

Ten tips for traffic discipline

The system must sustain itself

FOR too long, we have allowed misrule to rule our street and sacrificed mental peace and tranquility at the altar of whim and caprice of concerned authorities. Why must we believe that our drivers and pedestrians are disrespectful of traffic signal and street discipline if they face no credible deterrence for such violations?

We've spent crores of taka in building over-bridges but failed to stop traffic with a simple signal. We see no sign of pedestrians using the zebra crossings due to the moving traffic not halting to allow them that privilege.

We have also been wishy-washy in taking a resolute stand to effect traffic discipline, but gleefully wasted manpower by putting on duty thousands of cops whose hand signals do little to control passing vehicles and a sea of pedestrians.

We can hardly wait further for some miracle to take care of our street unruliness and intolerable congestion that make nightmarish experience of our desire to commute with peace.

Especially, the delay in Dhaka streets is so painful that many parents prefer putting their children in dormitory due to the danger of commuting from homes within even the RAJUK area.

The following ten tips for restoring traffic discipline are not only desirable, they're indispensable. (1) Activation of automated traffic lights and signals in all city intersections; (2) Ensuring zebra crossing or over-bridge usage by all pedestrians; (3) Scaling down of big islands into 'small is beautiful' islets; (4) Construction of more roads within the city and diversion tracks from the main choking points like Kachpur-Demra, Tongi-Uttara, Gabtali-Savar, Jatrabari-Narayanganj to avoid overpressure on a single approach to the city from outside; (5) Construction of underground bypasses at level crossings; (6) Installation of video camera at major intersections to spot traffic signal violators; (7) Creation of small courts all over the country to adjudicate cases of traffic violations with video evidence and police testimony; (8) Construction of separate lanes for public transport (bus, taxi) and rickshaw on every wider road; (9) Mandatory attendance to government approved driving schools of all aspiring drivers seeking licence; (10) Creation of an independent authority to adjudge drivers' quality before issuing licence.

Who pays for it? The system itself, and the taxpayers. Violators can be penalised until the system becomes functionally effective. Donors too might be consulted for development funds. The city corporations can save enough by not constructing any more islands and over bridges. And, the gain from saved time and rehabilitated image cannot be measured in terms of money.

The "traffic terror" deters foreign businessmen and tourists. It suffocates our own lives. It's a shame for the nation.

Underpass fire

Citizens' safety should be high on the DCC agenda

IT took the firefighters two hours to extinguish the fire that broke out in Gulistan underpass on Sunday night. The fire damaged some shops but, fortunately, there were no casualties in terms of human lives.

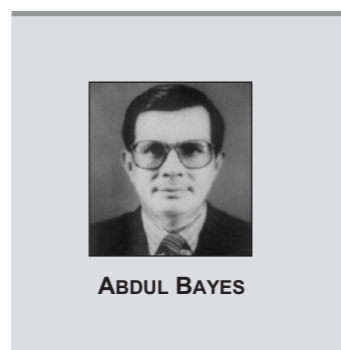
However, the incident is a harsh reminder of the fact that our fire preparedness is poor even in a place like a subterranean underpass where a fire can cause havoc. The fire broke out at a time when not many people were passing through the underpass. So there was no stampede and the shopkeepers got the time and space to move to safety. But what is the guarantee that such accidents will not take place during the busy hours? Is there any arrangement for evacuating the trapped people in case of emergency? Regrettably, these questions can only be asked but the authorities concerned cannot possibly provide satisfactory answers.

The fire incident has also brought into light some serious flaws insofar as maintenance of the underpass is concerned. It has been reported that there was no supply of electricity in it for five consecutive days! That alone could make it a dangerous place. A dark underground passage is surely not a safe place for a huge number of pedestrians rushing through it. So accidents of other types can take place any time if the underpass is kept open without electricity.

Reports carried by the press also indicate that the underpasses in the city are not serving the purpose that they were built for. People cannot feel comfortable if underpasses and overbridges become a habitat for hawkers and beggars, not to mention the drug addicts and muggers.

Not that the idea of constructing the underpasses was bad in itself. Obviously, the plan was to ease traffic jam and ensure that pedestrians could safely move across the roads at busy places. But what the authorities do not appear to have taken into consideration is that the underpasses had to be maintained properly. Poor visibility, presence of undesirable elements and lack of safety measures against hazards like fire are causes for concern that the DCC authorities must address immediately in the interest of citizens.

The veritable vegetable grower



ABDUL BAYES

I was visiting few projects that are reported to be "pro-poor". We have been hearing about "pro-poor growth", "pro-poor policies" etc. for a pretty long time. A close scrutiny, sometimes, showed that there was always a slip between the cup and the lip. It allegedly, appears pro-poor but serves the rich. I just wanted to know whether all that called "pro-poor" projects were, in fact, rhetoric or reality. Thanks to the Poverty Elimination Through Rice Research Assistance (PETRRA) project under the aegis of IIRRI for allowing me to visit some of their "pro-poor" projects. On way to my mission, the Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service (RDRS) officials of Thakurgaon engaged in PETRRA projects introduced me to a person. They were narrating how a penniless person rose to the prominence among the poor. I wanted to meet him and he courteously called on me.

Deprivation and desperation

Khairul Islam (45) never thought that doomsday was at his doorstep. Nor should he have thought so. Because, his father owned 11.5 acres of land to be inherited by three sons. But brothers, allegedly, betrayed Khairul by managing all lands from the father and thus depriving him of his due share. At that time of the disaster, he had three sons and a wife. Soon after, in 1991, his wife died and he had to marry Parul Begum to look after the kids and the household. Khairul was confident that he could overcome the crisis but the constraint was cash money. Desperate as he was to feed a family of five and another to join very soon, he went to a 'mahajan' and borrowed Tk. 20,000 at an interest of 10 per cent per month. Mentionably, all that he had of his own were: (a) a house made of mud and straw; (b) 10 decimal homestead land and (c) a jug of seeds of *Lal shak* (red leafy vegetable).

Some body told Khairul that NGOs could help him with credit to carry out income earning opportunities. He approached RDRS but, painful as it was, the prayer was rejected on the plea of poor credit

worthiness of Khairul. Few days later, one Shamsul Huq of RDRS stood beside him and paid on his behalf a cumulative savings amount of Tk. 140 at a time. Meantime, family's economic crisis began to mount. It was very hard to get three meals a day. There was no option left for him than begging or borrowing. However, after joining the group formed by RDRS, Khairul got training on vegetable production and poultry rearing and applied for a loan. While other applicants were

days appeared to have gone with quick contacts, facilitated by the Bridge, between his region and all other parts of Bangladesh. Imbued with the new insights, Khairul began to devote more land on vegetable production. To be specific, he used his newly mortgaged-in 2.5 bigha land to grow raddish and other vegetables. A party from Dhaka came to see his farm and expressed the desire to buy products on regular basis from him. A silverlining loomed large in Khairul's life. Neigh-

address of a merchant at *Kawran Bazar* collected from his local *arat*, he reached the place and the person with his bags of raddish. They were sold at Tk. 240/maund to give Khairul Tk. 17,000. After deducting the costs of transport, seeds, labour/draft animals, fertilizer/water etc., reportedly, he got a net return of Tk. 6000. Second time also from the same land, he took to Dhaka 15 bags but price went down due to over supply. This time, at Tk. 130 per bag, he reaped home about Tk.

raddish and *karala* were hefty and he bought 2 bigha (1 acre) of land at Tk. 44,000. Meantime, he devoted no less attention to the education of his children, meeting non-food needs of the family and saying prayers regularly. His children are getting good education in schools and colleges/training institutes. "But, I also use them in the early morning to harvest the daily crops that I take to the local *arats* for sale. This is mainly to teach my family that fortunes come from farms. I also

about the role of Jamuna Bridge and the realities around the poor farmers.

Truthful trainer

Starting with zero amount of land in 1992, within the span of 11 years or so, Khairul now owns four acres of land plus he leased in another one acre to grow *karala*. I saw signs of happiness in him. However, he was looking at his wrist watch at 9.30pm reminding me, perhaps, that a businessman like him has not much time left for a gossip with a university professor who draws upon a definite salary (irrespective of the output delivered!) at the end of each month. But Khairul will have to go home, take stock of things for tomorrow's markets, rise up at 5am and then again go to bed at 12 midnight. During the discourse, it was nice to hear that RDRS now knocks at the door of Khairul whose loan prayer was once rejected on the plea of poor creditworthiness. The reason they look for Khairul is to train other vegetable growers coming from different areas. Khairul teaches them with right earnest, not textbook type economics, but economics originated from the practical experiences of his fields. "It is not the size of the land but hard work, small amount of capital, some knowledge on production and marketing and above all a good communication system that could improve the fate of people like me", Khairul told me. In other words, according to him, the poor only need a small amount of land, institutions to provide small cash, training on new cropping systems and a good communication network to market their products. Thus infrastructure, innovations and institutions seemingly constitute the core of any approach to poverty reduction especially of the resource poor farmers.

Still with dreams!

At the tag end, as I was wishing him a success, Khairul said: "Sir, I have two dreams to come true. First, to buy a pick-up van so that I myself can carry the commodities and second, to write a book". "Writing a book?" I gave a surprise look at him. "Yes sir, about my life. I have already named the book as *Paruler sansar* (Parul's family)". "Why not *Khairuler sansar*?" I wondered. "Because throughout the journey so far, my wife Parul stood beside me to share the sorrows and silverlinings. In fact, she played the pivotal role in relieving us of the rigours", said Khairul, the veritable vegetable grower to live in my memory for years to come.

Abdul Bayes is professor of economics, Jahangirnagar University

BENEATH THE SURFACE

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given a loan of Tk. 4000 to 5000, it was only Tk. 2000 for Khairul. However, with the money in hand, he leased in one bigha land for one year with Tk. 1000 to grow vegetables and decided to set aside the rest of the amount for petty trading and buying inputs.

Valuable vegetables

Khairul went for the production of cucumber in the leased-in land. The decision was based mainly on the demand for the product in the market that he could ascertain. Fortunately, soon he could become a contract grower of BRAC to supply seeds. Thus, output and seeds from cucumber fetched him about Tk. 16,000. Excluding all costs, Khairul reaped home Tk. 8000 as net income! Lucrative profits from cucumber lured him but for food security of the household, he also went for paddy cultivation. Then potato. He excelled in both. Seeing his promising and profitable performance, the landowner leased out another 75 decimals at Tk. 3500 for one year. Khairul grew vegetables and began to sell in the roadside *arats*. In 1994, he sold vegetables worth Tk. 32,000. With that money, he mortgaged in 2.5 bigha land at Tk. 20,000 and bought 50 decimal paddy land.

Bridge as boon

In 1998, Bongabandhu Bridge over the Jamuna was opened up for traffic. Khairul had read up to eighth grade but could read well the realities on the ground. He realised that the biggest bridge could help better business and trading, especially of perishable products. In his lifetime, he saw farmers growing vegetables but failed to fetch a fair price due to the lack of communication to market the crops. About half of the products used to perish in the absence of disposal. But those

hours began to visit his fields.

Turning the table

Khairul, for the first time in his life, decided to go to Dhaka to sell his outputs. He reckoned that the margin that goes to the middlemen could pour into his pockets provided he established direct connection with the buyers. There was, of course, risks involved since he knew nothing about Dhaka and the deals there. But as I mentioned, the person was desperate to go up the income scale and risks had to be taken to overtake others. One fine morning, Khairul got out of his home with 40 bags (70 maunds) of raddish, and rode on a truck that was carrying stones. With an

2000.

The next trip, again for the first time, was to Chittagong in 2001. His bus from Thakurgaon started at 5 pm and reached Chittagong at 6 am next day and after selling the products he returned the same day because of the bridge that was once a dream. Khairul carried six cages (18 maunds) of *karala* to fetch home a net return of Tk. 13,000. Just a week later the same kind of journey took place with six cages (27 maunds) of *karala*.

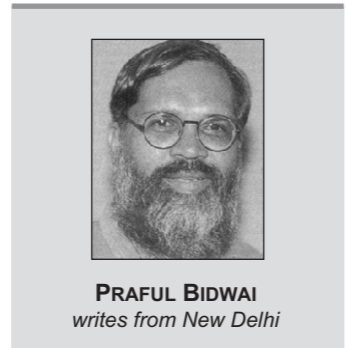
Farm and fortune

And so the rewards continued. Khairul started producing *karala* bitter gourd to sell in Khulna and Dhaka markets. In 1999, sales from

employ children of poor neighbours just to give them some cash money", Khairul described to me. "Now a days, the number of vegetable growers in this region increased substantially, especially the poor farmers who used to keep land fallow are now vying to grow vegetables because of the opening up of markets due to the big bridge. In the past, farmers used to go to the roadside with vegetables and, more often than not, used to throw away the unsold surplus. Now-a-days, nothing like that happens. Earlier, we produced vegetables and we perished but now it is the reverse: if we do not produce we perish". Khairul continued his conversation, as if, with a student who knows little



Politics of the chameleon: BJP and the Ayodhya issue



PROF. PRAFUL BIDWAI writes from New Delhi

IF you thought Mahant Ramachandra Paramhans, who recently died, was a universally revered figure in Ayodhya, think again. Going by local observers, he didn't command the respect of the other sadhus who control various temples and *akharas*.

"Mahant Ramachandra subordinated the Ramjanmabhoomi trust to the Vishwa Hindu Parishad", says Mr Sheelta Singh, the highly regarded editor of the Faizabad-based *Jan Morcha* daily.

A majority of Ayodhya Mahants found Ramachandra overbearing and untrustworthy—including Satya Das, the *Ramlalla* temple *pujari*, Gyan Das of Hanuman Garhi, Phalahari Baba, Bhavnath Das and Dharam Das.

Ramachandra was responsible for stealthily spiriting images of *Ramlalla* into the Babri mosque in 1949. He thus helped launch hun-

dreds of political careers.

But Ramchandra had little popular support. His Ayodhya-to-Delhi *chetavani yatra* last year evoked a poor response. Building the temple was an issue only for a few VHP leaders. The Mahant couldn't mobilise even one thousand people for this last year.

Therefore, it's strange that the Prime Minister of a supposedly secular nation attended the funeral of such a controversial person. Mr Vajpayee's first visit to Ayodhya in 14 years took place in the company

stooped to partisanship on this divisive issue.

Mr Vajpayee's *Hindutva* turn at Ayodhya speaks poorly of him—just as did his remarks about a [Ram temple] in "the India of my dreams" (September 2000) or the Ayodhya agitation being a "nationalist movement" (December 2000).

In Ayodhya, Mr Vajpayee was either playing *Hindutva* politics, or got emotionally carried away. Both possibilities are unflattering. Even more unseemly was his gratuitous outburst in Parliament about not

accepts parliamentary accountability.

On the other hand, it invests mystical properties into the temple as a symbol of *Hindutva* hubris. The first posture provokes it to deny that its leaders conspired to raze the Babri mosque—in breach of a solemn commitment to the Supreme Court. The second position impels it to depict the Ayodhya campaign as an upsurge of "cultural nationalism".

This schizophrenia was on display last fortnight. The CBI dropped the charge of criminal

consent.

But the High Court itself recommended in 2001 that the "defect" (not illegality) be "cured" through a minor governmental procedure.

All this reeks of an attempt to prevent a fair trial. The "disappearance" of the Babri videotapes is a serious matter. The Intelligence Bureau has nine hours of such coverage, as do private agencies. I myself know at least *three individuals* who have watched the tapes.

They confirm, as did the independent Citizens' Commission on

subverted the process of law the way it has. The BJP's reaction to the National Human Rights Commission's appeal to the Supreme Court in the Best Bakery judgment is nauseating. It calls it "anti-Hindu".

Nothing could better reduce Hinduism to an immoral faith that justifies violence, mass rape and butchery.

The Congress has paid a price for its manipulative politics: loss of power. The BJP must be made to pay a price too. The people have a chance to make it do so, especially in the four Hindi heartland elections due soon.

Faced with uncertainty, the party is playing crooked, suggesting that all Assembly elections be held simultaneously with Lok Sabha elections. This demands that we sacrifice the vital principle of representative democracy for administrative expediency.

Should the BJP do badly in the Assembly elections, it will be tempted to play the "temple" card—even at the cost of destroying the NDA—to polarise politics communally. Ironically, it might find that its "trump" is a dud.

Ayodhya ceased to be a *movement* long ago. It no longer inspires large numbers or gives them a "cause" the way it used to. One only hopes ordinary citizens won't have to suffer more for the BJP's blunders.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

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of the VHP's Ashok Singhal and the RSS' Sudarshan.

Mr Vajpayee vowed to "fulfil the Mahant's last wish to build the temple... We swear on his funeral pyre to complete [his] mission." Mr Advani said building the temple "is the national wish".

Mr Vajpayee was trying to out-Singhal Mr Singhal on *Hindutva*. But two days later, he retracted his statement and said: "There's no change in our stand on the Ayodhya issue..."

The denial was neither convincing nor becoming of a Prime Minister. Mr Vajpayee shouldn't have

yielding to "compulsions".

Mr Vajpayee, who paid his annual *gurudakshina* to the RSS flag on August 6, periodically descends to the same position on the temple as the VHP, RSS or Bajrang Dal. He then becomes indistinguishable from the "extremists" from whom he is supposed to guard the BJP's allies.

There is a difference between the BJP's parliamentary wing and VHP-RSS bigots. The latter take the temple literally—and aggressively. The BJP is more schizophrenic. It is, on the one hand, bound by the NDA's programme and reluctantly

conspiracy against the Union ministers inciting the mob in Ayodhya, viz. Messrs Advani, M.M. Joshi and Ms Uma Bharati. It mysteriously "disappeared" videotapes recording their speeches.

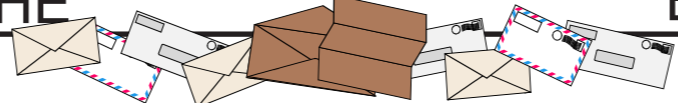
Law Minister Arun Jaitley's attempt at covering this up will convince nobody. He cottoned on to a procedural technicality. He failed to tell Parliament that the original 1993 chargesheet upheld in 1997 by Special Judge J.P. Srivastava, contained Sec 120B of the Indian Penal Code pertaining to "conspiracy". This combined two FIRs (197 and 198) without the High Court's

Ayodhya, that there was a conspiracy, a systematic plan to mobilise and incite crowds to "get even" with "history" and destroy the mosque as an "ocular insult" (Advani).

Three who committed that grave offence or instigated others must be severely punished. But for more than 10 years, they haven't even stood trial. This speaks of the NDA's obstructiveness and shows its utter contempt for the rule of law, political probity and accountability.

Like the Best Bakery case, this is probably unprecedented. The BJP's predecessor governments were capable of great venality. But none

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Gains (?) and losses of Bangladesh cricket

Bangladesh Cricket Team just completed a tour that was supposed to be an acid test for our cricket. With the tour over, time has now come to draw the balance sheet of gains and losses. Suffering defeats at the hand of world champions is very much acceptable and it is in line with the state of contemporary cricket. You know that some of world's leading teams performed very poorly against Australia. Now the question comes -- in the second and third one-day, the opposition's bowling attack consisted of average and part time bowlers, so why did the batsmen fail to capitalise such mediocre bowling attack. It is a pity to see that the likes of Harvey, Leehman, Symonds, created quite a havoc on Bangladesh cricket. Certain things have been very dominant in Bangladesh innings. For example, when the opening pair put up an impressive performance, then the middle order collapsed and

vice versa. In every innings only one partnership developed and not a single batsman succeeded in back to back matches. In the second one-day, the opening pair did the groundwork but the subsequent players just squandered the opportunity by throwing their wickets. Some basic things were missing like running between the wickets and the ability to take catches in the slip area. The captain faltered in failing to drag the bat while he got run out. The composition of the team may also suggest that all the eleven players are not capable of playing international matches. In fact six players (namely Hannan Sarker, Habibul Basher, Khaled Masud, Mashrafe, Rafique and Alok Kapali) are capable of delivering quality cricket that is needed at this level. So it transpires that six players can never match eleven players of a team, that too world champions. I

guess we have to think about it.

Abul Moqsood
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

Fly-happy Hasina

Thank you for the captioned report published in your Daily of 7 August 2003. I am not surprised at Hasina's action but I am pleasantly surprised that Daily Star chose to print on a subject like this.

It has been a hallmark of our politicians both in the opposition and in the seat of power to be more concerned about their "private and personal matters" rather than issues of national concern. While Sheikh Hasina goes abroad for a "relaxed" time with her dear and near ones the prime minister is known for her visits on account for performing Umrah and reported medical treatment on lesser calling. Incidentally it may be relevant to mention here that the needed medical attention could be effectively arranged here within the

country or in neighbouring India at half or perhaps no costs besides gaining considerable political mileage. No less than the Indian Premier himself seem to be doing as well as could be expected after undergoing treatment for similar ailments using available facilities within his own country.

There is so much to do and deal within the country, it is imperative that both opposition and the leader of the House remain within the country to the greatest extent possible in order to effectively deal with pressing issues facing the country. It is more imperative on the opposition leader than the leader of the House particularly at this juncture of political instability and turmoil.

The nation is faced with such critical issues like controversies regarding appointment of Judges of the High court, government's dragging of the feet and delaying tactics in separating the Judiciary from the

Executive, extensive and continued politicisation of Administration, the judiciary, the civil service and ever-rising highhanded undemocratic actions by the ruling party, the "signs of emerging religious fundamentalism" etc. To my mind other than harping on the demand for resignation of the present regime it has not able to make any real impact on any of the other "critical" issues facing the country given the fact that the ruling party is also to blame.

Shamsher Chowdhury
Dhaka

Entrepreneurship development

Finance Minister disclosed that he is thinking of reducing bank interest rate from December 2003 in order to encourage entrepreneurship in the country. Is it the only way to accelerate entrepreneurial activities? Definitely not. First of all, most of our

entrepreneurs are lacking business skills as how to launch a new business and operate it. Secondly, according to economists and consultants, investment increase if there is sufficient security available for entrepreneurs, and that in turn boost a country's economy. Thirdly, Entrepreneurs are never very enthusiastic about undertaking risks associated with a new business venture because of non-functioning financial institutes and an absence of proper money market.

Beside that, shortage of enthusiasm and technical know-hows are also the obstacles of entrepreneurship development in Bangladesh. Next, apart from red-tapism, transport facilities are also regarded as the main hindrance for entrepreneurship development. Countries such as ours lack developed means of communication, proper power supply, etc. and such

problems also discourage entrepreneurial activities. Last but not least, Bangladesh has a very small market. Government should work as a representative of the entrepreneurs in the foreign countries and allow entrepreneurs to participate in trade fairs. At the same time, the government should take proper measures with a view to increase per capita income of our people which will further help in expediting the supply of entrepreneurs. In addition, something should be done to change the mindset of our people by holding more seminars and symposium.

Naser Ahmed
Ever Green, Zer Zeri Para, Sylhet