

Blatant violation of traffic rules

Symptomatic of a deeper ailment

AMID chaotic traffic in the city, one may not make much about an aberration. But when that deviant behaviour comes from people who are supposed to abide by traffic laws it's altogether a different matter. For compliance with traffic rules is the foundation of urban existence. Traffic rules are a basic prerequisite for the city's smooth and purposeful functioning. Diligent abidance by these rules is a fundamental precondition for an orderly civic life.

Sadly, as per the lead photograph published in our paper on September 2, we witness the opposite happening and that too not for the first time as far as we remember. It is unfortunate to behold vehicles belonging to high ranking police and military officials blatantly using the wrong side of the road for their movement, while the other side for common people remains jam-packed and at a standstill.

When people in authority who are supposed to uphold law and rules break these with reckless abandon then what stops others from doing it? That is where the danger lies. The law is applicable for all and that includes the law enforcers and other public servants including members of parliament; in fact, they have to lead by example. We find this display of undue privilege in utterly bad taste too. As a matter of fact, Dhaka traffic is already heavily congested so that such wanton abuse of road space can spell the crumbling down of the whole traffic system. Nowhere in the world can anyone take liberty with public's easement rights. Let good sense prevail on those highly placed who make such mockery of law in full public glare. It is reprehensible, unacceptable and condemnable.

MP crosses the line

Smacks of impropriety

THE news report of a ruling party lawmaker's purported patronage of a sacked principal to reinstate him in a Poba Upazila College in Rajshahi brings to the fore an instance of attempted abuse of power by him. For an administrative probe has found truth in most of the allegations of corruption and irregularities levelled against the former principle. In consequence, therefore, the college governing body has removed him from his position. Furthermore, the ex-principal's academic credentials are not up to the mark. Given his grades he would not have been qualified to be promoted to the rank of college principal in the first place.

Against this backdrop, the MP insists on his reinstatement in the college on what he termed as 'humanitarian considerations'. He pressed request adding that 'even murderers are getting mercy' so the man deserves some mercy, according to him. We are shocked at such a blatant way of justifying his request for reinstatement of the ex-principal.

How can a lawmaker, so irresponsible with his utterances by way of exerting undue pressure on college authority. He oversteps his remit. Public representatives are meant to protect the sanctity of law. If this is the attitude of an MP to favour somebody out of turn then how does he do justice as a public representative of his constituency, one may wonder.

We are all VIPs in this land of VIPs

I was stuck in traffic in front of Jahangir Gate on my way to Mohakhali when I was privy to an interesting sight, not too uncommon: a star studded army officer's car was allowed to go through the red light amid heavy traffic on both sides. I am sure many of the readers have seen similar sights, in some cases it was the car of a MP or may be Secretary or some senior official of police. It is rather amusing to see those who are supposed to maintain law and order are the first to breach it with impunity. Now some may say I am making too much fuss about nothing, after all 'high' officials do require special treatments, as Orwell rightly said some people are more equal than others. But then where do we draw the line? Is it only in traffic that VIPs get special treatments or is it also when they are in Airport or some government office or in Hospitals? Are Generals VIPs but not Colonel, Secretaries VIPs but not Deputy Secretaries, current MPs VIPs but not ex-MPs and the list goes on. It is no wonder that with this superabundance of VIPs there is an inflationary pressure and so we need VVIPs!

This VIP culture of taking privileges as an entitlement is so endemic in our culture that in every occasion we look for 'links', the magical family connections to VIPs whom we can call upon, to take a short-cut and bypass the system. We have reached such a stage that we actually take great pride, showing our prowess, when we can bend or break the system. This can be from going the other way in heavy traffic because one has a flag-post in front of the car or bypassing a long queue in the Passport office because a call was made on one's behalf from 'high official'; this pernicious mentality of ours has to change. Next time we see someone taking great pride in breaking the system we should remember it is not that they are superior but on the contrary it probably shows a childish mind seeking attention because of insecurity and lack of self-worth. If the developed world can go by efficiently without all the VIPs running amok, I think it will be a good for our country to emulate them, because VIP culture begets more costly VIP culture.

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All those September stories



GROUND REALITIES
SYED BADRUL AHSAN

SEPTEMBER is upon us again. The leaves will fall again. Intimations of winter will soon blow through the winds.

September causes a stirring in the soul. Outside the parameters of the soul, it is the spectacle of falling leaves which gives September a distinctive symbolism that has translated itself into poetry over time. Indeed, W.H. Auden once gave us a poem, September 1, 1939, that ensured for the month a place in history.

In the soul, therefore, September comes in that sweep of history. There is a vastness about it, a reaching out as it were, into the human consciousness.

And all for good reason. On 1 September 1939, the floodgates to the destruction of modern sensibilities were flung open when Nazi Germany, only a fortnight after the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, invaded Poland. Sixteen days later, the Soviet Union rushed into the helpless country from the east. Poland disappeared. The Second World War was fast coming to Europe. Speaking of wars, in September 1965, India and Pakistan went to war for seventeen days. The result was a battlefield stalemate. Ayub Khan and Lal Bahadur Shastri went all the way to Tashkent four months later to go back to where they had been before the hostilities erupted.

Murder and mayhem have been part of the September narrative in Indonesia. In the depths of the night on 30 September 1965, six generals in the Indonesian army were murdered. A seventh one, Suharto, promptly sidelined President Sukarno, took charge and launched a massacre of suspected communists in the country. A million would be murdered by the state. Among the dead was D.N. Aidit, the respected leader of the Partai Komunis Indonesia. Suharto would go on to turn Indonesia into a kleptocracy over a period of thirty two years until his ignominious fall.

In terms of tragedy, few incidents can beat Black September in the ferocity of human behaviour. In September 1970, assassination attempts were made on Jordan's King Hussein; four jetliners hijacked by Palestinian guerrillas were blown up in full view of the world; and, eventually, Jordan's monarch waged pitched battles against Yasser Arafat's guerrillas before pushing them out of his country. A year earlier, on 1 September 1969, a young colonel in the Libyan army, Muammar Gaddafi by name, seized power in a coup d'etat and deposed the monarch, King Idris.

Ho Chi Minh, potent symbol of the Vietnamese struggle against colonialism, died on 2 September 1969. Incidentally, it was on 2 September 1945 that he had declared the independence of Vietnam. Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser died of a heart attack on 28 September 1970. Death came to China's supreme leader Mao Zedong on 9 September 1976. For the first time in their modern history, the politicians and people of China were seen scrambling for new leadership. The Gang of Four and Hua Guo-feng would arrive, to be followed eventually by the diminutive Deng Xiao Ping and his fellow reformers.

For Bangladesh, September has a special resonance in its history. On 25 September 1974, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman addressed the General Assembly session of the United Nations. Only a few days earlier, Bangladesh

had made its presence felt through gaining membership of the world body. China, having exercised its right of veto as a way of keeping the doors to Bangladesh's entry blocked for two years running, because it needed to keep its friend Pakistan pleased, had a change of mind. And that made the difference.

In modern history, 11 September 1973 turned out to be a day destined to be cast to the winds of infamy. On the day, the Chilean military, America's Central Intelligence Agency, the Nixon administration and Chile's political opposition came together to dislodge the elected government of Salvador Allende. The president was killed inside La Moneda presidential palace. And then began, in ever-widening circles of disbelief, a long, long period in state-organized terror. Augusto Pinochet Ugarte, the dictator, would oversee a long perpetration of terror on his country before his regime would crumble, with no one shedding tears. Twelve days after the coup, on 23 September, Chile's Nobel prize-winning poet Pablo Neruda died of illness and a broken heart. Illness can be rolled back. A broken heart never quite heals.

Exactly twenty eight years after Chile mutated into a state of fear, two jetliners flew into the twin towers in New York, reducing the buildings to powdery rubble and killing more than three thousand people trapped inside them. It was terror at work. And it would produce retaliatory terror, in Afghanistan and in Iraq. The two countries would be left destroyed by American firepower.

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Fifty three years before the outrage in New York, on 11 September 1948, Pakistan's founder Mohammad Ali Jinnah succumbed to cancer thirteen months into the birth of his Muslim country. Built on untenable political foundations, Pakistan would lurch from one disaster to another, eventually to lose its eastern half to a sovereign Bangladesh. In a blood-drenched Bangladesh, on 26 September 1975, the assassins of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman decreed an indemnity ordinance for themselves, the better to protect themselves from prosecution for their criminality. The criminality would be formalized in the Fifth Amendment to the nation's constitution by the military regime of General Ziaur Rahman in early 1979.

On 2 September 1666, the Great Fire of London began at Pudding Lane near the Tower of London and continued for three days. As many as 13,000 houses were burnt. On 5 and 6 September 1972, the Black September faction of the Palestine Liberation Army murdered eleven Israeli participants at the Munich Olympics, to our horror and shame.

There once was a beautiful story which brought together a handsome Rock Hudson, a sensual Gina Lollobrigida and a beautiful Sandra Dee. That was in 1961. And it was a movie. They called it Come September.

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Democracy in the Twenty-First Century



JOSEPH E. STIGLITZ
SERIES
JOSEPH E. STIGLITZ

THE reception in the United States, and in other advanced economies, of Thomas Piketty's recent book Capital in the Twenty-First Century attests to growing concern about rising inequality. His book lends further weight to the already overwhelming body of evidence concerning the soaring share of income and wealth at the very top.

Piketty's book, moreover, provides a different perspective on the 30 or so years that followed the Great Depression and World War II, viewing this period as a historical anomaly, perhaps caused by the unusual social cohesion that cataclysmic events can stimulate. In that era of rapid economic growth, prosperity was widely shared, with all groups advancing, but with those at the bottom seeing larger percentage gains.

Piketty also sheds new light on the "reforms" sold by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s as growth enhancers from which all would benefit. Their reforms were followed by slower growth and heightened global instability, and what growth did occur benefited mostly those at the top.

But Piketty's work raises fundamental issues concerning both economic theory and the future of capitalism. He documents large increases in the wealth/output ratio. In standard theory, such increases would be associated with a fall in the return to capital and an increase in wages. But today the return to capital does not seem to have diminished, though wages have. (In the US, for example, average wages are down some 7% over the past four decades.)

The most obvious explanation is that the increase in measured wealth does not correspond to an increase in productive capital – and the data seem consistent with this interpretation. Much of the increase in wealth stemmed from an increase in the value of real estate. Before the 2008 financial crisis, a real-estate bubble was evident in many countries; even now, there may not have been a full "correction." The rise in value also can represent competition among the rich for "positional" goods – a house on the beach or an apartment on New York City's Fifth Avenue.

Sometimes an increase in measured financial wealth corresponds to little more than a shift from "unmeasured" wealth to measured wealth – shifts that can actually reflect deterioration in overall economic performance. If monopoly power increases, or firms (like banks) develop better methods of exploiting ordinary consumers, it will show up as higher profits and, when capitalized, as an increase in financial wealth.

But when this happens, of course, societal wellbeing and economic efficiency fall, even as officially measured wealth rises. We simply do not take into account the corresponding diminution of the value of human capital – the wealth of workers.

Moreover, if banks succeed in using their political influ-

ence to socialize losses and retain more and more of their ill-gotten gains, the measured wealth in the financial sector increases. We do not measure the corresponding diminution of taxpayers' wealth. Likewise, if corporations convince the government to overpay for their products (as the major drug companies have succeeded in doing), or are given access to public resources at below-market prices (as mining companies have succeeded in doing), reported financial wealth increases, though the wealth of ordinary citizens does not.

What we have been observing – wage stagnation and rising inequality, even as wealth increases – does not reflect the workings of a normal market economy, but of what I call "ersatz capitalism." The problem may not be with how markets should or do work, but with our political system, which has failed to ensure that markets are competitive, and has designed rules that sustain distorted markets in which corporations and the rich can (and unfortunately do) exploit everyone else.

Markets, of course, do not exist in a vacuum. There have to be rules of the game, and these are established through political processes. High levels of economic inequality in countries like the US and, increasingly, those that have followed its economic model, lead to political inequality. In such a system, opportunities for economic advance-

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ment become unequal as well, reinforcing low levels of social mobility.

Thus, Piketty's forecast of still higher levels of inequality does not reflect the inexorable laws of economics. Simple changes – including higher capital-gains and inheritance taxes, greater spending to broaden access to education, rigorous enforcement of anti-trust laws, corporate-governance reforms that circumscribe executive pay, and financial regulations that rein in banks' ability to exploit the rest of society – would reduce inequality and increase equality of opportunity markedly.

If we get the rules of the game right, we might even be able to restore the rapid and shared economic growth that characterized the middle-class societies of the mid-twentieth century. The main question confronting us today is not really about capital in the twenty-first century. It is about democracy in the twenty-first century.

The writer is a Nobel laureate in economics, is University Professor at Columbia University. His most recent book, co-authored with Bruce Greenwald, is Creating a Learning Society: A New Approach to Growth, Development, and Social Progress.

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LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

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Restaurant inside Mahasthangarh citadel?

A couple of months ago, I visited Mahasthangarh citadel. I saw a restaurant with public toilets and motorcycle stand inside it near its north rampart. I visited the citadel many times and it was for the first time I saw the restaurant. I think it is not wise to allow a restaurant inside a historical site. If it is not evicted immediately, more restaurants and other establishments will be built there in the future.

I would like to request the local administration to evict the restaurant immediately. I would also request the Department of Archaeology to always keep an eye on the country's archaeological sites.

Faruque Hasan
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Moghbar-Mouchak road: Commuters' nightmare

The construction work of Moghbar-Mouchak flyover has increased our sufferings a lot. The commuters using Moghbar-Mouchak-Malibagh road are facing severe difficulties every day because of the horrible road condition. Now it takes two hours to cross the Moghbar rail line. There are cracks and potholes everywhere on that



PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

road. Vehicles get stuck here and can not move for hours; buses tilt dangerously, which can topple over other vehicles any time. Is the authority sleeping or is it blind and deaf and can't see or hear anything? When will our sufferings end?

Quazi Samira Rahman
Dept. of Architecture, BUET

"Controlling use of plastic bottles"

Aminur Rahim's letter on the above subject published in your column a few days ago deserves appreciation. Use of plastic bottles is very common and conventional all over the world. And refund of small price for the return of empty bottles and cans is also customary in the US and many other countries. This can be made mandatory in our country, if necessary, by promulgating a law. If random littering of plastic bottles is stopped, it will prevent the environment from getting polluted.

A F Rahman
On e-mail

Comments on news report, "WHY?" published on August 31, 2014

Sayed Rahman

The relatives of the missing people cried and made everyone present during the conference cry. How will these people endure this agony of losing their near and dear ones?

Rajibul Hasan

We hope they will get justice.

"PM's caution goes in vain" (August 28, 2014)

Sayed Rahman

If the DAP is violated by the ministry itself, it is difficult to control the land grabbers.

"Ambition is destroying greatness" (August 29, 2014)

Hapless Bangali

Great piece. And yet, greatness, sometimes, and destruction, quite often, culminates human ambition. While greater ambitions lead to destruction of greatness, the reverse is seldom true.

"Picked up, they never return" (August 30, 2014)

Sayed Rahman

The agony of losing someone from the family is unbearable and horrific.

Anonymous

When will the government take steps to find them?