The Ultimate Patience Test

Driving in Dhaka City

Munaiba Salam

DURING a discussion on roads, driving directions and the American left-hand drive, in a training course in England, my father's colleague asked him, "So which side of the road do you people drive?" to which my father shrugged and jokingly replied, "Any side".

For as long as I can remember, driving around Dhaka city was never nothing less than an adventure. What with the incessant honks, the pedestrians who are anywhere but the pedestals, the traffic policemen who are busy drinking tea in the nearest mudir dokan, the car who is ever so desperate to overtake yours to be two seconds ahead of you, you never get time to even blink lest you miss the drama.

Allow me to elaborate.

Traffic signals (yes, the one with the green, amber and red lights) are perhaps the most futile machines in the country. If you are stuck at a red light you always have the option of sticking your nose out a little bit, showing a bit of aggression and to drive ahead as if you did nothing wrong. One of the most pointless things we do at a traffic signal is to virtually sit on our horns the millisecond the light turns green, even if we are the 15th car in line! Funnier still, by the time this 15th car pushes and weaves its way towards the front, the light turns red again but our desperate driver will cross the road, will block the road for the other cars, will swear at everybody for not giving him the way, and will never understand the futility of his actions. Heartbreaking really.

When it comes to the discipline and rules of the road, Dhaka city is in anarchy. One will always find parked cars in front of a 'No Parking' sign and blaringly honking cars passing by signs that say 'No Horn Please'. You have no idea who is coming from where, at what speed, with what sort of mood and/or desperation. The concept of give-way or the right of the road is lost somewhere in the midst of our beloved city. If you are on the main road, then your eyes have to constantly adjust to the people crossing the road, the sudden nose of a car that will stick out from a nearby goli, the microbus on the left trying to take a right turn and the jeep on the right trying to take a left turn. Anarchy indeed.

And then there are the traffic sergeants. With limited knowledge about signs and rules and no idea about highway codes and traffic duty, they stand proudly with a stick, a green uniform, dark shades and the occasional motorbike or umbrella to 'control' the traffic. Often at crossroads you will find two officers who have no coordination between them. One says go, the other says stop. Go or stop? Too late, because by then all the cars are in the middle of the crossroad and everybody is heatedly swearing at everybody. Chaotic. Stopped by a police as he was driving straight once, my brother-in-law asked him what was wrong. Police kaka asked why the indicator hadn't been turned on. "I am going straight, that's why", answered my brother-in-law. The exasperated officer looked at him and said, "Then why haven't you turned on both the indicators?" Chuckling to himself, my brother-in-law switched the hazard light on to console the policeman and drove off. Such is the vast knowledge of our police force.

Like the use of the hazard light, the Bengali use of honking and flashing the headlight is also opposite to the universal rule. Normally you flash your headlights when doing something courteous, for example letting someone cross the road. You blink, they know you are slowing down for them.

My heart goes out to those who think the same happens in our country. Here, you blink, it clearly means get-out-of-my-way-moron-blink-blink-blink-NOW. Of course we can be courteous, by sitting on our hideous horns to let a fellow driver know that his bonnet is open, or to draw attention to a friend on the road. But I don't suppose we honk to let somebody know they can cross the road...nah, that'd be out of character.



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