

Prospects of Tourism in the South-Western part of Bangladesh: An impact analysis of Padma multi-purpose Bridge

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Abstract

Padma Multi-purpose Bridge commonly known as Padma Bridge connected 60 million People from 21 districts with the other parts of Bangladesh. Several impacts of the Bridge have been identified in different publications but very limited publications are found on tourism industry of the region. Thus, this paper explores the impacts of the Bridge on tourism industry of the southwestern part of Bangladesh. A range of positive outcome have been identified by reviewing and analyzing a number of journal articles, newspapers, electronic and social media, as well as different website information. It is certainly expected that the Bridge will open a new window for tourism industry in the region. The investment and working opportunities in the tourism sector may change dramatically the socio-economic conditions including education, health, employment opportunities, lifestyles, rapid transport services and so on. Likewise, the GDP is expected to increase by 1.2% due to the impacts of the Bridge.



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Literature review

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Introduction:

Bangladesh is the land of rivers where many small and big rivers are flowing from northern part to southern part ideally, and Bay of Bengal is the destination of all finally. Millions of people depend on the rivers to cultivate their agricultural land, and transport goods and products from one place to another. On the other hand, the rivers are the barriers of communication among the different parts of the country due to insufficient bridge on the rivers. Thousands of people are suffering to move one part to another because of the absence of the bridge. The river Padma, for instance, is one of them which detaches around 60 million people of the 21 districts from the other part of the country. That is why the bridge on Padma River has been being expected for more than 50 years since the independent of Bangladesh. Padma Multi-purpose Bridge commonly known as Padma Bridge is one of the largest (spans- 41 & length-6150m) & challenging constructions in the history of Bangladesh. The Bridge was inaugurated on 26th June in 2022 and became a blessing for the people of southwestern region of the country. Padma River isolates the southwestern part of Bangladesh from other parts of the country. Only ferry service was available before inaugurating the Bridge for connecting those parts but the ferry capacity was minimal & the waiting time at ferry ghat that needed from 2 hours to more than 10 hours. Padma Bridge is directly linked between the two busiest seaport- Mongla, Payra port and tourist Zone Khulna division. It will also contribute to the trans- Asian railway network system. After the operations in Padma Bridge the distance between Dhaka & other places of southwestern part reduced by 100 or more than 100 kilometer which also reduces travel time, cost & improves the commodity movement systems around the country.

One of the cheapest & comfortable journey moods for tourists in Bangladesh is the railway service. This rail network will be strong & effective after the construction of the Padma Bridge. Thus, tourists will be largely benefited from reduced travel time & cut their travel costs. Alongside this advantage, new tourist spots (recreation center, park, hotel, motel, fisheries, housing, Agro-farm, resorts etc) will be created on the both sides of Padma Bridge. Already many entrepreneurs (related to tourism sector) have started buying land & planning to establish recreation facilities based on Padma Bridge which will directly & indirectly contribute in the creation of huge employment opportunity as well as contribute to the improvement of the living of local people (especially the people who live in nearby Chars). Apart from that, the government has already planned to make it a tourist hub. The proposal of establishing a high-tech park in Shariatpur, zoo, children's playground, animal museum & setting up an office of Shilpakala academy are the parts of that planning. Padma Bridge will be the focal point for the south Asian integrated communication system which will help us to materialize Bangabandhu's dream of Sonar Bangla (Golden Bengal). However, immense potential sometimes destroyed due to a lack of adequate planning & execution. So, it is expected to take & execute proper steps to ensure the best use of Padma Bridge-centric tourism potential. The primary objective of the study is to identify the prospects of tourism in southwestern part of Bangladesh and the role of the Padma Multipurpose Bridge in promoting tourism of the southwestern part of the country. The other objectives are to describe the contribution of Padma Multipurpose Bridge to developing the tourism industry, to discuss the benefits of Padma Bridge for the local community and to describe the role of the Padma Bridge in the economic development of the southwestern people.

Literature Review:

A range of studies is found on Padma Bridge and its impacts in the last 12 years. Sharmin et al. (2014) studied on the energy and environmental impacts of the bridge. An economic impact has also been analyzed by Raihan, S., & Khondker, B. H. (2010). They argue that road user benefit can be about million 1,295,840 Taka over the 31-year period and GDP would be 0.33

percent compared to the national base GDP (i.e. 4,468,549 million taka) (Raihan, S., & Khondker, B. H., 2010). It was also estimated by the researchers that about \$2.1 billion would be injected into the economy. Mahmood, M. N., & Keast, R. (2016) studied on the gaps between impact assessments and resettlement planning of Padma multipurpose bridge. As mentioned earlier the Padma Bridge is one of the most challenging projects in the history of Bangladesh. It is the longest Bridge in Bangladesh and longest over the river Ganges in terms of span & length. It will connect Louhajong, Munshiganj to Shariatpur and Madaripur (create the link between the southwest of the country to the northern & eastern regions). It has 150.12m (492.5ft) long 41 spans, 6.150 km (3.821m) in total length (Authority, 2022). The design of the main Bridge was drawn in AECOM's Hong Kong office (Anam, 2016). Then for the smooth operations of construction, one dedicated project office was set up in Dhaka in March 2009. Padma Bridge is a milestone in the history of Bangladesh's remarkable development. German Ambassador to Bangladesh Achim Troster said that Padma Bridge is not only connecting two riversides, but it is also a symbol for connecting Bangladesh's part with a bright future (UNB, 2022). It will influence the country's economy, medical, travel, tourism, business, agriculture, import, the export sides also. Twenty-one backward districts in the southwestern part of Bangladesh (Khulna, Bagerhat, Jashore, Satkhira, Narail, Kushtia, Meherpur, Chuadanga, Jhenaidah and Magura of Khulna Division; Barisal, Pirojpur, Bhola, Patuakhali, Barguna and Jhalokati of Barisal division and Gopalganj, Faridpur, Madaripur, Shariatpur and Rajbari of Dhaka division) will enjoy the significant benefits of this Bridge.

This construction will contribute 1.23 percent to the country's overall GDP growth (Correspondent, 2022). Kuakata is the second largest sea beach in Bangladesh but still one of the major hindrances of visiting Kuakata was crossing Padma River (it takes from five to six hours ferry ride) which extended the journey to 14-15 hours. After the inauguration of Padma Bridge, it takes a total of five or six hours to reach Kuakata from Dhaka (Hossain, 2022). Kuakata is the only one sea beach in Bangladesh from where tourists can enjoy the sunrise & sunset. Traveler can enjoy the beauty of coast & can also enjoy Buddhist Temple (traditionally made with wooden boats by Rakhine community) which located at five kilometers east of the beach (Hossain, 2022). Alongside Kuakata, the country's two out of three UNESCO declared World Heritage sites (Sundarbans-the largest mangrove forest & Shat Gombuz Mosque) are located in the Bagerhat region. One study said that a total of 12,000 tourists came to visit the Sundarbans Bagerhat part & 18,000 tourists visited shat Gombuz Mosque in the fiscal year 2012-22 and the government earned revenue of 1.125 crores & TK 60 lakh respectively from those places (Hasan, 2022). Sheikh Shakir Hossain (member of Sundarban Tourist Club) said that the inauguration of Padma Bridge would help to increase the number of tourists in Bagerthat (Hasan, 2022). Mawa ghat in Munshiganj has become a new hub of domestic tourism due to the construction of Padma Bridge (Reporter, 2021). Few playing facilities have developed temporarily there. Now people are visiting Mawa Ghat to enjoy the real taste of Hilsha, watch the scenic beauty of Padma & children are visiting to enjoy children's entertainment instruments.

Materials and Methods:

It has been decided to collect data from secondary sources of information under the qualitative study. It has been found that several features, articles, opinions and news have been published on local, national and international newspapers since the start of the construction of the Bridge. These publications are considered as significant sources of information especially where the impacts of the Bridge have been focused. Besides, the relevant journal articles are reviewed to gather the essential data through a limited number of articles has been found. In the same way, a range of publications from different websites has been studied thoroughly. The interviews of

government personnel and tourism experts given on electronic and social media have also been considered as essential part of the data. The collected data from the different sources have been analyzed carefully. The positive effects of the Bridge have been accommodated in preliminary stage. Then all impacts are separated into sub-points and discussed accordingly. In this way, this paper has been written based on published materials from different sources.

Results and Discussions:

Impacts of Padma Bridge on flourishing tourism industry:

One of the pillars for the development of any country or region is to build an improved & robust communication system. Padma Bridge is such construction which will ensure uninterrupted road & rail link among south and southwestern part of Bangladesh with capital & eastern part. Mawa-Jashore-Khulna railway link will be established as a part of the integrated communication system. After the operations of Padma Bridge trade, commerce & SMEs will be expanded their business. Thus, the country's GDP will grow 1.2% a year and Southern part's GDP can grow 2.5 % (Talukder, 2022). Md. Mustafizur Rahman (), Fellow of the Centre for policy dialogue (CPD) shared his opinion that Padma Bridge is one of the keys to our economy; we can establish our business collaboration with INDIA, BHUTAN & NEPAL easily through it (Choudhury, 2022). Mongla port, the second largest seaport in Bangladesh was almost become non-functional in the late 1980s (Sarkar, 2022). But after the opening of Padma Bridge, a large number of products was shipped abroad from Mongla port for the first time on 4th August (Thursday) 2022 (Sheikh, 2022) which paves a new dimension for garment exports. The ship left the port for Poland carrying 17 containers of RMG products made by 27 factories in Bangladesh (Sheikh, 2022). The Chairman of Mongla port Authority (Rear Admiral Mohammad Musa) overwhelmed & declared this day as one of the most memorable days for the port after the inauguration of Padma Bridge. The director (Traffic) Mustafa Kamal shared his opinion with a newspaper reporter that the businessman didn't use & try to avoid Mongla port for the prolonged waiting for the ferry to cross Padma River in the past (Sheikh, 2022). Increased export-import activities of Mongla port will help to reduce the pressure on the Dhaka-Chattogram highway & Chattogram port. Before the construction of Padma Bridge, water transport/ ferry was the only transportation medium where the conditions of ferry service have become worsened in every year. The waiting time for ferry points is more than two hours for buses and light vehicles and almost 10 hours for trucks (Ali, 2021).

This situation becomes more devastating based on the bad weather conditions. Thus, the travelers get bored and do not feel interest in visiting the south western part of Bangladesh. Although south western part is blessed with many major tourism attractions, it cannot flourish their tourism industry for lack of transportation facilities. Padma Bridge will remove this crisis & motivates people to travel to southwestern parts. One side of the bridge is Mawa of Munshiganj & other side is Jajira of Shariatpur and both sides are essential for tourism industry. Raw materials supply & labor force movement will be easy & less costly. It will also contribute in the development of the communication system between Dhaka & Kuakata. As a result, more tourists will visit Kuakata (from where tourists can enjoy sunrise & sunset from same beach), Sundarbans (mangrove forest & UNESCO world heritage sites) & its surrounding area's natural islands, beaches & places. Director of TOAB (Tour Operators Association of Bangladesh) Mohammad Shahed Ullah shared his opinion regarding this issue in an interview & said "usually people went to Mawa Ghat to visit the Padma Banks & taste Hilsha fish but as now the communication is developing there, visitors are much interested in day tours which certainly creating a big opportunity for the tourism sector" (Hossain , 2020). Now people are visiting Mawa Ghat for enjoying Hilsha as well as to enjoy the beauty of Padma Bridge. It takes only 30-40 minutes to reach Mawa from Dhaka due to the improvement of road transport system.

Padma river cruise service was launched based on the construction of Padma Bridge. State Minister for civil aviation and tourism Md. Mahbub Ali inaugurated the Padma river cruise named M.V Dingi. Padma River cruise Boat Company operates daily tours to explore Padma River, fishing, rural people living in the river bank. Avijatrik Tourism Ltd. introduced this river cruise which can provide service up to 60 tourists at a time. Everyday 2 shifts operated from Mawa ghat- morning (from 10am-1pm) & evening (from 2pm -5pm). This cruise package includes breakfast, lunch & light snacks –tea, coffee & other items to tourists. In the inauguration ceremony of Padma River cruise, Md. Mahbub Ali said that “the government is working to develop maritime tourism. Our national tourism development policy emphasizes the development of maritime tourism. Naval tourism is also taken into consideration for tourism master plan” (Standard, 2021). Bangladesh Tourism Board (BTB) & BPC (Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation) are also planning & taking initiatives for promoting river-centric tourism. They are planning to promote riverine tourism of Bangladesh around the globe. Tourists can now easily visit Padma resort, Mawa resort to stay & enjoy the scenic beauty of Padma River & Padma river cruise. After the inauguration of Padma Bridge on 25th June, people from different parts of the country are running to visit Padma Bridge after the inauguration of our Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. After the opening of Padma Bridge, people from all walks of life were gathered in the starting point of the Bridge & crossed Bridge with excitement and happiness (BSS, 2022). A total of 15,200 vehicles crossed Padma Bridge in the 1st eight hours of its opening (Hossain, 2022). We can look over following table (collected toll in 1st four days from vehicles) to know the interest of people traveling from the Padma Bridge-

Table 1 Number of vehicles & collected Toll from Padma Bridge

Time	Number of vehicles	Collected Toll
1 st 8 hours	15,200	82,19,050 TK
Day-1	51,316	2,09,40,300 TK
Day-2	15,274	1,97,56,600 TK
Day-3	14,493	1,94,58,100TK
1 st July	26,398	3,16,53,200TK
8 th July	31,723	4,19,39,650TK

Source: The Business Standard, 2022

According to information of Bridge Authority, 450,317 vehicles from both sides crossed Padma Bridge in 1st 20 days & collect a total TK 52, 55, 35,650 TK (Report, 2022). However, the government is bound to stop the movement of motorcycles to avoid different unexpected accidents & events. Observing the considerable interest of tourists & travelers, BPC (Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation) has started a day tour package (from July 22) for interested travelers named “Dream Padma Bridge Tour” (Correspondent, 2022) at a minimum cost TK 1200 per person after 40% discount, it was for TK 999 for 1st day of package opening day (children bellow age five can travel for free). They promote to visit Padma Bridge & back to the capital in six hours only. Journey will start from the Parjatan Bhaban in Agargaon at 4:00 pm & return to Dhaka by 10:00 pm (with two air-conditioned tourists’ coasters having 29 seat each). They will give a break of two hours at Banga, Faridpur, serve light snacks & refreshments to tourists there (Correspondent, 2022). State Minister of Civil Aviation and Tourism Md Mahabub Ali inaugurated the service at BPC’s premises (Report, 2022). He expects that various tourism facilities will be created on both sides of Padma Bridge with the cooperation of BPC (Correspondent, 2022).

Challenges & opportunities to the local communities:

➤ Socio-economic development: The Bridge will directly or indirectly contribute in changing the socio-economic status of more than 60 million people of the southern 21 districts (Rahman, 2020). Padma Bridge will help to boost the overall GDP of Bangladesh by

contributing every sector of economy. Infrastructural development will enhance the productivity & competitiveness of the country. Around three crore people of southwestern districts of Bangladesh will be benefited through this Bridge (Khatun, 2020). They can use Padma Bridge as their economic corridor. Alongside the improvement of the transportation system, it will ensure better supply chain domestically & internationally. Southwestern people will also get better access to education, healthcare, accessible goods transportation & other relevant services. Like urban people, rural people will also enjoy several opportunities like agricultural product transportation & enhancing their daily income.

➤ Creating employment opportunities & Reducing the poverty rate:

When the bridge is opened, it will help to reduce the poverty of 0.84% of the southern people. Many people of those regions lost their interest in agriculture activities only because of poor communication & connectivity with the capital. This bridge will facilitate them those opportunities that will indirectly ensure their sustainable development.

➤ Decentralization facilities:

Decentralization of goods & services will help to reduce the excessive pressure on the capital city. Factories can be shifted from Dhaka to the connected part which will help to reduce the cost of raw materials as well as ensures the sustainability of both cities. Besides, the development of existing services like electricity, education, healthcare in the connected village will motivate rural people to stay in the village rather than crowding the cities. In the short term, cargo transportation facilities can be developed for ensuring easier excess of existing businesses (Mia, 2021).

➤ Proper utilization of local resources:

While the communication system develops, local people will be encouraged to involve themselves with entrepreneurial work. Industrialization will help to ensure the proper utilization of local resources. It will promote the region & contribute in the development of national economy (Islam, 2020). Then several financial supporters will also invest/finance to the rural people to flourish their small & medium businesses.

➤ Communication, Connectivity, Healthcare & other opportunities:

Padma Multipurpose Bridge will carry one step forward in overall communication system of the country. Then raw materials, finished goods like oil, additives etc. will be easily transport from Chittagong port at lower price. Domestic & international Connectivity will be enhanced. Among many goods transport drivers, Monir Hossain (truck driver) shared his views that he waited for a ferry for two days & noted that they would feel much safer & faster transportation mode if Padma Bridge opened. He also added he loaded his truck one day before at Satkhira & reached Ferry ghat at around 1:00 am in the night. Even he has no idea when he can avail the ferry. But if the bridge opened there, by now he could have reached the destination Chittagong, unloaded his truck & even returned home (WB, 2011). In previous times, people used water transportation for their mode of transportation but many of those ships are outdated & provide service without maintaining their carrying capacity (overloaded) which causes accidents (Sharmin, 2017). After the opening of Padma Bridge, people will get alternative modes of transport, thus use of water transport will be reduced. It not only helps to reduce the distance but also provides easier & comfortable communication system to the southwestern people. Before the construction of the bridge people of the southern part were deprived of taking emergency health treatment due to poor transportation facilities. Among many sufferers, Imam Hossain Dhali (who lost his elder brother while attempting to cross the river for medical treatment) shares his views that around 70% of emergency patients die on the road to Dhaka.

If there was a bridge then the patients could reach doctors in the capital faster & help to reduce the accident (WB, 2011). For the construction of Padma Bridge & related organizations, huge land was required & collected from locals. Which indirectly reduce the farming land of that area. Many people have to shift from their inherent residents which have temporary negative impacts on their livings. However, Padma Bridge is one of the outcomes of the dedication of people of Bangladesh which enhance the confidence level that Bangladesh can plan for larger infrastructure with their limited resources if they want.

Conclusion and Implications:

The primary objective of this paper was to identify a range of positive impacts of the Padma Multi-purpose Bridge on the tourism Sector of southwestern part of Bangladesh so that the expected benefits can be seen visually since the industry of the region was lack-behind so many years because of the road communications barriers particularly in the absence of a bridge on Padma River. So, the inauguration of Padma Multi-purpose bridge was a means of long waiting of the people of the region specially Barishal, Khulna and Dhaka (Some Parts) divisions. Likewise, the tourism industry in the area was waiting for the moment many years as it could not flourish instead of having a number of tourism resources. Several publications including newspaper articles, journal articles, online features of different websites, Government reports as well as newsletters of private organizations have been reviewed to find out the expected outcomes. The 6.15 KM Bridge connected the southwestern part with the other parts of Bangladesh not only by road but also rail connectivity though the railroad is yet to complete. This railroad will connect with integrated communication system where Bangladesh railway will connect with India, Bhutan and Nepal. As a result, the GDP will increase by 1.2% (2.5% in the region) due to expansion of SMEs and other business initiatives. For tourists, it was time-consuming and unpleasant journey to visit in the region like travelers of Kuakata beach, only the place of Bangladesh where the sunrise and sunset can be enjoyed, due to waiting time of ferry services on Padma River. Many tourists, however, can now go to tourist destinations within significantly shorter time. As a result, Sundarbans (The largest mangrove forest of the country and UNESCO world heritage site) and Kuakata will be famous tourist destinations of the country which may have multiplier effects. Many tourist attractions like Tungipara (Mausoleum of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman) of Gopalganj will flourish dramatically. To explore the Padma River, enjoy the fishing in the river and feel the lives of rural people living in the banks, the Padma River cruise service named Dingi has already been introduced for the tourists. It is expected to increase such type of river cruise services in near future which may connect between tourist and local people and benefits them in several ways. The government bodies like Bangladesh Tourism Board (BTB) and Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation (BTC) are also working to initiate and promote such kinds of river-centric tourist activities. It is also expected that 60 million people of 21 districts (Geographically one-third of the country) will receive benefits in several ways in socio-economic sectors like education, health care, good transportation, agricultural production and sells as they connected with the other parts of the country directly. A huge number of tourists will consume their products and services certainly.

The bridge will also facilitate the southwestern people in creating employment opportunities and reducing poverty involved in the newly developed tourism industry particularly in accommodations, food, guiding, and transportation and sightseeing sectors. The freshly developed communication system will help to local people to utilize their resources properly through industrialization of the region. Several number of small and medium businesses will flourish rapidly where local people can be converted into human resources. In emergency situation like medical issues during traveling to the region it was difficult to move to Dhaka

easily. Rapid medical service was a big challenge which has been overcome by the construction of historical bridge, Padma. A report on medical emergency shows that around 70% emergency patients die on the road due to the complexity of road communication. The bridge relieves the region from the situation for entire time and now they can reach doctor in the capital city easily. So, the bridge on Padma River opens the new window for not only the tourism industry of the country but also for 60 million people of the region. A range of industry will develop in the region very soon which contributes in increasing GDP of the country.

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