

BITTER TRUTH

An accident is not always an accident



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

SIDRATUL Muntaha Paloma (9), a student of Class 2 of Monipur High School and College was crushed under the wheels of a speeding bus in front of the school as she, escorted by her mother, was waiting to cross the road.

On that fateful morning, Muntaha pressed her mother to hurry up because she would not be allowed to enter if she reached after 7-25 a.m. Alas! Because of the indiscreet and haughty action of a bus driver that left her lifeless in a pool of blood on the road, the school gate was closed for her forever.

Hamim Sheikh (5), a student of Willes' Little Flower School was crushed under the wheels of a bus in front of the school. Parents of kids who take their wards regularly to school through such trauma and pain heard this heartrending news with shock and trepidation before the citizens could recover from the shock of two accidents that killed journalist Dinesh Das and left Nikhil Bhadra fatally injured in a bus crash.

Hardly had the protest and indignation against their deaths died down, newspapers and electronic media flashed news of the death of three more persons in road crash in the city. True, some deaths become a matter of more than personal grief to the bereaved family. It happened with the deaths of Hamim, Muntaha and Tanjim because they couldn't remain safe even in the hands of their mothers.

Incompetence of drivers, indifference, and tendency to flout road safety rules as well as the bus owners' greed have heightened the scale of tragedies. With road fitness of vehicles and drivers' training absent, hundreds of people meet death on the roads in the most shocking and painful manner. It is a black humour when the LGED minister Syed Ashraf Islam terms these deaths as mere accidents and does not find any human folly or wayward behaviour of these drivers.

With mismanagement, apathy and neglect crippling the road sector, the problem is getting worse every day. Reports from World Bank sources show that road accidents cost the country 1% of its gross national product per annum, which is about Tk.18,000 crore per annum. With law enforcement agency going soft or compromising, every month, as reports reveal, about 45 people are killed in road accidents caused by buses.

While such deaths might not affect the mightier matters of the state, they certainly reflect the brazenness with which drivers of vehicles and owners of buses and trucks feel that they can run their trade, destroy innocent people's lives, nay the lives of helpless children, and subvert law and justice. Even in a country where life is so easily extinguished there is a feeling of revulsion about the

way all these precious and young lives were lost. Road crashes, which have become a daily event, reinforce our belief that there is something awfully wrong in the whole system of administration, especially in the road sector. It is no use portraying these tragedies as simply "an accident" and taking refuge in the old saying that humans are simply pawns in the daily cycle of events. A study conducted by the Accident Research Centre at Buet revealed that road accidents claim about 12,000 lives annually and lead to about 35,000 injuries, and that about 21% of the fatalities were children less than 16 years old.

Drivers are in a mad rush to overtake the buses of rival companies in a bid to pick up passengers, defying road safety regulations. Vehicle owners often don't care whether their drivers have valid driving licence or not. In the case of Hamim's kill-

It is no use portraying these tragedies as simply "an accident" and taking refuge in the old saying that humans are simply pawns in the daily cycle of events.

ing, the driver admitted he had a fake driving licence and that he was driving vehicles for the last two years unchallenged. He had caused many accidents in the past and every time he escaped through paying compensation and bribes to the law enforcers.

Roads have become virtually death traps nowadays. Statistics by the government revealed that during the last 10 years, 34,918 people died in road accidents. But unofficial statistics put the figure at 20,034 per year (Prothom Alo: Jan 9). Small wonder, the number of people seeking admission to hospitals far exceeds the number recorded in the government report.

Despite the mounting number of deaths, injuries, disabilities and total ruination of the families of the disabled persons during the last few years, and the shock, trauma and sufferings of the administration could hardly be sensitised to action. The problem is not one of resources but of leadership, motivation and political will. Because these are appallingly missing, the country faces such calamities and disasters one after another.

Though former communications minister Syed Abul Hossain knew that Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) had long been riddled with corruption and inefficiency, he never visited the office to see how it was run. The incumbent minister Obaidul Quader's visit to this office immediately after assuming office might usher in many changes that will benefit the people.

The paramount task that the transport ministry must take up is to train drivers by setting up public training cum counseling centres in tandem with private sector owners. Counseling is most important because the drivers, mostly within the ages of 25 to 40 years, have to be made conscious about the grave situation that befalls a family when death or disability of a vital earning member due to such accidents occur mostly because of the recklessness on the part of the drivers. These training centres will then recommend that BRTA issue driving licences to the successful trainees.

The LGED minister announced in the ongoing session of the parliament that the government would allocate enough funds for repair of roads in the next budget. But the people want to know if our ministers can be crusaders against sloth and corruption that bedevil the road sector, or will they be always willing to make compromises. It is worth noting here that in popular perception all these accidents are being blamed on issuance of fake licences, drivers' lack of skill and over-riding non-chalance towards road safety measures.

According to reports, there are about one lakh vehicles without fitness certificates. There are about 10 lakh drivers against the requirement of 30 lakh for 15 lakh operating vehicles. According to the latest report issued by BRTA, about 5 lakh vehicles are now run by drivers without valid driving licence.

According to reports by the Accident Research Centre, Buet, 56% of the patients in orthopedic hospitals are victims of road crashes. People in the country would be shocked to learn that the fatality rate due to road accidents in Bangladesh is the highest in the world, about 60% of able bodied persons within 16 to 45 years of age.

The crash that caused the death of Muntaha has jolted the nation and sensible citizens have expressed their shock and dismay in news media, pointing out the flaws glossed over so long. Most importantly, unless the government enacts stricter laws, there will be no improvement of the situation.

Fully aware of the maximum punishment of three years jail sentence that they will face if their fault can be proved in the court by eye witnesses, most drivers have a tendency to flout road safety rules because they want to meet the commercial needs of the bus and truck owners.

Lawmaker Tarana Halim rightly told in the current parliament session that all accidents are not accidents if they are avoidable. Earlier, in 2010, she urged the parliament to amend the existing Section 304 (ka) by incorporating life sentence. It appears that because the law is soft, investigation is shoddy and lengthy, and because the culprits have seldom been booked, such murderous offences go on. But there should be an end to this monstrous business. The country cannot betray itself any more.

The writer is a columnist of The Daily Star.
E-mail: aukhandk@gmail.com

SHIFTING IMAGES

The sound of silence



MILIA ALI

ONLY when you drink from the river of silence shall you indeed sing," said Kahlil Gibran. As did the ancient Dhruwad musicians of the subcontinent, who underscored the importance of silence in their musical renditions. According to them, the meditative pauses in the melodic patterns allow singers to create and improvise, since silence enables us to connect to our inner selves.

Most religions also promote some form of isolation, contemplative prayer or meditation as a means for attaining tranquility and connecting with the Divine. Spiritual leaders reiterate that a silent mind, free of external and internal noises, is crucial for spiritual development.

Unfortunately, we live in a world where it is becoming increasingly difficult to find the ever elusive "silence." From the time we wake up to the time we go to bed, we live in a mad jungle of noises. Starting from the rattling of the tea kettle in the morning, followed by a ride or a drive through noisy streets and highways (not to mention the

Most religions also promote some form of isolation, contemplative prayer or meditation as a means for attaining tranquility and connecting with the Divine. Spiritual leaders reiterate that a silent mind, free of external and internal noises, is crucial for spiritual development.

ringing of cell phones), we are in the midst of a series of nerve-racking, noisy interventions. Work places buzz with pounding computer keyboards, loud phone exchanges and voluble conversations. Even if one stays home, there is no respite. A family member or a neighbour is either watching TV or listening to blaring music!

External noises are not the only sounds that disturb our equilibrium. In the course of the day our minds get cluttered with frustrations like irritation with the traffic, anxiety about deadlines, regrets over past dealings or stress created by the actions of those around us. What we don't realise is that the inner chatter, along with the external noises, gradually erodes the tranquility of our souls. The cumulative effect of this restlessness adds up and generates negativity in the space surrounding us.

The challenge that many of us face is: how do we get to the point where the mind is free of commotion? After all, we are neither sannyasins nor saints and cannot forsake the world to go the Himalayas to meditate! We need to find our haven of silence in the midst of our noisy existence. Of course, there are books, articles and even web sites replete with prescriptions for meditation, yoga and breathing exercises to help us connect to the silent universe within our minds. They are all very useful as long as we find the time and make the effort to practice them on a regular basis. Not being a disciplined person, I have problems following a repetitive regimen. Hence I have been seeking simple mechanisms for dealing with the "noises in my system."

One principle I try to adhere to is avoiding situations that result in negative energy. In the work place I steer away from conflicts and would rather take the path of least resistance. Yes, it may mean not getting to the top but if reaching the pinnacle involves stressful competition with peers and backstabbing my colleagues I would rather not get there! In the social sphere I shun people whose high competitive streak makes them loud, brash and insufferable. You know what I mean: most of you have attended social events where a squeaky voiced woman boasts about her diamonds and designer purses or a garrulous man with a swollen ego brags about his business successes and material acquisitions! I shut myself from these interchanges and try to move to another part of the room.

I know many of you may be thinking: "But unabashed self propagation is the norm. We live in a world where the loud and the brazen always seem to get what they want." I agree, but then, as I noted, it's a choice between inner peace and worldly success. Frankly, I have chosen the road less travelled -- the one that allows me to sleep more peacefully at night and breeze through my days with less stress, and be content with mediocre success.

The one thing that definitely helps me in my pursuit of silence is spending some time each day in solitude. It may be a simple walk or just sitting in the backyard all alone. I am surprised how healing these solitary sojourns can be. Watching the movement of the clouds or a lone squirrel climb a tree, or simply listening to the sound of silence can be truly therapeutic. It's worth a try! You don't need to take my word for it. Follow Rumi's advice -- the great Sufi saint said: "Silence is the language of God, all else is poor translation!"

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.

Save the rivers

HUSSAIN IMAM

I have no idea what the word "Buriganga" actually means and who gave this name. If we take "Buri" to mean "Old" the Buriganga river, on the banks of which stands the city of Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, has certainly now become old. The river has not only grown old, it has also turned grey, pale and sick, and lost all its colour and texture.

If you haven't seen her in the last one decade or so, you had better not attempt to now. You will be shocked. You will not be able to recognise her. What could once be compared with a beaming attractive young lady, full of life and energy, can now at best be compared with an old haggard counting days till eternity. What was once known as a lively river may now at best be called a dying canal.

This is how one of my senior colleagues reacted after a recent trip on a steamer from Sadarghat in Dhaka to Barisal. He couldn't believe his eyes.

The Buriganga is literally dying, if not already dead. It has shrunk both in width and depth -- the width by the innumerable structures built along both sides by the land grabbers and the depth by layer after layer of polythene and other solid wastes that are being thrown into the river every moment.

When the Mughals made Dhaka the capital in 1610, the river was the city's main source of drinking water. Why talk about the Mughal period? It is hardly a quarter century back, when this river used to be utilised by the residents of Dhaka for boating, bathing and washing, even for cooking and drinking purpose. Pity! Today, you cannot think of even taking a boat ride for pleasure let alone use it for bathing, cooking or drinking. The water has simply become poisonous.

The reason why the condition of the river has become so bad is not difficult to understand. It has been seriously affected by pollutants that include chemical wastes of mills and factories, home wastes, medical wastes, sewage, oil spillage

and every other thing one can conceive of.

The city of Dhaka discharges more than 45,000 tons of solid waste everyday and most of it is released in the Buriganga. The tanneries at Hazaribag alone release about 20,000 tons of waste that includes highly toxic materials.

The condition of another important river, the Sitalakhya at Narayanganj, is no different either. Its water, which is the main source of surface water for Wasa's water treatment plant at Syedabad, has become so polluted that it can

The Buriganga, the Sitalakhya, the Turag and the Balu that surround Dhaka are sources of surface water needed for supply of safe drinking water to the city. In other words, they are the lifelines of the city. Their death means the death of the city itself.

hardly be considered fit for treatment even.

If I am not wrong, marine pollution, be it of sea or river water, is an offence punishable under international law and Bangladesh is a signatory to the international convention for marine pollution. How is it that the rivers of Bangladesh, especially those around Dhaka, are being polluted so indiscriminately under the very nose of the International Maritime Organization (IMO) representatives sitting in Dhaka?

Even if we are easily let off from our international obligation for one reason or other, it is in our own interest that we should take every measure, both at individual and national levels, to protect the rivers from pollution. We have to rescue them from extinction at all costs.

The present government has been frantically trying to increase the water flow and bring life to the river by demolishing the unauthorised structures built on either side of the river and removing polythene and other debris from its bed, but with little or no result. The main reason for their failure is their inability to plug the holes that allow discharge of pollutants into the river.

The Hazaribag tanneries, which are considered to be the single largest source of pollution for the river, are still there releasing tones of highly toxic chemical wastes almost unabatedly. They were supposed to be shifted to Savar long ago but are still there to continue polluting the river and add to the misery of the city.

The Buriganga, the Sitalakhya, the Turag and the Balu that surround Dhaka serve not only as the transport links with the other districts of the country, but also as the receivers of the water drainage system of the capital city. They are also sources of surface water needed for supply of safe drinking water to the city. In other words, they are the lifelines of the city. Their death means the death of the city itself.

According to a recent newspaper report, more than 80% of Dhaka city's requirement of drinking water is still being met from underground water. The situation is grim because of the fact that the upper level of under ground water is continuously going down at an alarming rate. If the trend continues like this our sources of underground water will almost completely dry up in the next 10-15 years and then we will have to depend fully on surface water.

It is, therefore, imperative on the part of the government as well as the residents of the city to take care of these rivers. I am not sure who in the government are particularly responsible for looking after these rivers. Whoever they may be, it is high time they woke up and took steps that will help rescue these rivers from total disaster.

The writer is a retired merchant navy officer.
Email: himam55@yahoo.co.uk