

BRIDGING THE NATION CELEBRATING ONE YEAR OF THE PADMA BRIDGE

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“We have managed 2.5 times more vehicles than the forecast for the first year”

Padma Bridge has provided us with significant experience and self-confidence, which will help us in constructing more major bridges. We are in the process of preparing a masterplan for BBA and have already identified approximately 70 potential bridge sites.

Bridges Division Secretary Md. Monjur Hossain, who is also the Executive Director of Bangladesh Bridge Authority, the implementing and operating agency of Padma Bridge, speaks with The Daily Star's Tuhin Shubhra Adhikary on the occasion of the first anniversary of the opening of Padma Bridge.

Q: Padma Bridge is the most-talked-about project in the country. The Bangladesh Bridge Authority (BBA) has built the bridge and is now carrying out its operation and maintenance (O&M). Please tell us about your experience of the last one year.

A: The first thing is that the construction of a bridge over a river like Padma was very challenging. There were problems related to financing after foreign lenders pulled out from the project. The first and foremost thing is the courage. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina led us from the front to implement it with our own funds. Our main achievement from the project is that it has proved our capability. Although we have hired foreign contractors and consultants, the project, where sophisticated technologies were used, has enhanced our capability.

Although we have hired a foreign joint venture firm for the operation and maintenance of the bridge, most of the people involved in the work are local, and thus O&M has created a great scope for employment. Padma Bridge, when the construction works were going on, had created a scope for employment, and now the O&M has

created the same scope.

Q: How many vehicles have used the bridge since it was opened and how much money has the BBA collected as toll? How difficult was the task to manage the huge number of vehicles, especially at the initial stage?

A: A total of 55.61 lakh vehicles have used the bridge till June 18 since its opening, and the BBA has collected Tk 781.82 crore as toll. On average, 15,000 vehicles use the bridge daily, and this number rises to 30,000 to 40,000 on special occasions. The daily traffic forecast for the first year was 6,451, while it was 7,898 for the second year and 11,841 for the third year. Therefore, we have managed 2.5 times more vehicles than the forecast for the first year, overcoming the initial challenge. We have made efforts to ensure speedy service despite our limitations. We have six toll booths on both sides and currently, there is no scope to increase the number as the project is still ongoing. Therefore, we have set up toll booths at both ends of the emergency lanes. We have aimed to make optimum use of all our available resources.

Q: Padma Bridge was built taking a loan from Bangladesh Bank, and BBA has paid four installments of the loan so far. Was the toll BBA collected so far enough to repay the loan?

A: We have repaid around Tk 633 crore of the loan so far, excluding VAT and tax, and all the money came from the toll. We did not have to bring money from another fund to repay the loan. We want to give a big thank you to the



bridge users because we have been able to repay the loan with their money (toll). Apart from the loan, we are providing a 15 percent VAT from the toll money. We hope to pay the fee of the O&M operator from the toll as well.

Q: What are the socio-economic changes the bridge has brought for the people so far? What is your observation? Have you carried out any study on it?

A: We will surely carry out an impact assessment, but I think it is still too early for such a study. It would require data for at least two to three years to conduct a comprehensive analysis. The initial prediction was that the Padma Bridge would boost the country's annual GDP by 1.23 percent. However, many experts working on these issues believe that the actual growth will be

much higher if other aspects are taken into account. For example, the increase in land value following the opening of the Padma Bridge was not considered in the initial prediction. Additionally, the bridge is saving a significant amount of time, and if the time-related costs are also considered, the growth potential will be further increased. Previously, people in the southwestern region had to spend at least two nights and one day for work in Dhaka, but now they can complete their tasks within a day. Businesses, industries, and the tourism sector in the southern part of the country are experiencing expansion beyond our expectations. However, we need to allow more time for further expansion of industries and businesses in this region.

Q: What is the progress regarding the installation of weigh scales and Electronic Toll Collection (ETC) system?

A: Weigh scales (axle load control centers) have already been installed on both sides of the bridge, and they are currently undergoing trials. We are planning to launch it very soon. Additionally, we have already installed Electronic Toll Collection (ETC) system at Bangabandhu Bridge, and we have initiated the process to do the same at Padma Bridge. We are collaborating with the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) and the ICT division to ensure better integration in this regard. Initially, we will launch ETC at one or two booths and gradually increase the number.

Q: BBA had taken an initiative to

form a dedicated company for the operation and maintenance of Padma Bridge. Is there any development in this regard?

A: Yes, there has been some progress in this regard. A committee assigned to determine the organogram of the company and address relevant issues has submitted its report. We are currently finalizing it. Our goal is to have the company begin its operations by June 2024.

Q: Do you have any other new plans centered around Padma Bridge?

A: Padma Bridge has provided us with significant experience and self-confidence, which will help us in constructing more major bridges. We are in the process of preparing a masterplan for BBA and have already identified approximately 70 potential bridge sites. The experience gained from Padma Bridge will greatly assist us in implementing this masterplan.

Q: What would be your final remark on the occasion of the first anniversary of the opening of Padma Bridge?

A: We would like to express our gratitude to the Prime Minister and the Road Transport and Bridges Minister. We also extend our thanks to all the people involved, including the contractors, consultants, and officials who worked on this project. Additionally, we would like to thank the journalists for their coverage of the project. Lastly, our heartfelt appreciation goes to the bridge users, for whom the bridge was built.

A BRIDGE TO PROSPERITY

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Prominent economist Prof Mustafizur Rahman, however, said that there is still a long way to go to transform the Padma bridge-backed transport corridor into an economic corridor.

The bridge has changed the transportation

system and reduced travel time, costs, and energy consumption, he said.

“But we have many things to do to convert the transport corridor into an economic corridor,” said Prof Mustafizur, who is also a distinguished fellow at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD).

In order to take advantage of the bridge, the government has plans to develop 17 economic zones in the southwestern region and establish sub-regional connectivity involving India, he said.

“If we can merge the three factors—communication, business, and investment—

we will achieve the expected outcome from the bridge,” he told The Daily Star.

Khandaker Enayet Ullah, the secretary general of the Bangladesh Road Transport Owners Association, said that the number of buses operating in the southwestern region has almost doubled after the opening of the

Padma Bridge, making transportation easy and smooth for the people.

However, he mentioned that although the number of buses has increased significantly, the transport business has not experienced the expected boost due to intense competition among the bus operators.