



Mission Impossible accomplished

FROM J1

"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

DEADLINE AND COST	
2014/2015	Tk 10,161 crore
Dec 2015	Tk 20,507 crore
Dec 2018	Tk 28,793 crore
June 2021	Tk 30,193 crore

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. The ruckus resulted in filing of corruption cases against some project officials and resignation of then communications minister Syed Abul Hossain. Yet, the WB cancelled its financing in June 2012.

Other financiers -- Asian Development Bank (ADB), JICA and Islamic Development Bank (IDB) -- also cancelled their loan proposals, leading to the project being stalled for some time.

However, the allegations against the government officials were later found to be

BRIDGE FACTS	
Length (road and rail)	6.15 km
Number of piers	42
Number of spans	41
Approach road	12.12 km
River training area	14 km

untrue by the Anti-Corruption Commission and a Dhaka court. A Canadian court also found no proof of graft conspiracy involving the project.

Then, in July 2012, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina took a bold decision to go ahead with implementation of the project with the country's own funds.

Two Chinese companies -- China Major Bridge Engineering Company Ltd and Sinohydro Corporation Limited -- were appointed for two major works, the construction of bridge and river training.

In December 2015, Sheikh Hasina inaugurated the main construction work of the most challenging engineering project of the country, having one of the deepest foundations in the world.

DAUNTING CHALLENGES

But the project has been a huge engineering challenge as the mighty Padma carries a large volume of sediment, making its bed soft and tricky to build on. The most difficult part was river training and piling because of the strong river currents and erosion.

The second major challenge was to drive in the piles which will carry the load from road and rail traffic as well as the weight of the bridge to the foundation.

And the situation was further complicated in 2016 when differences emerged between the information obtained through geotechnical investigation in the design phase and that in the construction phase of piles of the bridge.

The project authority had to change the design of the 22 bridge piers, causing a further delay. The first span was installed in September 2017.

By this time, the project costs went up to over Tk 30,000 crore.

As the project progressed smoothly, then arrived the Covid-19 pandemic at the shores of Bangladesh. Yet the work continued, albeit slowly due to a shortage of workers -- Chinese and local -- and poor supply of construction materials.

The project gained pace after the end of the Covid-19-induced two-month shutdown and return of Chinese nationals. Then, again, the strong currents in the Padma started causing problems but the work again gathered momentum.

NEXT STEPS

Installation of the roadway deck and railway stringers is going on now. Of the 2,917 roadway slabs, 1,333 were installed as of yesterday while 1,942 out of 2,959 roadway slabs were installed.

Some other work, including installation of electricity and gas lines, has to be completed before the bridge is opened.

However, the railway stringers, which went into the Padma due to erosion at a yard, will have to be brought from Luxembourg, which will cause some delay, officials said.

Talking to the reporters on December 7, Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader said it would take 10 to 12 months to complete other work after installation of the last span, which was placed at 12:02pm yesterday.

However, a top official of the Bridge Division told this newspaper last month, "It will take 12 to 14 months to complete all works. It may be opened [for the public] in the first half of 2022."

But Mizanur is as eager as ever. "I am really looking forward to the opening of the dream bridge."

PADMA BRIDGE: AN AUDACIOUS DREAM COMES TRUE



'Gap of South' bridged

FROM J4

although the distance is 170 kilometres down that route due to time-consuming loading and unloading of vehicles in ferries, and also the longer distance the ferry travels compared to Patuira.

Over the Padma Bridge, the journey will take around four hours.

According to a Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) study, a 10 percent decrease in travel time to and from Dhaka will lead to a 5.5 percent increase in district economic output. The annual average daily traffic would be around 29,278 by 2024, as projected by ADB. The benefits of the project would be equivalent to an annual increase of at least 1.7 percent of southwest region GDP in value and of 0.56 percent of annual increase of national GDP, according to the World Bank (WB) project appraisal document in 2011.

It also said the poverty reduction rate would increase by one percent in the southwest region and by 0.8 percent at the national level.

The Padma Bridge will reduce travel time between Dhaka and Mongla port, which is shorter in distance than the Chattogram port from Dhaka -- Chattogram's 264 kilometres against Mongla's 170 kilometres. Greater

A perfect riposte

FROM J1

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, Sitalakhya 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. But it has been a rough ride for her. The World Bank withdrew its \$1.2 bn pledge on June 29, 2011 citing corruption conspiracy. The other development partners ADB, JICA and IDB also opted out.

Within one week after WB's withdrawal, the premier announced that the Padma Bridge would be built with the country's own funds.

The prime minister also laid out ambitious plans to mobilise resources, including levying surcharges and issuing sovereign bonds.

movement of freight between Dhaka-Mongla port will also reduce the congestion at the Chattogram port.

It will also provide direct links between two major seaports of the country and will be an integral part of the Asian Highway One and Trans-Asian railway network systems (Sylhet-Kanchpur-Dhaka-Mawa-Jashore-Benapole, connecting Kolkata to the eastern part of India on the eastern side of Bangladesh), said the appraisal report of WB.

The river training works of Padma Bridge will also help control river erosion, a recurrent acute problem in Bangladesh and one of the major causes of landlessness and extreme poverty. Trade and tourism could be another important source of growth. Besides internal trade, trade with India will receive a boost from lower transport time and cost.

The bridge will help maximise farm and non-farm growth possibilities, diversifying crops and agriculture in the saline environment and availing trade potential within the country due to connectivity and with India. This includes dairy and fish processing, in particular shrimp, sawmilling, jute textile and jute-bailing. With transport and energy constraints removed, the small and medium enterprises such as the

garment industry, export-oriented small-scale manufacturing etc. will have strong prospects for growth, said the WB report.

The experience after the Jamuna Bridge was that labour mobility across the river went down, indicating increased economic activities within the local economy of the southwest Region.

Increased farm activities--especially the increase in vegetable production--would produce that effect. This is also expected to happen in the areas opened up by the Padma Bridge. One simulated effect of the bridge derived by use of the national SAM (Social accounting matrix) was a 10.2 percent increase in total employment over the base level. This result was consistent with what was found as a likely impact of the bridge on the gross national output.

The World Bank pulled out as lead financier of Padma Bridge with a 1.2 billion dollar pledge, on June 29, 2012, alleging "credible evidence" of a "high-level corruption conspiracy" among Bangladeshi officials to misuse money earmarked for the bridge. ADB and JICA also pulled out.

Bangladesh, however, termed the "corruption conspiracy" allegation as "baseless" and eventually decided to build the bridge from its own funds.

She instructed different ministries to slash development projects and divert the money to fund the multipurpose bridge.

The premier decided that the construction work of Padma Bridge would start with our own funds. And if any international donor or organisation wants to take part in the project, a decision would be made upon discussion.

After the WB complaint, corruption allegations surfaced against a family member of the prime minister, cabinet member, advisor, the then secretary of the bridge division and many others.

But the prime minister has always maintained that those allegations were unfounded. She even asked individuals to be reported to her if anyone does anything using her name.

The WB decision to back out not only put the project in uncertainty, but also hurt our nationalistic pride to the core. The prime minister made no secret of her feeling.

"They want us to beg. They want us to continue as guinea pigs. We will go ahead with this project using our own resources," Sheikh Hasina told the parliament on July 8, 2012.

Bangladesh's relations with the WB became strained over the corruption conspiracy allegation and eventually Bangladesh officially withdrew its request for funding on February 1, 2013.

The WB started its own investigation and had requested the Canada police to take action against SNC Lavalin. After the trial procedure for over five years, a court in Canada disposed of the corruption case. The court in its verdict said that the evidence submitted was conjectural, filled with gossip and rumours. The court also acquitted the three accused Lavalin officials.

At that time Bangladesh said the corruption allegation levelled against the country was part of a conspiracy and meant to tarnish the image of the country.

When the construction of the bridge started in November 2014, many criticised it, saying it was impossible or just a day-dream. Some, at that time, said that the construction

of the bridge using our own resources would not be viable.

They said it was risky. Diverting development funds to the bridge project could affect sectors such as health and education, undermining social achievement and delaying growth.

But the steadfast premier took all the criticisms in bold stride.

She formally inaugurated the construction of the bridge on December 16, 2015. In that ceremony on Victory Day, the premier said, "We will have to shrug off the begging mentality to do such enormous work."

"I wanted to show that we can do it. We have reached that day, today."

Ever since that assertive, confident statement was made, the premier moved along with her party second-in-command Obaidul Quader and others to fulfill that audacious dream.

Along the way there were hiccups with piling works of some piers. Covid-19 also slowed down the progress of the work, but could hardly deter the determination of a nation ready to overcome the last geographical barrier under the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

The bridge is set to change the fortunes of the people of the southwestern reason. As an economic corridor, it will create investment opportunities and employment, increase mobility of traffic, and enhance trade, production and connectivity with the region.

We salute you Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for fulfilling that dream, for that rainbow of hope, and for the prosperity that the Padma Bridge will bring.

How we feel today is reminiscent of the words of poet Sukanta Bhattacharya's poem 'Dumrar'.

mvevm, evsjf+`k, G c,w_ex
AevK ZwwKtq iqt
R;fj-cyfo-gfi QvILvi
Zey gv_v fBvqvevi bq!
["...Bravo, Bangladesh, the world is looking with awe; burnt to ashes, still will not bow down."]

THE DREAM BRIDGE

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina formally inaugurating the construction work of the bridge on Dec 12, 2015 (left); the first span of the bridge being installed on Sept 30, 2017 (top left); initial work of river training on the bank of Padma (bottom left); upper deck of the bridge awaits final touch, and a part of the bridge's beautiful approach road (bottom).

PHOTOS: SK ENAMUL HAQ, ANISUR RAHMAN, AMRAN HOSSAIN, PMO, COLLECTED.

