

# Eating an elephant

One avenue of mitigating the burden on the exchequer for maintaining the traffic police would be to impose realistic penalties on all traffic offenders. Fines in the books today are what were probably imposed years ago. This should be brought up to date. Moreover, income from buses has gone up from ten/twenty years ago. The penalty should be heavy as well, so that an offender thinks twice before repeating the offence.

SHAWKAT ANWAR

**H**ARDLY a week, may even be a day, passes by that someone does not deliberate on Dhaka traffic, more so, the scourge of it. Like Mark Twain said: "Everybody talks about the weather, but nobody does anything about it." Regarding Dhaka traffic, we have about the same impasse, except that while a lot of people are talking about it many are also planning to do a lot of things.

It is all very well that because the matter is very urgent we have a number of plans to tackle the problem. However, the people are begging for at least partial, albeit significant, relief that can be effected today. This can, indeed, be done, and at a fraction of projected costs.

The deliberation today dwells mainly on buses, because a lot of notions have been put forward recently regarding buses, their importance with regard to traffic, their contribution, and particularly the bad behaviour of bus operators/drivers.

A solution may be found in what

is known as "eating an elephant." Eating one whole elephant in one go is a monumental task, and prima-facie assessment of the enormity of the undertaking may deter many from even attempting it. But not if the job is broken into bite-size pieces, when it becomes more manageable and practicable. People have deployed this technique to achieve successful results.

Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) is almost in a similar situation. The job of achieving a comprehensive and satisfactory traffic system may seem daunting, but DMP has many of the tools required, but does not employ them appropriately. DMP does not seem willing to employ its most important tool: legal power. This can be the first bite in eating the elephant.

There are laws that are prerequisites for a good traffic system. They provide measures that would allow only competent drivers on the road. Drivers who are found to be hazardous to the traffic system should be taken out, sent to driving schools and retested before being let loose on the streets again. Depending on the severity of the offence and the attitude of the

delinquent driver, the DMP may prosecute him and impose fines, and in extreme cases, even incarceration.

While inept drivers may be taught better driving skills, the full force of law may be applied against people who deliberately break the rules. Particularly if this involves damage to life or property. The penalty should work both as a deterrent for the offender and as a safeguard for others.

There are flagrant violations of traffic laws every day, people are maimed and killed, assets are damaged and, yet, how many drivers are penalised? Hardly any, if at all.

There are laws governing fitness of buses, and yet we see hundreds of faulty buses bumper to bumper. Some don't even have bumpers! Even though the DMP conducts Traffic Week from time to time, the lack of a follow-up renders the exercise meaningless.

Only implementing traffic laws in isolation is unlikely to yield all that we envisage in terms of civil, efficient, orderly and professional conduct from the bus operators, mainly due to the fact that many bus drivers do not even know what

is expected of them.

"Ignorance of law is no excuse" we know, but it shall be more rewarding if drivers were informed beforehand what is expected of them in terms of road behaviour, which leads, again, to training. We must train at least a few batches of drivers, and hope that they pass that knowledge on to the batches that follow.

You will find buses violating traffic rules frequently, from stopping at any point on the street to take or drop passengers, to a number of them bunching up at major intersections, to weaving their way through thick traffic, to suddenly jumping on to your shoulder at break-neck speed and forcing you to vacate the lane at the risk of a major accident, and so on.

All these dangerous acts can be captured by cameras positioned by the sides of the streets, or by mobile police, and used as evidence in prosecuting reckless drivers.

A serious matter to consider is that in all these cases the police may themselves lack knowledge of what they are expected to do. They need to know about traffic rules and regulations, and how to process an indictment through the law courts.

The DMP objective is at least two-fold. First, to improve movement of traffic immediately and reduce accidents and collateral damages. Second, to continually monitor traffic flow on a continuing long-term basis.

To achieve these, DMP needs to impart knowledge and skill to their own members at all times. Team members should be provided with

laptop computers and police stations should have computing facilities that have a database that holds driver and motor vehicle records.

Mobile police teams should have speed detection equipment and, if possible, video cameras. Stationary roadside cameras to read license plates of speeding autos can support DMP charges of speed violations.

These might seem like expensive and fanciful ideas, but we do not need to do it all today. We need to have modern, even if not state-of-the-art, resources to meet current day situations. We are using lasers in our hospitals now, so why not a laptop for a policeman, particularly when technology is so commonplace today?

One avenue of mitigating the burden on the exchequer for maintaining the traffic police would be to impose realistic penalties on all traffic offenders. Fines in the books today are what were probably imposed years ago. This should be brought up to date.

Moreover, income from buses has gone up from ten/twenty years ago. The penalty should be heavy as well, so that an offender thinks twice before repeating the offence.

We do not have to implement the traffic laws all over Dhaka city at the same time. As a start, we can take, say, the whole stretch of Airport Road to VIP Road to Suhrawardy Uddayan (PG Hospital), and equip it with mobile police personnel, speed detection equipment, video cam-



Miles to go before they sleep.

eras and wireless communication equipment, for a three or four week period. During this time, apprehend the offenders and process them through the legal route. In addition to the legal process, subject offending drivers to further training if they wish to drive in future.

At the end of the period, do a proper assessment of how many vehicles were checked, how many were found delinquent, how many were penalised on the spot, how many were processed for trial, and how many were let go with "warn-

ings issued." The data analysed will provide a basis for future actions.

In addition to above exercise, whenever a driver is stopped checks should be made into matters relating to the automobile itself. The DMP should look into the issues of ownership, insurance cover and road-tax, and take appropriate measures. Kill a few birds with one stone.

An extremely important principle to follow is, whatever be the number of cases handled it must be ensured that the whole process has been carried out in depth. The

success of the principle lies in the integrity of its detailed application. It will end is only when the very last unit has been disposed off and after-care methodology complied to. If it calls for re-training, re-training must be executed.

All this sounds rather lengthy and arduous. But, let us take it in easy, manageable bites. Let DMP observe four consecutive traffic weeks on any route and see the results. At least we would have tried to eat the elephant in small bites!

Shawkat Anwar is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

# Need for respect

If you use the writing standard of this era, many of the sentences of those writers can indeed be less than mellifluous. But that is to disregard the evolution of a living language. Just imagine someone today who speaks or writes in Elizabethan English, he would be regarded as either a comedian or a lunatic. Nobody would see him as Shakespeare reincarnate.

RAYMOND ZHOU

**L**OOSE cannon Han Han has got into trouble again. He is being lambasted for criticising the literary giants of the last century.

In a television talk show, Han stated that the "writing styles of Bing Xin, Ba Jin and Mao Dun are terrible." The avalanche of disapproval can be summed up with a few points:

It is ignorance personified to speak ill of these towering figures; and more, it is an attack against Chinese culture.

Han is a young writer; he should assume modesty and respect older generations. He should not publicise his personal judgment using a public platform.

Literary masters are not to be talked about and commented in this fashion. They symbolise the highest achievement in literature and must be held in awe.

For me, Han's comment -- I don't see it as an 'attack' -- should be approached in two ways: First, does he have a right to comment on nationally recognised masters in one negative swoop? Second, is what he said right? Or more accurately, do you agree with what he said?

On the first point, I believe that anyone has the right to offer his observations and criticisms of any writer as long as the writer is published and the commentator has read this writer's work. His comments may not be conclusive

if he has read only a sampling.

The tradition to put a great writer on a pedestal and shield him from damaging remarks may be well-intentioned but ultimately harmful to a healthy environment of literary appreciation.

Once you hold certain people or certain works above the sea level of normal discussion, you turn them into 'saints' depleted of the saltiness and nutrients of seawater. Pretty soon, they are fossilised into specimens to be gazed at from afar.

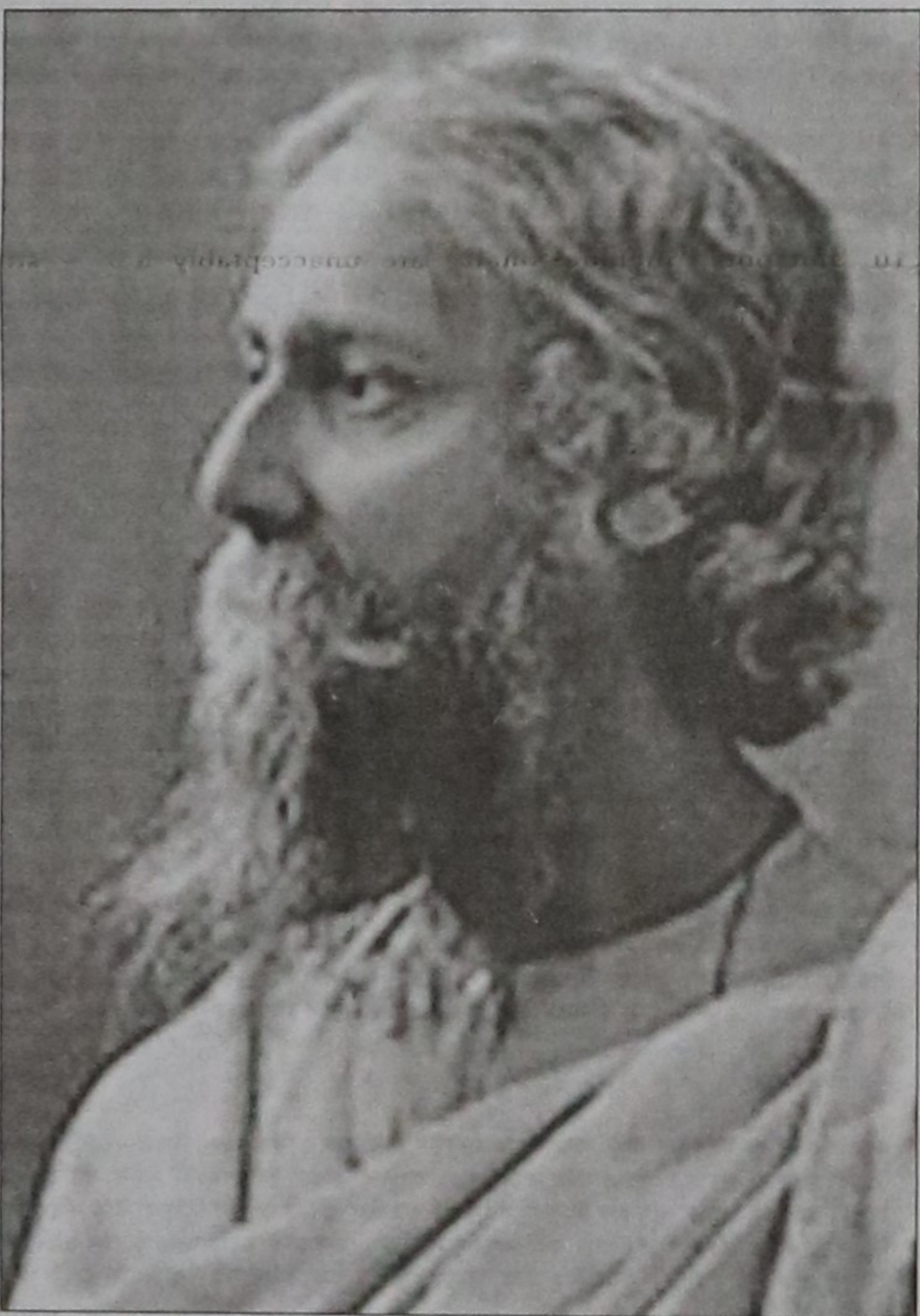
To equate the feelings toward one group of writers with the love -- or the lack of it -- for Chinese culture is preposterous. I adore the costumes of China's ethnic minorities, including cheongsam of the Manchus, but I'm turned off by the traditional Han garb, which some tout as our national wear. Does that make me a traitor of Chinese culture?

But, hey, I admire the same black-and-white aesthetic that dominates old architecture in southern China.

On the second point, there is also room for debate.

Writers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were at the threshold of the vernacular revolution. They were exploring new territories. It is not surprising that some of the linguistic details did not make it to the mainstream usage of later generations.

What Han meant by 'terrible,' I came to interpret as "not quite readable to someone of our generation," judging from his more



Literary giants world-wide are subject to debate.

nanced analysis in his blog. Television is good at soundbites, and Han has given it something out of context, which it turned around and used for shock value. It was intended for mutual publicity.

We must understand that Han was not offering a complete evaluation of these writers, but just their language skill. Even as many of us disagree with him, we should put his overtly sensational and simplistic statement in perspective.

If you use the writing standard of this era, many of the sentences of those writers can indeed be less

than mellifluous. But that is to disregard the evolution of a living language.

Just imagine someone today who speaks or writes in Elizabethan English, he would be regarded as either a comedian or a lunatic. Nobody would see him as Shakespeare reincarnate.

When worse comes to worst, simply ignore Han. Banning outrageous speech will only choke the conduit of expression. It will never enrich our literature.

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# Blaming the bureaucracy

It is impossible to create a level playing field without the active support of political parties or alliances. The tendency of political parties to utilise the bureaucracy of political parties during election, their intolerance of their opponents, and disrespect to the wisdom of the voters are major impediments to ensuring free and fair election in a country like ours.

DHIRAJ KUMAR NATH

**A** level playing field for a free and fair election through the restoration of confidence in the Election Commission and Returning Officers is a must for creating equal opportunity in a system of multi-party democracy.

The people are, by and large, encouraged to go to the polling stations to exercise their voting right where such an environment exists.

Whenever, the question of level playing field arises, all fingers are pointed towards the neutrality of the bureaucracy, as if they are responsible for all types of election engineering. I do oppose the accusation, since this is not the whole truth.

I had the experience of acting as Returning Officer of Gazipur in the Parliament Election held on February 18, 1979, and was involved many times before and after with local and national level elections.

I am sure that a few might be blamed for breach of neutrality, whereas almost all are in favour of creating a fair climate with maximum compliance to the oath of bureaucracy.

In spite of the above, massive transfer and posting of DCs, TNOs and police officers before the election takes place to exhibit the wishes of the government. All officers in charge of police stations were transferred 1996, 2001, and even in December 2006, before the parliamentary election.

Certain criteria were followed for such transfers, postings and withdrawals from the field of posting

during election, such as, any one working in the same station for more than 2 years, or posted for the second time, was transferred.

At the same time, anyone working with any minister, state minister or deputy minister, or known to be related to a candidate, was withdrawn from the field during election time. This formula was followed for the last few elections, and accepted by the officials.

The creation of a level playing field, in fact, depends on few indicators:

- Equal opportunity for all parties to propagate their political programs openly through all media, without any discrimination.
- Civil administration and law enforcing agencies to be non-partisan while acting as the Returning Officers or ensuring law and order.
- The appointment of Presiding Officers, Assistant Presiding Officers, Polling Officers by the Returning Officers must be based on utmost neutrality. Besides, the selection of polling centers at a neutral zone, not near the premises of a particular candidate, and in consultation with all contesting parties and candidates might be a visible example of neutrality and fair play by the officials of the Election Commission.
- The counting and announcement of result quickly at the polling stations in a transparent manner, and allowing the agent to get a certified copy of the result, can demonstrate a state of level playing field prevailing during the election.

The People's Representation Order to be announced by the Election Commission must spell out details about the treatment of fake voters, false voting, deployment of observers, apprehension of media coup etc., so that contesting candidates are confident that there is fair play. Besides, a level playing field needs a lot of reformation, of which a fair electoral roll is fundamental. Thanks to the Election Commission and the government for giving the people national ID cards.

Apart from that, introduction of transparent ballot boxes, electronic voting system, ineligibility of the candidates, trading by political parties while nominating a candidate etc., are issues closely connected with the creation of a level playing field. The responsibility of the Election Commission is to oversee or regulate all this.

The Philippines promulgated a Fair Election Act in 2006 (Representative Act No 9006). The main purpose of the Act was to enhance the holding of free orderly, peaceful and credible election through fair election practices. This Act has very explicitly demonstrated the wishes of the government and was found effective.

Democracy thrives on information. It also thrives in an environment where media freedom exists. The media can play a pivotal role in creating a conducive field for the level playing only when democracy functions fairly with the support of the majority.

Thus, democratic values and mutual respect among the contesting candidates can create a level playing field. The desire to win the election by any means obviously generates violence during elections, and repression on the supporters of defeated parties and minorities.

Nowadays, people's confidence in the neutrality of the bureaucracy is eroding very fast. There are a few reasons for which the general administration fails to project its neutrality. Firstly, some officials involved in

the election process are closely related to politicians of different parties. Somehow or other, others know it in a closed society like ours.

Secondly, a few officials might have been involved in student politics previously, and were now engaged in the election process. The neutrality of such officers is made questionable, without any fault in his behaviour.

Thirdly, many servants of the Republic cannot overcome the undue pressure from the party in power and bow down to its dictation, thereby renouncing their neutrality.

Fourthly, the party in power takes a plan to make the recruitment of their followers in the office of the Republic as a strategy to use them during election, or for any other purpose.

At the time of the election, services of all officials are placed with the Election Commission. The Commission must be strong enough to punish the delinquent officials breaching the trust of neutrality on the basis of any allegation with adequate evidence. This might act as lesson for the future.

It is impossible to create a level playing field without the active support of political parties or alliances. The tendency of political parties to utilise the bureaucracy of political parties during election, their intolerance of their opponents, and disrespect to the wisdom of the voters are major impediments to ensuring free and fair election in a country like ours.

Unfortunately, the tendency to blame the bureaucrats or law enforcing agencies for the breach of neutrality was observed by defeated candidates almost in all cases. This is not fair, and should in no way be encouraged. The government should protect the officials working so hard to hold a free fair and neutral election.

Dhiraj Kumar Nath is a former adviser to the caretaker government.

# The ten plagues of the age of irony are upon us

**I** was walking through a wet market with my children when we noticed something odd. One whole row of stalls had no customers except us. Even the stallholders seemed to have disappeared. It was the poultry section.

Then I realised why. "It's empty because bird flu germs were found at a market on the other side of town," I told the kids. "Bird flu is a killer disease people catch from uncooked chickens."

"Will we die, daddy?"  
"No, dear," I said, laughing. "Normal people over-react. But not smart people like us. We know germs cannot jump huge distances

from a distant food market to our one here."

The next day I picked up the newspaper and discovered that germs had jumped from a distant food market to ours.

I stuck the kids in the shower and washed them till they squeaked.

Yet this whole bird flu thing bothers me. I find it really difficult to cower at the sight of chicken fillets, although I've seen crowds fleeing in terror from the sight of a dearly departed hen.

To me, dead chickens are the stuff of comedians' valises. I have been known to carry around a

rubber chicken myself, and many professional journalists consider it a standard item in their toolkit. How did they become the biggest threat to human life? It can only be clear proof of the existence of the Great Big Sense of Irony in the sky. The same could be said for HIV-Aids.

I reckon the only possible explanation is that there must have been some big debate in the Plagues Department of Heaven, some time in the 1980s.

Angel One: I miss the old days, when we would regularly destroy the whole world with massive plagues.

Angel Two: There's nothing to stop us doing some more. This is the age of irony. Let's do some ironic plagues.

Angel One: Great idea -- let's take something that everybody likes, and make it lethal.

Angel Two: Blue skies? Hello Kitty? How about chocolate?

Angel One: Nah. Everybody already knows sunshine gives you skin cancer and candy is bad for you. How about sex? We could make sex lethal.

And so HIV-Aids was created. A few years later, the angels met to see how things had panned out on Earth.

Angel One: That ironic plague certainly shook things up. Time for another. How about finding some really boring domestic animal and making it lethal?

Angel Two: You mean like horses or dogs or something?

Angel One: How about kittens?

And so SARS was created, along with a rumour that it was carried by felines: thousands of kittens were abandoned across Asia.

A few years later, the angels met again.

Angel One: I've got an idea for the ultimate ironic plague. We're going to take the least scary items in the world and make people

petrified of them: chicken nuggets.

And so was created bird flu. At regular intervals, bird flu panic sweeps through Asia and chicken fast-food shops lock their doors.

Now according to my reading, plagues normally come in sets of ten, so there should be seven more. What's next? I have no idea, but I'm kind of amused by the image of people backing away in horror whenever they see the Hello Kitty logo.

Oh. You already do?

One of the worst plagues infecting the Internet is the website at: [www.vittachi.com](http://www.vittachi.com).