazila roads, 46,259 km of Union roads and 247,574 km of village roads, under LGED. On an average each of the nearly 800,000 villages has almost 4.44 km of road length and there is a kilometre of road for about 450 Bangladeshis (assuming total population being 160 million). These should be respectable figures for a lower middle income country. However, the per capita availability of

Mymensingh, Dhaka-Sylhet, Dhaka Rajshahi, etc.) are being upgraded to four-lane highways. Long-distance elevated expressways are also being thought of. The Padma Bridge will dramatically improve road connectivity from the capital to the south and southwestern regions of the country.

Bangladesh geographically is a small country with a roughly rectangular shape. Its capital Dhaka is almost in the geographical centre, and all national highways radiate out from Dhaka. Railways, river routes, roads, air routes all focus on Dhaka, making it a critically important multi-modal hub.

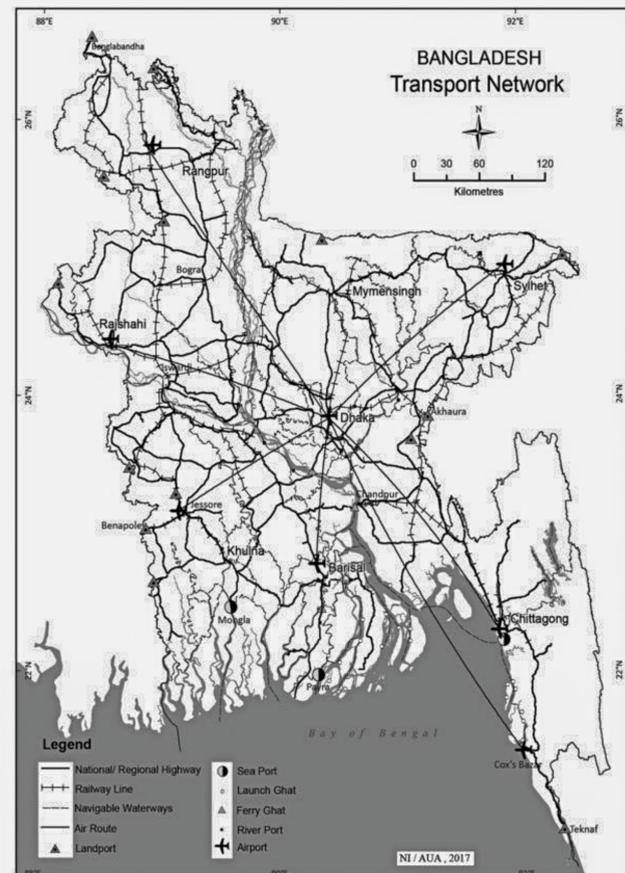
The road network of national highways is organised along a number of corridors: Dhaka-Chittagong (to the south-east), Dhaka-Sylhet (to the north-east), Dhaka-Rajshahi/Rangpur/Dinajpur (to the north-west), and Dhaka-Barisal-Barguna (to the south). In fact, almost all districts are directly accessible from Dhaka by road. The two farthest district towns, Cox's Bazar in the southeast and Panchagarh in the north-east, are less than 400 km away from the capital.

The capital is also connected with Kolkata by direct bus route. Similar routes are also planned for Agartola in Tripura. Bangladesh is also in the Asian highway connectivity.

Domestic air transport
Air transport in the present Bangladesh territory started with military aviation during World War II, when a few airstrips were built in Dhaka, Comilla, Feni, Chittagong, Cox's Bazar, Chakaria, Sylhet, Jessore, Rajshahi and Lalmonirhat. Most of these airstrips currently serve as modernised domestic airports. Nine are operative: Dhaka, Chittagong and Sylhet (which are also international airports), Cox's Bazar, Saidpur, Rajshahi, Iswardi,

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bituminous roads is very low.

With Bangladesh being a country of a large population and experiencing rapid economic growth, the movements of people and goods have increased. Even with expansion of road network, mileage and width of roads, the capacity of roads is far short of the need and demand. For reasons of geography (mainly presence of rivers, floods, erosion etc.), shortage of financial resources (investment in infrastructure), inadequacy of technological knowledge, management weakness (especially in monitoring and maintenance) and alleged widespread system loss (i.e. corruption), the quality of road transportation service is unsatisfactory. Most alarming is the situation of safety on roads, with increasing incidents of fatal accidents. Highway traffic discipline is seriously lacking.

Nevertheless, the government gives high priority to the road transportation sector. To meet the growing demand several highways (like Dhaka-Chittagong, Dhaka-

Jessore and Barisal. The Civil Aviation Authority is responsible for air transport management. With growing economy and increase in private income, the demand for domestic air transport has increased significantly. Biman Bangladesh Airlines in the public sector is the principal operator, while a number of private airlines also provide service. Some private airlines that began business in the 1990s have closed service, while a few new ones are now in operation. There are also private helicopter services available commercially.

In conclusion, domestic connectivity in Bangladesh has experienced quite significant progress in the last four and a half decades since independence. We, however, feel that in all modes in the sector, safety concerns must be given priority attention. Overall management improvement is also critical.

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