

PADMA BRIDGE: AN
AUDACIOUS DREAM
COMES TRUE

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MISSION IMPOSSIBLE ACCOMPLISHED

A bridge of Bangladesh's very own finally comes
to reality riding through rough waters

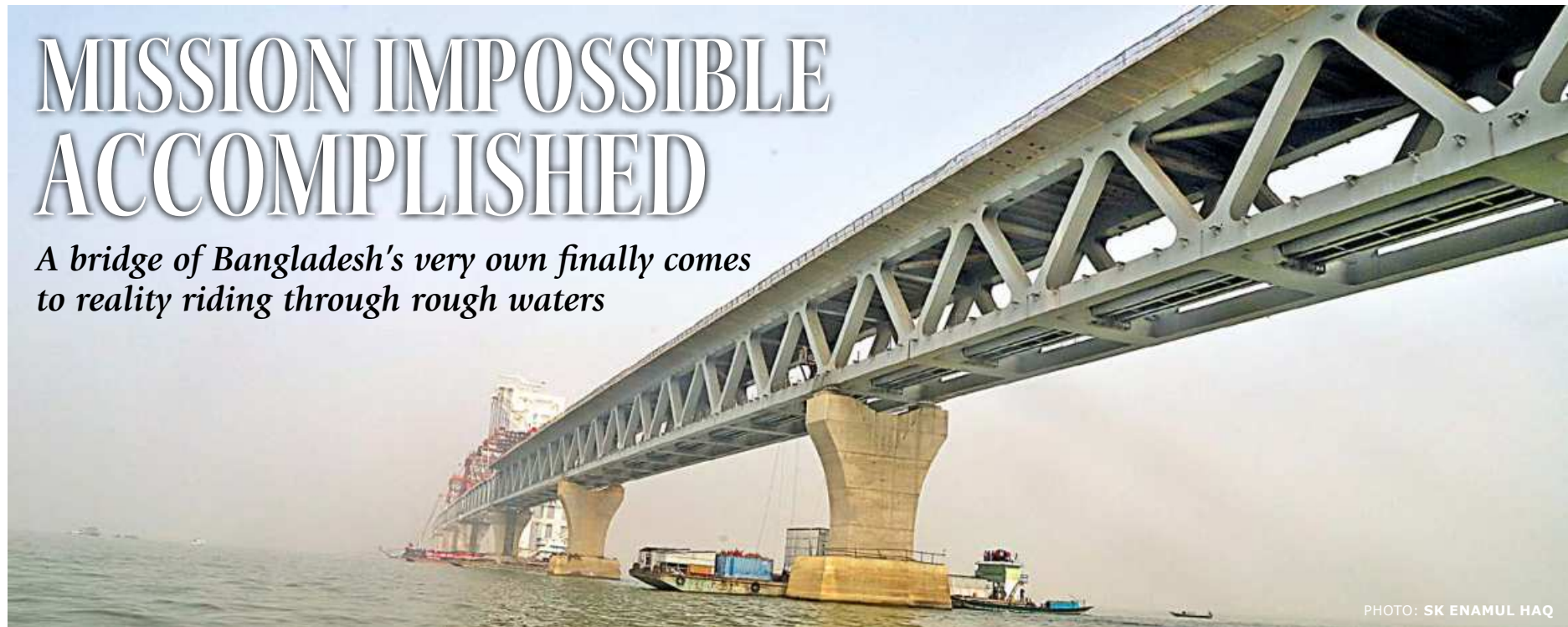


PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

WASIM BIN HABIB AND TUHIN
SHUBHRA ADHIKARY

Mizanur Rahman stood still, gazing with awe from the bank of the Padma river at the specialised floating crane laying down the last span on the mega structure yesterday.

As the 150-metre span was finally placed on pillars 12 and 13 at the Mawa end, he was thrilled and elated to see the full structure of the Padma bridge.

"Look, here is our dream bridge standing tall. What a great engineering feat it is!" marvelled Mizanur, pointing to the 6.15km bridge that became fully visible for the first time.

The Padma bridge is not a dream anymore; it's now a reality. The mega bridge is expected to be a huge boon for the underdeveloped south and south-western region of Bangladesh.

But decades ago, it was rather an audacious dream, a daunting challenge to tame the turbulent river. Crossing the mighty Padma has always been strenuous and sometimes dangerous due to unreliable and limited ferry connections and long waits for crowded boats and launches.

"I still remember it took around three hours to cross the river by the ro-ro ferry when I first came to Dhaka in 1998. Twenty-two years down the line, it still takes a similar amount of time now," said Mizanur, a private jobholder

hailing from Madaripur.

"But once the Padma bridge opens to the public, we can go home in a few hours and come back to Dhaka the same day. Our travel time will be slashed immensely."

The two-level steel truss composite bridge -- the top deck accommodating a four-lane highway for vehicles and the lower deck for a set of railway tracks -- is the culmination of years-long efforts and an impressive engineering feat.

The authorities expect to open it to the public in the first half of 2022.

The bridge that connects Dhaka to 21 southern districts is a potential catalyst for major economic change in the lives of over 30 million people living in the region and will give a major boost to trade and economic activities.

The Tk 30,193-crore bridge will connect multi-lane expressways and railway lines with Dhaka to Mongla port and the largest deep-sea port at Payra.

It will be one of the major transport corridors linking Bangladesh with India, Nepal and Bhutan besides enhancing regional trade and collaboration along the Asian Highway and the Trans-Asian Railway Network.

REALISING A DREAM

A bridge across the mighty Padma had been in talks since the mid '90s. The idea gained momentum in 1997 when the construction of

Bangabandhu Bridge over the Jamuna was nearing completion, ushering in new hope and optimism among people of the south-western region.

The pre-feasibility study of Padma bridge was conducted in 1998 and 1999. The government then approached the Japanese government for financial and technical assistance for a feasibility study, which was conducted by Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) between 2003 and 2005.

Following further studies and exploring financing options, the government approved the Padma Multipurpose Bridge Project worth Tk 10,161 crore on August 20, 2007 to be built with donor assistance.

On January 11, 2011, the Padma Bridge Project was revised with the estimated cost raised to Tk 20,507 crore, mainly to incorporate a rail line into the bridge.

The government concluded loan agreements with four development partners in early 2011 and an agreement for \$1.2 billion was signed with the World Bank on April 28, 2011.

SETBACKS

But the billion-dollar project became uncertain in September 2011, when the lead donor, WB, suspended its promised \$1.2 billion loans on allegation of corruption conspiracy, which the government denied.

KEY DATES

Pre-feasibility study
1998-1999

Feasibility study
2003-2005

ECNEC approval
Aug 20, 2007

Physical work began
Nov 26, 2014

PM formally inaugurated
work on Dec 12, 2015

First span installed on
Sept 30, 2017

Last and 41st span
installed on Dec 10, 2020

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A perfect riposte

PM braves all odds to realise an
audacious dream, serve a fitting
reply to critics

PARTHA PRATIM BHATTACHARJEE

It was a dream of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman which his daughter Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, with her steely resolve, is about to fulfill.

The dream project Padma Bridge connects the southwest region with the rest of the country, and after many ups and downs, adversities and controversy, this dream is about to be materialized.

There were many obstacles, most notably the uncertainty of funds after the World Bank withdrew, citing 'corruption conspiracy' which led to fierce criticism at home and abroad.

There were also many physical challenges, one of them being the river Padma herself, due to her extremely strong currents. Besides, there were complications over the formation of the solid layer at the bottom of the river.

But against all odds, adversaries and detractors, a singular-minded Sheikh Hasina stood firm like a true statesman. Her perseverance and nationalistic pride that acted as a driving force has made the impossible, possible.

The dream Padma Bridge is now a reality. It is not just a structure, it is a symbol of the country's pride, progress and coming of age. The Padma Bridge is a significant milestone in the glorious chapter of Bangladesh's history.

Although Awami League promised to build a bridge over Jamuna, Buriganga, Sitalakha and Karnaphuli rivers in its 1970 election manifesto, Bangabandhu made the announcement to build a bridge over Padma after the independence in 1971.

But after Bangabandhu was assassinated along with his family members in 1975 on that black day of August 15, the dream Padma Bridge remained elusive until his daughter Sheikh Hasina embarked on the Herculean task of fulfilling that dream.



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Although the world denied, Bangladesh kept the dream alive and now it is about to become a reality...



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Mirinja Point, Lama, Bandarban



Rohingya camp, Ukhiya, Cox's Bazar