

# Is Bangladesh on the right track?



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

**PLEASURE IS ALL MINE**

If you go by the results of the latest survey by US-based International Republican Institute (IRI), you would think the country is on course, primarily as set by the ruling party chief and PM Sheikh Hasina. Politically, it implies a certain democratic deficit that we have to come to terms with someday. Economically, we are on a good footing, rather on a firm wicket, to use a spectacular cricketing phrase.

You have seen some positive energy lately, radiating three-dimensionally: IRI's lively findings, withdrawal of VAT imposed on private universities and removal of indemnity against trials of those who passed off many a custodial killing as death from 'heart attack'. This happened in Operation Clean Heart during BNP rule.

The first served as a barometer of public opinion on political weather, the second safeguarded higher education from commodity taxation and the third opened a window for victims of custodial deaths to seek justice in a particular case.

One of the least said things about US-based International Republican and Institute (IRI)'s latest series of findings concerns shedding light in the circle of darkness. You have got some basis for

understanding how public opinion has quietly changed in the last one and a half years of the AL's second term stalked by controversy from day one. By freeing us of the dull consistency of stock political observations, thanks to the IRI survey, we are put in a relatively comforting zone.

A word about the credibility of the IRI survey. The reputed research organisation claims a margin of error not exceeding plus or minus two percent but confidence level at 95 percent. For all we know, the dependability of its surveys remains unassailed.

Awami League waltzed to the statistical lyrics of an improving image to an extent that the parliament in a resolution congratulated the PM on favourable IRI survey ratings.

An IRI survey between January 12 and 27, 2014, hot on the heels of the January 5 elections, showed only 35 percent of the people thought the country was headed towards the right direction; in September of the same year, 56 percent believed that the country was on the right track; and now 62 percent believe the country is headed in the right direction.

Support for the ruling government and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina reached 66 percent and 67 percent respectively.

BNP could, in theory, latch on support indicated (in the survey) in favour of pre-poll neutral caretaker arrangement and early election. But the preferential gaps are narrowing down between the parties even on those counts.

"68 percent (up from last year's 65 percent) regard democracy definitely

more important while only 27 percent, down from last year's 30 percent, choose a prosperous economy."

The high watermark of the survey is that 81 percent of respondents keep faith in democracy despite its flaws. That being a very positive deduction, one feels, a quest for inclusive democracy, once timed-out, needs to be undertaken in good time. And time is all we have to be utilised optimally for maximising democracy and minimising conflict and tension across the board.

## A quest for inclusive democracy, once timed-out, needs to be undertaken in good time.

In parallel, we energise and invigorate national economy primed on a global concept of growing together, despite shrinking spaces and fast depleting resources of the planet.

As if to reinforce the argument for lending primacy to the economy even in politics, please note that we are the 35th largest economy among 189 economies by World Bank's reckonings. This ranking is based on purchasing power parity. It means with one dollar a Bangladeshi can buy more than an American or a British would. There is meat to our being a large economy: Our per capita annual income is around

US\$1300 and the size of our population 160 million which has a multiplier effect on our purchasing power parity. One of the downsides of a growing population is the difficulty in reducing illiteracy and illiteracy. The last literacy figure has slightly dropped from the previous level in the face of a rising population stripping away at the literacy drive.

Our GDP is slightly below the 50th largest among the world economies. With consistent GDP growth rate above 6 percent, which again is poised for acceleration, we have modest incrementals (trickle downs) in terms of purchasing power and affording amenities among a greater mass of people.

We are yet to strive meaningfully to attract, hold and employ three potential sources of capital lying in abundance but out of reach: Plug the holes of capital flight, tap in on the large high income groups in the country whose per capita income equals that of some East European countries. This is the high-end potential domestic market capable of garnering foreign investment, including on a collaboration basis waiting to be utilised. Then you have a complement of a 5 million Bangladeshi expatriate community to add to our potential resource base.

We have maritime water territories equal to the size of another Bangladesh, a huge bonanza to capitalise on in every sense of the term to fast-track into a developed stage that is simply beckoning us.

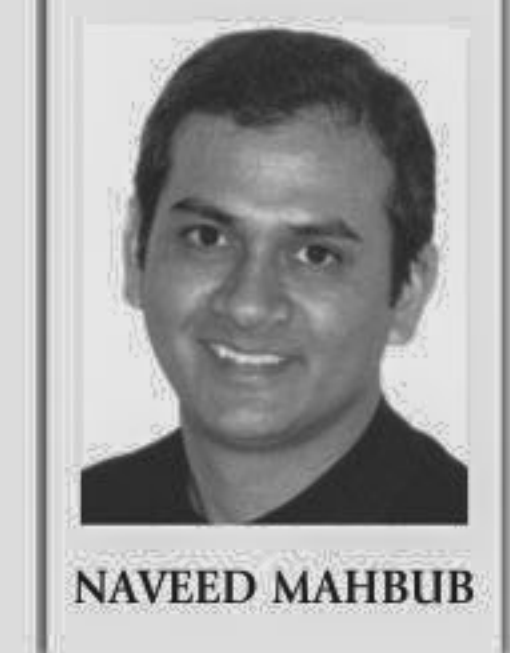
The writer is Associate Editor, The Daily Star.

# V-DAY

## Nutrient facts on the packet of College Rolls

Saturated VAT:	1.5%
Trans VAT:	2.5%
Poly-unsaturated VAT:	2.0%
Mono-unsaturated VAT:	1.5%
<b>Total VAT:</b>	<b>7.5%</b>

### HUMOROUSLY YOURS



NAVEED MAHBUB

**H**EALTH conscious university kids immediately go on VLCC's VAT-reducing diet. Traffic jam turns into VATic jam as playing with traffic is the only available bargaining chip.

Many start scratching their heads trying to put two and two together, plus VAT – is higher

education a right or a privilege? Meanwhile, I receive an SMS from my kids' school: "School will remain closed due to unavoidable circumstances." I try to figure out what is unavoidable, VAT or roadblocks? Then another SMS from NBR that the VAT on private university tuition fee is to be paid by the universities, not the students. The Law of Conservation of VAT doesn't allay the students, perhaps from their anticipating that they are the ones who may eventually have to cough up the extra bucks in the form of a convenience fee.

The protests continue. After the recent shower-power and inundated streets, the streets are once again inundated, but this time with flower-power powered by high carb flour-power. It is an interesting anomaly from the all too familiar fire-power of petrol bombs while we run with our cower-power from arsonists possessing the hour's-power backed by the wannabe-power's sour-power against the incumbent's tower-power.

The tussle is short-lived, ending with a 'V' for 'VAT-less'. No, there was no VAT-ican intervention from Cardinal Fernando Filoni's pastoral visit to Dhaka.

As many ordinary commuters happily put away their VAT-mobiles, aka, bicycles, I smile. But my smile is short-lived. The over-protective dad in me is now panicked at the thought of my 10 and 3 year olds hitting the streets protesting the 7.5 percent VAT that I have been paying for their school tuition fees. And all just for being guilty of going to an English medium school.

Nah, English medium school students are 'all' inside air conditioned houses and cars. They will not bother to hit the harsh streets. Besides, English medium schools are fun, fun, fun, starting with PLAYgroup. So, the notion of no VAT on university education but with VAT on English medium schooling is about education being a right ONLY once one can get over the 12 years of it being a privilege...

But it's not that all English medium schools have been in the VAT net – after all, all English medium schools are equal, some are just more equal than others.

Now, now, don't panic Robi! You won't be VAT-ed for the 'English in Schools' programme. However, just to stay safe, you can think of some proactive deterrent, like Grameenphone's "Cholo Bohudur", i.e., "Let's go far away" (from VAT).

Oh well, I guess it's logical for the Queen's English to come with a premium. To be or not to be, that is, pay the state coffers or just send the kids to S@ifurs, that is the question. There are some things that money can't buy. For everything else, there is VAT.

But it's Eid time. So, a happy ending can have a happy encore. And so, a stay order on this last remaining VAT on paper chase comes as a second welcome news in a week. The happy dad in me wishes you all a VAT-free Eid Mubarak. And as a gift, this English column comes to you 7.5 percent leaner.

The writer is an engineer at Ford & Qualcomm USA and CEO of IBM & Nokia Siemens Networks Bangladesh turned comedian (by choice), the host of NTV's The Naveed Mahbub Show and the founder of Naveed's Comedy Club. E-mail: naveed@naveedmahbub.com

# Street abuse: Drawing the line

SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

**T**HE abuse of our streets seems to have reached monstrous proportions. At the root of it all is a phenomenally growing aura of indiscipline that borders on the unbearable and challenges one's physical, emotional, and even financial endurance. With indiscipline, unfortunately, also comes a disrespect and disregard for others that is displayed brazenly by people from all walks of life – from the pedestrian crossing the streets "anywhere" and "anytime" and the rickshaw-puller occupying centre-street to the uncivil car and bus drivers blocking left lanes and making ridiculous U-turns, motor-bikers striding footpaths and ignoring traffic directives, masses of bus passengers standing in the middle of the road in waiting, footpath occupiers taking up all the walking space and much more. These are serious behavioural problems that need to change.

I had written earlier (TDS – August 2014) on how Dhaka's street users are a study in behaviour dysfunction. Others have also written extensively on the woes of the streets. But things seem to have gone from bad to worse. Apparently no one who can do something about the matter is able or listening.

A major issue with our streets has to do with normlessness. Where norms are followed in many other situations (homes, offices, airports, banks, etc.), just about anything goes in Dhaka's streets. It exposes a side of us as selfish, pushy, arrogant, nasty and oblivious of others. Whether this reflects who we are as a people or whether the street conditions have driven us to turn roguish is a moot question.

There are many probable solutions for the traffic mess. Some strategies require long term thinking and include public education on street norms, improving public transportation, increasing road capacity, severely limiting new private car registration, creating new development hubs in other parts of the country to redirect labour migration, relocating businesses from roadsides, implementing zoning laws, building high-rise parking spaces, getting slow-moving traffic off the streets, planning one-way streets that change direction depending on traffic flows, and installing parking meters, to name a few.

For immediate relief, however, the need is stronger enforcement of discipline and innovative behaviour

modification strategies. The fact is we are not incapable of showing discipline. For example, during traffic weeks, much greater deference is shown to the concept of discipline. Within the Cantonment, street behaviours are quite well-regulated. And, yet, during normal times, incivility is at its peak. Clearly, when there is a disciplining force at work, orderly traffic flow is more easily achieved.

Given the mammoth traffic problem that is horrendously costly and debilitating for the nation, it is important to disaggregate the variety of elements contributing to the traffic conundrum and seek solutions for each particular element within a larger framework.



PHOTO: STAR

For lack of space, let me elaborate on one particular element that can be better managed using a three-pronged strategy to provide immediate relief while long term strategies continue to be developed. Many of the problems, the readers will probably agree, are at the *traffic intersections*. A great number of violations occur at these intersections, mainly because there is no norm on who should wait where and who gets to enter the intersection when. It may be noted that there is a code of conduct for traffic entering intersections in the developed world. There is no such norm in Bangladesh. Most problematic is the absence of clearly drawn lines at the intersections to demarcate where the vehicles must stop until permitted to proceed. Thus all vehicles keep pushing as far as they can, in utter disarray, while

narrowing the space at the intersection, thereby obstructing smooth flow. As a result, the clog up is often colossal and unrelenting.

The first strategy thus is to draw lines in red and white at the intersections to clearly demarcate where vehicles "must" stop. This is also a nice CSR opportunity, as well as a public-private partnership (PPP) prospect for all affected parties to engage in a collaborative effort to bring sanity quickly.

Second, given the serious deficiency in the number of law enforcers for all the (major) intersections in the city to apprehend violators, I propose a SWARM & STING FORCE (SSF). This is a "mobile" special force, moving in teams of 15-30

all over the city, in special and imposing uniforms, who will show up like bees, unannounced, at major (and some minor) intersections known to be traffic trouble spots.

What the *FORCE* must use is the *element of surprise*: to apprehend the motor-bikers on the footpaths, the impatient pedestrians crossing the streets haphazardly, the left lane blocking vehicles that must be "forced" to turn left (this needs painting arrows at the intersections), the buses stopping at the intersections for passengers, the parked cars that narrow traffic lanes, the cars in the inner streets that in their hurry and rudeness form new lines and block traffic coming from the opposite direction, and the idiot driver driving on the wrong side of the street. Other similar

violations, too numerous to list here, will also come under their ambit.

Of particular importance is that the *FORCE* must be empowered to impose serious penalties on "all" violators. Their strength will be in their numbers and they must have the authority to take "any" violator to task. Thus, when vehicles cross the line and block the intersection, impede traffic flow on the left lane, or drive on the wrong side of the road, the penalties must be swift and sharp.

Buses blocking the intersections should be especially taken to task. The license of some of the drivers must be impounded for a certain period. In fact, the intersections should be off-limit to picking up passengers or dropping them off.

Many of these offending bus and also car drivers may be made to complete a training or certification programme before they can get back their licenses. If databases can be maintained, repeat offenders can be tracked using computers and long-term driving bans imposed on them.

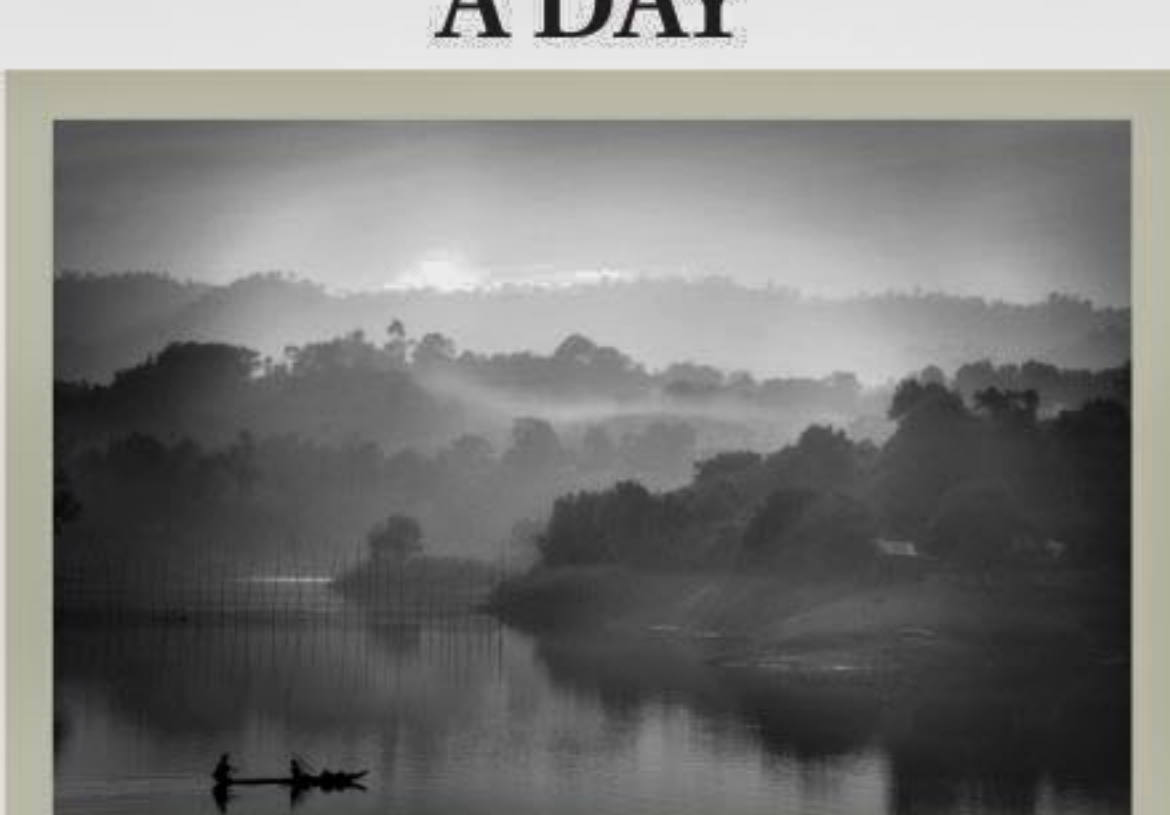
The *FORCE* could also initially help train pedestrians and make them cross in groups using zebra crossings. Violators could be fined a substantial fee for crossing at the wrong places or detained in a special enclosure in lieu of a fine. Beggars and hawkers on the streets, rickshaws, motor-bikers and smaller transport vehicles are other categories of offenders that must also be dealt with in special ways.

Third, extensive media involvement is needed in the initial phases to highlight the behaviour changes being targeted and the consequences for violations. This will be critical and must be innovative and persuasive. The universities and media houses could collaborate to come up with interesting communication ideas (with awards for the best ideas). Media must thus continue to inform, persuade and remind the public of the new street norms and is the final piece of the three-pronged strategy to manage the traffic better.

Fresh new paint on Dhaka's streets will convey a clear message about the traffic authority's new resolve. The surprise effect of the newly empowered SWARM & STING FORCE will bolster implementation. Media will creatively inform and guide. Properly coordinated, the much needed behaviour changes will provide deep relief to the weary, harassed and tormented street users.

The writer is Vice Chancellor of BRAC University.

# A WORD A DAY



**Bucolic**  
[byoo'kælik/]  
Relating to the pleasant aspects of the countryside and country life.

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Mouse chasers
  - 5 Girder metal
  - 10 Fairy tale monster
  - 11 "Catch-22" author
  - 13 Slimming plan
  - 14 Prison resident
  - 15 Went by
  - 17 Nervous habit
  - 18 Responds to a busy signal
  - 19 Call -- day
  - 20 Finish
  - 21 Corn cores
  - 22 Rough hut
  - 25 "Water Lilies" painter
  - 26 Mandolin's cousin
  - 27 Lawn material
  - 28 Little rascal
  - 29 Paper fasteners
  - 33 Buck's mate
  - 34 Long-suffering
  - 35 Pencil part
  - 37 Simplicity
  - 38 Modern
  - 39 Rock's Motley --
- DOWN**
- 40 Title documents
  - 41 Looked over
  - 1 Programming pro
  - 2 Like a gymnast
  - 3 Tire feature
  - 4 Bit of stage scenery
  - 5 Gladiator's need
  - 6 Watches over
  - 7 Shade tree
  - 8 Great joy
  - 9 Beatles classic
  - 12 Get a new actor for
  - 16 Went under
  - 21 Feature of old breeches
  - 22 Fast pitch
  - 23 Indulged
  - 24 Tranquil
  - 25 Ring around a castle
  - 27 Begins
  - 29 Forgo frugality
  - 30 TV's Dennis
  - 31 Follow as a result
  - 32 Spirited horse
  - 36 Look upon



## YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

C A S T E R   H I T S  
A L L U D E   O M I T  
R A I N E D   M A R Y  
A M M A N   L E G A L  
T O E S   R E S I D E  
W E B I S O D E S  
P A M   L I N E  
O R P H A N   C A T S  
S H I E S   M O G U L  
T E R I   M A R I N E T  
A R E S   A M U L E T  
L O S T   R E M E D Y

## BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker



## BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

