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In conversation with Dr. Md. Shamsul Hoque, Professor at the Department of Civil Engineering, BUET.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina inaugurates the Padma Bridge on June 25, 2022. PHOTO: STAR

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The Daily Star (TDS): Padma Bridge has completed its first year. How would you evaluate the overall impact of the bridge during this time?

Prof. Shamsul Hoque (SH): The Padma Bridge represents a significant milestone in addressing the long-standing deficiency of transformative long-term infrastructure.The southwestern region of the country, despite its proximity to the capital, has historically been neglected. However, with the establishment of the Padma Bridge, this previously marginalized population now has access to development opportunities and direct connectivity. It also reflects the strength of our political will.

The bridge optimizes the travel route, eliminating turbulent and uncertain ferry journeys. Additionally, the inclusion of the railway system ensures a multi-dimensional communication network. It creates the possibility of decentralization by providing advanced infrastructure, allowing people to seek job opportunities in different areas.

Our port and coastal belt have immense potential, yet we have not been able to fully harness it. Through the Padma Bridge, we can unlock the potential of the trans-Asian railway and establish connectivity with the National Asian Highway, taking progress to new heights.

One challenge in the railway system is the orientation issue. Currently, all trains, regardless of their origin, enter the Kamlapur Railway Hub from the north, which hampers optimal productivity. This issue will be resolved with the Padma Bridge, as its railway gateway will be located in Narayanganj, to the south. It will create balance and resilience.

In addition to enhancing the resilience of the railway and highway networks, the Padma Bridge will also enable us to tackle the challenges of the new reality following our graduation from the LDC status.

TDS: What measures should be taken to ensure the proper maintenance of the bridge?

SH: Training the Padma river posed numerous challenges that we had to overcome. As we contend with the forces of nature, it is crucial for us to remain ever watchful of the river's evolving nature and maintain a vigilant approach to river training. It is crucial for ensuring the longevity of the bridge.

TDS: Do you see any challenges in realizing the full potential of the Padma Bridge?

SH: To achieve optimal results from the Padma Bridge, we need to transform it from a transportation corridor to an economic corridor. This entails not only improving vehicle movement but also promoting overall economic development in the areas connected by the bridge. Despite having such plans outlined in the bridge's planning documents, we observe a lack of implementation.

The unplanned development on both sides of the highway puts it at a disadvantage, resulting in retail-oriented growth rather than large-scale economic development. If retail developments dominate around the Padma Bridge, it will undermine the productivity potential of the infrastructure. My concern lies in the fact that although we have constructed the bridge, there has been insufficient planning to establish a comprehensive economic corridor alongside it.

Furthermore, we must also prioritize the protection of agricultural lands along the highway to ensure the country's food security.

In the era of smart and sustainable development, it is imperative to prioritize long-term utility. In our riverine country, the river channels were expected to provide the most utility. However, since the construction of the Padma Bridge, the river channels have been unable to keep up due to the absence of a national strategy. There should be a balanced and multidimensional development strategy in place that ensures resiliency. Decision-makers need to concentrate on safeguarding the river routes and transportation system, as they hold the potential to be gateways of endless possibilities. Ignoring the intervention needed for the river channels will lead to their gradual demise, which is a short-sighted approach.

There is a significant lack of enforcement when it comes to road safety. Worldwide, we can observe well-designed roads that facilitate faster transportation. Studies suggest that managing vehicle entry onto roads can help control the accident rate. Unfortunately, it appears that we are not fully prepared for this type of development, or perhaps the individuals responsible for road safety lack the necessary qualifications and accountability. However, to effectively maintain and ensure the safety of passengers in such a grand infrastructure, we must change our mindset. Despite constructing safer roads, we still struggle to make them entirely safe.

The current system of route permits in Bangladesh lacks appropriate judgment based on skills and talent. Anyone who applies for a route permit is granted one, regardless of their qualifications. It is crucial to have a single service provider for each route instead of increasing the number of vehicles on the roads. Instead of adding more cars, introducing double or triple-decker buses can significantly increase passenger capacity.

Currently, the Padma corridor lacks smart operational points, resulting in competition among vehicles. To address this, there should be a single station in Dhaka and a unified service for the Padma Bridge from that station. This route can cover a distance of approximately 51 kilometres, which is convenient for most passengers. Additionally, there should be a central station on the other side of the Padma, serving as the main entry point for the 21 districts connected to the bridge. Local bus companies can expand their business from this central station, while the central bus business in Dhaka can flourish within the city. By implementing this smart operational bus route plan, utilizing modern scientific technology, we can achieve better control and management of the Padma Bridge with fewer vehicles.

The government is greatly concerned about the rapid increase in motorcycles. Many motorcycle riders tend to ignore traffic regulations, resulting in a high number of accidents, particularly among young riders. While the main objective of the Padma Bridge is to promote economic development rather than personal convenience, these unfortunate motorcycle incidents divert attention from the bridge's primary purpose. Given the absence of dedicated lanes for motorcycles, it is crucial for the government to acknowledge that motorcycles pose a substantial threat to road safety. Taking action to regulate the number of motorcycles from an early stage is essential to prevent an unmanageable situation in the future.

TDS: What suggestions would you offer to enhance the utilization of the Padma Bridge and maximize its potential for driving economic development?

SH: Upon closer examination, it becomes evident that although the Padma Bridge has brought significant promised benefits, there have been reported accidents and a lack of enforcement of adequate safety measures since its completion. Measures such as implementing a strict monitoring system and enforcing vehicle fitness checks can be crucial in effectively addressing the problem.

Additionally, improving the road system by acquiring more land on both sides of the roads and constructing Export Processing Zones (EPZ) can contribute to economic development. It is important for higher authorities to closely monitor these activities to ensure their effectiveness.

Furthermore, it is essential not to overlook the potential of natural waterways and prioritize their strategic development alongside the mega-road projects. By integrating efforts in both the waterway and road sectors, the government can optimize transportation benefits and fuel efficiency.

Interviewed by ***Priyam Paul***