

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA SATURDAY DECEMBER 12, 2020, AGRAHAYAN 27, 1427 BS

Padma Bridge is a gateway to our economic aspirations

Foresight and sincerity will make them real

It is indeed a historic moment to witness the realisation of a dream—the completion of the Padma Bridge—that seemed quite impossible when the World Bank, followed by other donors, pulled out their funding alleging corruption, allegations that were later proven untrue. But thanks to the quick and bold decision of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to build the bridge using the country's own resources, we now have a bridge that connects Dhaka to 21 southern districts bringing in immense economic opportunities that may change the lives of over 30 million people in the region. Credit goes to our PM for remaining steadfast in her vision that, despite the astronomical costs increased by delays caused by engineering challenges and environmental onslaughts, has now come true. The Padma Bridge, apart from adding to our national pride, also has given us reason to be optimistic of our economic future.

The TK 30,193 crore bridge will, for example, connect multi-lane expressways and railway lines with Dhaka from Monga port and Payra, the largest deep sea port. It will link Bangladesh with India, Nepal and Bhutan and catalyse regional trade along the Asian Highway and Trans-Asian Railway Network. It will not only benefit the Southwest region but there will also be economic spillovers all over the country as new jobs are created because of better connectivity between both sides of the Padma River. Studies have predicted an increase in national GDP growth rate by 1.2 percent, and this despite the huge additional costs the project has incurred due to delays and implementation problems.

The benefits for the south-western region are predicted to be enormous as lack of connectivity has left it as one of the least developed parts of the country, with most of the people living below the poverty line. In Khulna and Barishal districts, there are more people below the poverty line compared to other districts. Farmers especially suffer because there is a lack of access to markets, soil has been adversely affected by salinity, and because of lack of fresh water in the dry seasons. More importantly, the people have remained isolated from the rest of the country. With the bridge, travel time from Dhaka to Khulna will be four hours instead of about 13.

As an economist has pointed out, the bridge provides an economic corridor and we must make full use of its potential. This means attracting investments by building economic zones. The private sector has to be incentivised to encourage foreign direct investment. Clearly, the bridge is going to bring an unprecedented boost in economic activities including in farming, trade, labour movement, growth of small and medium industries, tourism, export-oriented manufacturing and so on. Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and industrial parks can generate many job opportunities for the local population. For this, there must be skills training programmes to train the local people. There must be more and better education opportunities for the young people in these regions. Backward and forward linkage industries have to be established along with marketing channels to service the production hubs.

The Padma Bridge promises to give a huge boost to our economy and change the lives of the most deprived sections of the population. It has the potential to accelerate our development dreams. But to make this happen, we must work hard to create an enabling environment for these aspirations to come true. The nation must be united in their efforts to take on these tasks with sincerity, efficiency, honesty and innovation.

HC clears way for recovery of grabbed Buriganga land

Govt must follow up with quick action and increased oversight

We commend a ruling by High Court removing the hurdles for the government to carry out eviction drives on an illegally grabbed land along the Buriganga River. According to a report published in this paper, the court cleared the way for the government to recover the land in Keraniganj from the possession of three companies of Maisha Group owned by a ruling party lawmaker, rejecting a writ petition filed collectively by the three companies.

Earlier, a probe by the National River Conservation Commission (NRCC) revealed that in 2010, the said lawmaker of Dhaka-14, Aslamul Haque, had filled up more than 54 acres from the Buriganga river and wetland to construct a power plant and a private economic zone in the vicinity of Basila, Keraniganj, in a clear violation of the Water Act. How could a lawmaker abuse his power to conduct such illegal activities? We have often witnessed how ordinary citizens have had to lose their land to grabbers connected with politicians and public officials, and now a lawmaker representing the state has been found to be directly involved. It's a pity that politically connected groups have been continuously grabbing our rivers and waterbodies despite several directives given by the HC. Rivers and such waterbodies belong to the people and no one should be allowed to tamper with them for their petty gains. Now that the HC has ruled, the land grabbed and filled up by Maisha Group must be recovered immediately and all the clearance certificates previously provided to the accused must be terminated.

We also congratulate the NRCC for its leading role in unearthing the illegal practice. This is but one case of river grabbing, however, and there are plenty of cases to take note of around the country. While the government's eviction drives have been successful in some cases, the challenges that lie ahead are enormous. Also, often it is seen that evicted land has been grabbed again by taking advantage of lack of oversight, monitoring and follow-up actions by the agencies concerned. The government must remain careful that nothing of this sort happens in case of the Keraniganj incident and other cases pursued by the agencies. The illegal river grabbers must be held accountable for their crimes, which have a profound impact on the lives and livelihoods of the people as well as the environment.

The waters we share with our neighbours



HASEEB MD IRFANULLAH

TWENTY-FOUR years ago, when the prime ministers of Bangladesh and India signed the Ganges Water Sharing Treaty on December 12, 1996, it was quite a different world to mark such a milestone. No

social media, no late-night talk shows. But there was excitement, concern, and confusion that invaded the parliament, the streets and the media. After all, it was the first-ever long-term water-sharing treaty signed between the two South Asian neighbours.

Politically, it was a great achievement for the then Awami League government to sign this long-awaited deal within the first 175 days of assuming power, 21 years after losing it to the assassination of the Father of the Nation.

Having 54 rivers coming from India and three from Myanmar, handling of transboundary rivers like the Ganges has always been a sensitive political agenda for Bangladesh. But transnational water sharing soon went beyond being a mere partisan agenda defining the country's major political fronts. It became an environmental issue as well. Reduced water flowing from the upstream via the Ganges impacted the Sundarbans mangrove, shared between Bangladesh and India, changing this unique ecosystem badly.

Since the Ganges Treaty was signed, we have come to know that due to climate change, rains are now falling quite oddly on South Asian soil causing unusual flooding. Our seas are continuously rising, our coastal areas are being hit by surges and storms more frequently and strongly, and our coast is much saltier than it used to be three decades ago. So, whatever we do or do not with the rivers flowing from Bhutan, India, Nepal, and China has a significant impact on the survival of the 170 million people of Bangladesh. But the harshest fact is, despite so much concern and discussion over transboundary water sharing, not a single bilateral treaty has been signed between Bangladesh and India over the last quarter of a century.

Following numerous talks, an interim deal to share the water of Teesta River has been gathering dust since 2011. In India, the largest democracy in the world, the state governments' say on the transnational water sharing issue is more crucial than the central government's intentions. That leaves Bangladesh at the mercy of how Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, and Sikkim play their parts to share the rivers, like the Ganges and the Teesta, within India before they cross the border into Bangladesh.

Being on the receiving end, Bangladesh continues to be positive towards the transboundary waters, demonstrating its

willingness not just by issuing occasional optimistic statements but also through actions. In October 2019, for example, it signed an MoU with India to supply drinking water to a township of 7,000 people in the Tripura state.

However, despite the painful sluggishness at the state level on this issue, there have been some interesting developments and interventions in the non-political, non-governmental arenas involving these two countries since 2010.

For example, the Dutch, who first visited the Bengal delta about 400 years ago, have shown genuine interest in the waters and coasts of Bangladesh over the last five decades—be it through coastal protection, long-term development initiatives like the Char Development and Settlement Project (CDSP), and most recently, supporting a century-spanning planning process called "Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100".

In 2010, the Embassy of the Kingdom

scholars, and experts from both countries. The E4L did create a momentum of enthusiasm over transboundary water governance or "hydrodiplomacy" in both countries at different tiers and in different sectors, especially when conversations between the national governments were slow.

Despite an unprecedentedly generous investment in soft activities, like networking and knowledge creation around regional water governance, it was rather difficult to see the tangible milestones this initiative eventually achieved. The Dutch embassy was not seen to support any follow-up activities beyond the E4L. This may indicate that the Dutch might have expected rather concrete outcomes from this well-invested regional water governance venture.

It was not an end on the IUCN side, however. IUCN in Asia capitalised its global experience, drawn from

Salween River basin in Myanmar with funding from the government of Sweden. Oxfam, given its people-oriented rights-based vision, has defined this project in its own way.

The TROSA has been essentially focusing on local, small river basin level interventions involving two countries, promoting stronger youth and women engagement in water governance, rather than region-wide, high-level policy influencing actions. Aligning with the TROSA, IUCN Asia is currently focusing more on institutionalising a vibrant regional Civil Society Organisation (CSO) platform engaged in regional water governance—a realistic, focused initiative, but far from the all-encompassing dreams that the E4L showed.

Over the last few years, these non-governmental initiatives have gained another dimension as international research organisations are often seen to focus their regional initiatives not on countries but on deltas, given the huge populations these harbour and the vulnerability they face under climate change.

Led by the Newcastle University, UK, the Living Deltas Hub project has brought together more than 30 organisations to gather knowledge on three Asian deltas—the Red River, the Mekong, and the GBM. The CGIAR's global Two Degree Initiative (2DI) for a climate-smart food system also focused on three mega deltas—the Mekong, the Irrawaddy, and the GBM—to understand the Asian context. These initiatives are creating space to take the conversation around shared waters at an apolitical, non-governmental level. The interests in delta are growing fast. The first virtual Goheshona Global Conference, to be held on January 18-24, 2021, is expected to have discussions on delta as one of the mega themes throughout the week. Bangladesh is, and will always be, a core part of such conversations in the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna basin.

But we really cannot talk about Bangladesh's water without talking about its transnational rivers. The civil society organisations of this region lack conveying power when it comes to regional water governance. Initiatives by international organisations with convening authority often fail to be impactful due to their inherent donor dependency. Regional research initiatives may help us understand what a delta means, show us connectivity among ecosystems beyond political boundaries, and also offer us a shared vision for collaborative environmental governance. But these conversations and knowledge mean nothing unless our governments talk.

December 12, 2026 seems to be far way, when the Ganges Treaty expires. But is it really that far?

Dr. Haseeb Md. Irfanullah is an independent consultant working on environment, climate change, and research systems. His Twitter handle is @hmirfanullah



File photo of Teesta River.

PHOTO: ANIMESH PRAKASH

of the Netherlands took a notable step. It supported a five-year project to bring together non-governmental actors, both individuals and organisations, from Bangladesh and India to create a space to talk about the shared river ecosystems and the peoples, and to help improve the management of these ecosystems between the neighbours. This project was called "Ecosystems for Life" (E4L), implemented by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

The E4L took a soft approach and implemented softer activities. It organised numerous meetings, workshops, and sessions with all possible stakeholders discussing a wide range of issues in Dhaka, New Delhi, Bangkok, and other cities of the host countries. It supported individual and joint studies by academics, enabled NGOs to take field actions, and organised media campaigns. Studies on the biology and management of *hilsa* fish were particularly notable due to their direct policy implications and transfer of experience from Bangladesh to India. The project benefited immensely from the advice of reputed ex-diplomats, notable

programmes like the Building River Dialogue and Governance (BRIDGE), and tried to put together smaller transboundary water diplomacy activities involving Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, and Nepal. Since 2015, it has been trying to follow the same approach it tried in the E4L partnering with The Hague Institute for Global Justice and Asia Foundation, for example. Government officials from both countries did continue attending meetings and workshops, frankly expressing their opinions on issues on the table. These were indeed important incremental changes while dealing with sensitive issues like hydrodiplomacy. But focusing on individual events, rather than comprehensive ones, failed to regain the momentum of the E4L lost in December 2014.

One of the on-going regional water governance programmes that has been supportive to IUCN's E4L legacy is Transboundary Rivers of South Asia (TROSA). Since 2017, Oxfam has been implementing this project in the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM) basin in Bangladesh, India, and Nepal, and the

The inescapable greed grid of the health sector



SHAMSAD MORTUZA

I walked out of the doctor's chamber with my mother when someone took the prescription from me. I thought he was working for the hospital as he was standing right next to the attendant who was maintaining the

serial and receiving payments. He took a snap of the prescription with his tab. Only then did it occur to me that a medical representative had just taken note of a document that was supposed to be private. The man was assigned either to monitor the prescription pattern of the doctor or to make sure his company's medicines were being suggested by the doctor concerned. This was wrong on several counts—a medical representative should not intrude into the privacy of a patient; it was unethical and unprofessional for the diagnostic centres or hospitals to allow an outsider to stay so near to the chamber of a doctor; and, there is possibly a direct correspondence between the perks these representatives offer to the doctors and the treatments that follow.

I guess I was so happy thinking I could see the doctor protecting the appointment serial from being bypassed or hijacked, by the late-comers who would tip the attendant, that I did not let the trivial intrusion issue bother me at that time. I just asked him, "So did she prescribe your company's medicine or what?" The guy was mum.

You hear about all sorts of unholy alliances between a doctor and a pharmaceutical company's agent. Many of these doctors receive various gifts ranging from as little as prescription pads and pens to home appliances or even fully-paid foreign trips for conferences or holiday packages for their entire family. Then there are the pathological tests that you do not need but are prescribed nonetheless as the by-products of these alliances. I once took

a relative with complaints of heart burns to a gastrointestinal doctor, and the first thing the moody doctor did was to ask us to consult the front desk for an endoscopy. "Don't come to me without doing this test first," she said.

The most common complaint that you hear is: many doctors do not study proper case history before seeing a patient; they just prescribe a series of tests from which they can deduce the problem. News on the grapevine is that some doctors receive hefty commissions from these prescribed

check-ups, medical boards, constant change of medicines, excess supply of medicinal paraphernalia, personal items and food, diet consultants, lab tests, surgeries, therapies, referrals and so on. They will do everything within their power to prolong the stay of the patients. There are instances where the news of the death of a patient is delayed to increase the bill for life support in the ICU. Then, of course, there are news of hospital bugs in the concealed ventilation system that send every patient of a hospital to their

The system milks our vulnerabilities. When we or our closed ones are ill, we do everything to ease the suffering. Monetary or ethical concerns become secondary. And this is when the professional servicemen take advantage of our emotional vulnerabilities.

tests. Hence, they don't have time to listen; they act like automatons. I will not be surprised if some of these doctors only see a thousand taka note in place of the patient's face, just like in *The Gold Rush* a hungry miner saw a chicken in Charlie Chaplin and tried to eat him up. The life of the doctors is so mechanical that you cannot but feel pity for them. Some of the surgeons I have come across start their day right after the Fajr prayer. They will operate 4-5 patients in a private clinic before heading for their government/regular job and then, in the evening, they will split their time between various chambers to see another 40-50 patients in 4-5 hours. They are so overworked and overpriced because there is a serious dearth of good doctors in the country.

Some of these good doctors are being picked up by the corporate system. While working for a luxury hospital, these doctors are under the obligation to earn at least four times (I am guessing) their monthly salary which I hear is more than a million a month. So they keep on subjecting their patients to needless and elaborate treatment procedures: routine

ICUs with bronchitis. These hospitals are so powerful that even if you die from their negligence or accidental fire, they will dowse the news in ways that will point at the illness not only of the individual but also of the society at large.

These ironies are normal for our health system; and unfortunately, our complacency as consumers adds to the situational irony. The corporatisation of the health service is making profiteering their only business agenda under the guise of service. This is the sector that has the potential to save billions of dollars going abroad in the name of medical tourism. When some of these health franchises opened, we were excited by the thought of having world-class service in the vicinity. But soon the international plaster wears away, the mask of nobility and charity falls down, and cutting-edge technology is cut down. We find ourselves helplessly caught in the ugly grid of greed.

Even when you pay a handsome amount, you are not sure whether you have received the right treatment, whether the test reports are doctored or not. I know of a case where the local diagnostic centres

(yes, more than one) gave a PSA score of a patient citing that he has prostate cancer; the same patient goes to India and finds out that results are normal. Somehow you cannot trust the system. You end up asking for second and third opinions—confusing yourself in the process and crowding the system even further. In the absence of a proper health system, you rely on bothering your friends and relatives for an over-the-phone consultation. And if you are not that lucky, you end up buying drugs recommended by the salesman at the pharmacy or looking it up on the net.

I was reading in Friday's Bangladesh Pratidin about the tele-conferencing introduced during the pandemic by some of our local hospitals. Someone registered with an apex hospital paying Tk 500 for such a promised service, and then the patient was charged Tk 1,000 for a subsequent call, and Tk 1,500 for the next. An inpatient was charged for the PPE the doctor was wearing; but the doctor was on a round and he was going to every patient wearing the same PPE. How many times was the same PPE charged? You do the math.

The system milks our vulnerabilities. When we or our closed ones are ill, we do everything in our bid to ease the suffering. Monetary or ethical concerns become secondary. And this is when the professional servicemen take advantage of our emotional vulnerabilities.

I will end on a lighter note. I once took my daughter to see a dermatologist in a reputed diagnostic centre in Gulshan. He was an elderly man, and apparently my daughter reminded him of his own in the UK. He started chatting. Despite repeated knocks at the door by the attendant reminding him of other patients, he went on reminiscing about his days in London where my daughter also grew up. He went on and on before writing a skin ointment for my daughter's acne, and hurling a parting request: "do you mind paying for two patients? I need to tell them I saw you too to justify the time!"

Shamsad Mortuza is the Pro-Vice-Chancellor of ULAB.