

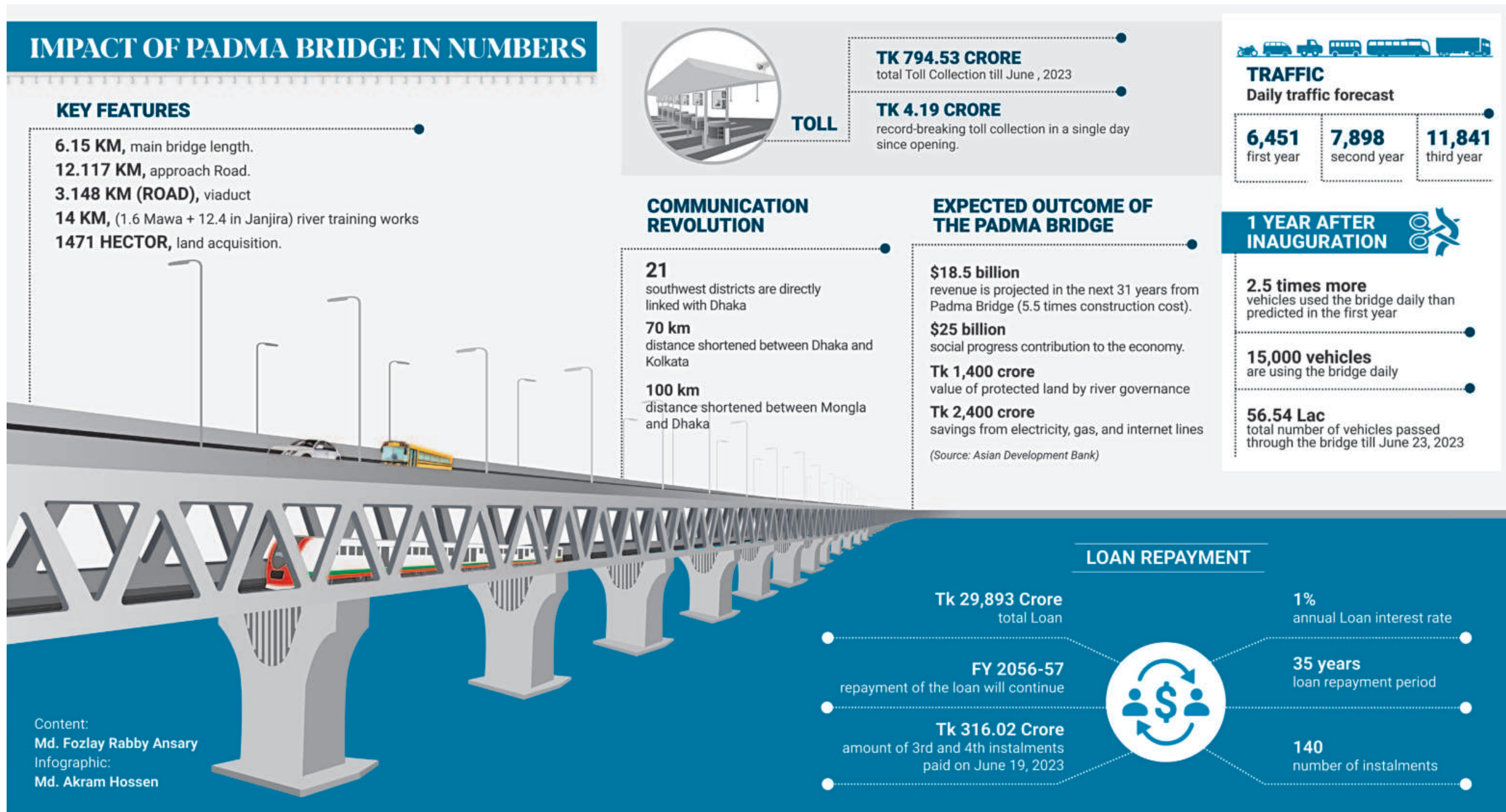
BRIDGING THE NATION CELEBRATING ONE YEAR OF THE PADMA BRIDGE

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A BRIDGE TO PROSPERITY

One year of the Padma Bridge and its transformative impact on Bangladesh



TUHIN SHUBHRA ADHIKARY

Every time Bappi Hasan takes a ride to his Shariatpur home crossing the Padma Bridge, one thing crosses his mind: had the bridge been built 20 years ago, he could have managed to ensure better treatment for his deceased mother.

His mother suffered a major brain stroke at one of his relative's houses in Dhaka in 2003. Unfortunately, Bappi was at his home. His mother should have been rushed to a specialized hospital immediately, given the severity of the stroke, but his distant relatives could only manage to take her to a local hospital as they neither had the financial ability nor the people to do so.

Upon receiving the news over the phone in the late evening, Bappi and his maternal uncles started for Dhaka, but the mighty Padma River stood in their way. They could not reach Dhaka that night as the launch service was shut down.

By the time they reached the capital on the following day, his mother's health condition had seriously deteriorated, and she was paralyzed forever. She died a few years later.

"Now the hours-long journey to cross the river is reduced to only 7-8 minutes, thanks to the Padma Bridge. So, whenever I get on the bridge, I tell myself that if there had been a bridge over the river at that time, I could have reached Dhaka and could have done something for my mother in arranging faster treatment," said Bappi.

"So, the Padma Bridge is not just a mere structure; it's etched with my emotions," he said.

Like Bappi, tens of thousands of people from 21 southwestern districts are now connected with their life and livelihood as the double-decker bridge not only shortens the journey and saves money but also brings changes in the mindset of the people living in the region.

On June 25 of last year, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina inaugurated the country's largest bridge, directly connecting the capital with the southwestern region. The bridge was opened to traffic on the following day.

As of June 23, 2023 a total of 56.54 lakh vehicles have used the bridge since its opening, and the bridge authority has collected Tk 794.53 crore as toll. On average, 15,000 vehicles use the bridge daily, and this number increases to 30,000 to 40,000 on special occasions,

according to the Bangladesh Bridges Authority (BBA).

The bridge has brought about a positive change in the socio-economic scenario.

Take tourism in Kuakata as an example.

The number of tourists has doubled after the launch of the Padma Bridge, which is contributing to the local economy, according to Motaleb Sharif, the general secretary of the Kuakata Hotel-Motel Owners Association.

"Not only on special occasions like Eid or New Year, but tourists also come to Kuakata even on weekends because the distance from Dhaka to Kuakata is less than the distance from Dhaka to Cox's Bazar," he told The Daily Star.

Sattar Khan, a private service holder from Kalia Upazila of Narail, said it used to take over six hours to reach Dhaka. But now it takes around

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two hours after the construction of the Padma and Modhumoti Bridges.

"The most important thing is that the Padma Bridge has resolved the uncertainty over the transportation system in this region. We used to check the weather before starting for Dhaka during the rainy and winter seasons. If it was cloudy, we used to choose buses that had launch facilities, but during the rainy season, we would choose buses that used ferries," he told The Daily Star.

Transport expert Prof Hadiuzzaman thinks the Padma

Bridge is a "transformational infrastructure," not just a communication infrastructure.

The bridge has not only shortened people's journey time and reduced overall transportation costs, but it has also brought about a major change in the mindset of people living in the southwestern region, he said.

"They now consider seeking better treatment and education in the capital. Many of them might have previously considered receiving treatment at local healthcare facilities or studying at local educational institutions," Hadiuzzaman, who teaches civil engineering at Buet, told The Daily Star on June 20.

In addition to improving road communication, the bridge is expected to bring revolutionary changes in railway communication in the country, where public transport like railways is crucial.

The bridge will help expand the rail network in the southern part of the country, which was previously unthinkable, he said.

Regarding socio-economic changes, he said that big businesses and large industrial units have already purchased land in the southern part of the country to expand their operations there. Although the expansion of heavy industries will take time, the process has already begun, he said.

Md Monjur Hossain, the executive director of the Bangladesh Bridge Authority, the implementing and operating agency of the Padma Bridge, said that although they have not conducted any study on the socio-economic changes brought about by the bridge, it is still too early to do so.

"But the changes are already visible," he said.

He mentioned that the land value in the southern region has sharply increased following the opening of the bridge. Business, industries, and the tourism sector are also expanding in the southern part of the country, but it will take some more time, he added.

"It was predicted that the Padma Bridge would boost the country's annual GDP by 1.23 percent. However, many people working on these issues believe that the growth will be much higher if other aspects, such as the increase in land value, are taken into consideration," he told The Daily Star on June 19, 2023.

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