

## Dhaka's crippling gridlock

*Does anyone really care about public agony?*

THOSE on the road yesterday experienced firsthand the agony of Dhaka's traffic gridlock, this time caused by a DNCC event and a procession of the education ministry. The city, where chaos rules over the traffic system, came to a virtual standstill. People suffered in the blistering heat of summer, sitting in vehicles, some falling ill. Does anyone in the administration really care? How much did the country lose in productivity?

Why would several streets be closed during peak hours for a ceremony organised by the city corporation? And why on earth would the education ministry bring out a procession occupying the main streets? Is this the kind of education the ministry is imparting that it is alright to obstruct public thoroughfare for observing Education Week? And while we are at it, why does each and every official programme have to be ceremonialised? In the digital age, can such programmes not be inaugurated via video-conference, without going through the trouble of physically going to the venue and adding to the congestion, thus sparing the public of the misery? What is more important -- the noise and the fanfare or the actual work? Do the authorities not understand that such needless sufferings ultimately overshadow the gains made, that it invokes more public ire than accolades?

One of the main reasons behind Dhaka's traffic snarl-ups is the movement of VVIPs by making roads off limits to traffic during their movement. It makes absolutely no sense to build infrastructure in order to reduce the gridlock and then not allow people to use it. Dhaka's traffic problem is horrific as it is, and we can do without mindless acts compounding it, as was done on Wednesday.

## Another miscarriage of justice

*Juvenile tried under wrong law*

A day after we wrote about a man wrongfully incarcerated for 13 years, we find that a minor was tried in a wrong court and under a wrong law. The victim, Abdul Jalil, was awarded life imprisonment and has already spent 14 years rotting in jail! A bench of the High Court (HC) has ordered his immediate release and the State is to pay Tk 5 million in damages. No rules of procedure were followed at the time of the trial, and Abdul Jalil, who should have been tried in a juvenile court (as per Children Act 1974), ended up in a Women and Children Repression Prevention Tribunal, although the Juvenile Court was set up by the Sessions Judge, Bhola for the purpose. The Tribunal awarded him life sentence, thus treating him as an adult -- which he was not!

The case that Abdul Jalil was shown accused in was so shoddily conducted that the prosecution had to ask for time extension 52 times and the court granted all 52 of them. And here is the irony; the five instances of bail petitions by the defendant to the court were not entertained. It is pathetic to think that such things can happen while we are living in the 21st century. A man was deprived of his rights and has languished for nearly a decade and a half in prison and the law had failed to protect him. The compensation will be of little solace to the man, but it will reinforce the fact that justice is not blind and will be done eventually.

## COMMENTS

**"Gastric? Get his gastrometer"**  
(May 22, 2016)

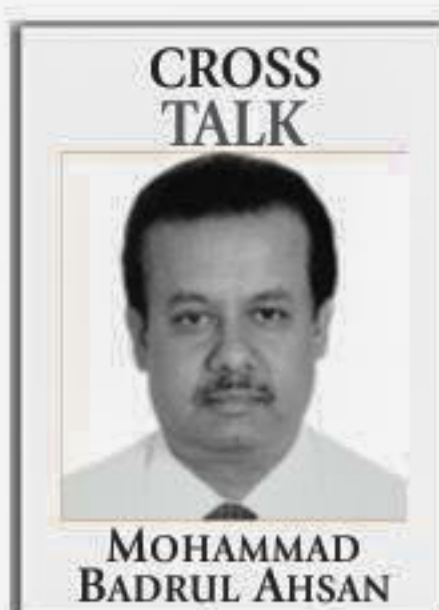
Noori

What this man has done without an advanced degree in technology is laudable.

Kallol Hasan

He deserves support of the government so that he can implement his innovative ideas.

# What happens when living in the void?



CROSS TALK

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

"NOTHING comes from nothing" is a philosophical expression first argued by pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Parmenides. In the 19th century, German

philosopher Frederick Nietzsche warned that if you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you. If these two axioms are combined, it tells us something about living in the void. And that telling came screaming last week when Selim Osman, a lawmaker from Narayanganj, gave a journalist a piece of his mind on the phone. He spat expletives faster than bullets and most of it was concentrated on the wrong end of the body, leaving no doubt in anyone's mind that the void had gone to his head.

Our body can be compared with a high-rise building, split into many floors for vital functions. Let us say the brain is the penthouse and the garbage dump is located in the basement. An elevator transporting wisdom and waste runs between floors.

For this particular lawmaker, that elevator somehow got stuck in the basement. And, if the Guinness Books of Records is ever interested in a special category, this one lawmaker has set the world record for hurling the highest number of obscenities per minute. Most of what he said was spiked with disgusting innuendos.

But that's not why I am writing this column though. I am not writing it because he has insulted one or all of us, or because somebody needs to match him blow for blow. I am writing because after

humiliating a teacher, he has once again exposed us to the fear of something that can't be ignored. The danger of living in the void is that the void starts living inside you.

If many of us have been shocked by his vulgarity, it was not only because he could speak so much filth. It was also because not in one sentence or snatch of

filth? Could it be the manifestation of the Tourette's Syndrome, a neurological disorder characterised by compulsive utterance of obscenities?

It could be anyone of these factors or all of them together that packaged the man into such a disgraceful dispenser of insults. But I am more inclined to think it has got something to do with the void. It's this void

of a public man who didn't care for his own image before he poured out the cesspool in his heart? That also within the earshot of millions, now that the audio of that frantic phone call has been posted to YouTube!

The real threat for the rest of us is that this void can be infectious. If it has gone to him from somewhere, it will surely go somewhere from him. We can already feel it when we look into ourselves. We wake up in the morning feeling impotent and hopeless when the growing might of evil is overpowering good.

It's because the first victim of the void is hope. People don't get what they expect and they don't expect what they get. What gets screwed up in this confusion is people's faith in their ability to change anything but themselves. Despair brews up the same storm in the soul that hunger does in the stomach.

As I said in the beginning, the scatological phone call had a journalist on the other side. He patiently listened to the mad ravings, sprinkled with salacious suggestions of vulgar consequences for him and his community. He occasionally interrupted to importune the furious politician that they should sit down and talk face to face. But his pleadings proved as vulnerable as a mud wall in mad torrents.

We heard the voice of the void last week, the soundtrack of sordidness. A rude politician cut off his nose to spite our face, but it has failed to trigger outrage. We responded to a teacher's humiliation by holding our own earlobes. The smart void knows it can't happen this time, because doing it means we shall have to curse ourselves.

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conversation could he come up with anything decent. People rant all the time and some people also use profanities when they fly off the handle. But sensible minds eventually come back to their senses because that's what sets them apart from the foul mouths on the street.

What must have caused the lawmaker to be so abusive? Is it the pressure of his job that requires him to deal filth with

that has found him the place in life that he may not have deserved. It's this void that has got him elected uncontested. It's also the same void that earned him the popularity before it was tested.

That void is dangerous because it's full of emptiness. And that emptiness fills up with more emptiness, which impairs judgment. What could prove that impairment more if not the impudence of

## Fallout from Narayanganj Hope and Despair

*this spectacle.*

I think the fallout from Narayanganj has short- and long-term, positive and negative consequences. Controversial Islamist outfits like the Hefazat-e-Islam, and Tahaffuz-e-Khatm-e-Nabuwwat, and groups of Muslim traders, youths, students and ordinary people have been glorifying Salim Osman as a defender of Islam, and asking for the execution of the headmaster for "blasphemy against Islam". Days after the public humiliation of the teacher, thousands of rabid Salim Osman supporters, along with members of anti-democratic Hefazat and the Khatm-e-Nabuwwat, organised a mammoth rally at Narayanganj, in solidarity with the MP, the newly emerging "defender of Islam". The rally was all about taking a vow to defend Islam from Hindus, atheists and "enemies of Islam".

Interestingly, the Al-Madina Shilpi Gosthi uploaded a song on YouTube in

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praise of Salim Osman, glorifying him as a champion and defender of Islam.

Ominously, as appears in its webpage, this cultural group is an offshoot of some clandestine Islamist extremist group, which circulates the writings of Osama bin Laden's mentor Imam Abdullah Azzam, and among others, those by Maulana Maududi. This group also admires Hefazat-e-Islam and Delwar Hossain Sayeedi. It also compares Sheikh Mujibur Rahman with Feraun (Pharaoh).

For almost a week following the public humiliation of the teacher, there was countrywide protest against Salim Osman and his henchmen. The protest was peaceful and mostly symbolic. Young men and women, holding their ears with their hands, formed human chains in public places, expressing symbolic solidarity with the victim, and their contempt for Osman and his men. The protest went viral in the social media.

Another unintended fallout from the Narayanganj episode is the online circulation of a recently leaked out telephone conversation between the MP and a journalist. The MP used unprintable swear words, 87 times in a telephone conversation that lasted less than 20 minutes. Thanks to these expletives, he has presumably lost the image as a "Champion of Islam", among his followers, and neutral observers in Bangladesh. The leaked out conversation also reveals his manipulative, and corrupt ways of making business and political deals, least expected of good Muslims and politicians.

Meanwhile, several journalists, human rights groups, members of the civil society, and a handful of ruling party leaders have condemned the lawmaker for violating the law of the land, and have demanded his arrest and expulsion from the Parliament.

He has, however, remained defiant. Again, local youth and student leaders affiliated with the ruling party at Narayanganj believe Salim Osman to be innocent, simply a victim of propaganda. Interestingly, the High Court has given directives to police to take action against the MP by Wednesday, May 25.

In view of the High Court directives, even if the police take the lawmaker into custody, and/or he loses his seat in the Parliament, this won't be the end of the story. What the MP did to the headmaster definitely crossed the limit of what people in power do to ordinary people -- servants, day labourers, rickshaw-pullers, peons, and drivers -- to "discipline" them in public, albeit with total impunity and acceptance of the society at large. Making a teacher squat by holding his ears in public was unprecedented. Hence the protest!

Had Shayamal Kanti Bhakto been a sweeper or peon, nobody would have ever

made a fuss about it. In the recent past, one Bangladeshi cabinet minister publicly slapped a petty railway employer at the latter's workplace for dereliction of duty; and a police officer publicly pulled a rickshaw-puller's ear -- for violating a certain traffic rule -- in presence of the same minister, on a public thoroughfare. Recently, yet another state minister publicly kicked a police constable in broad daylight for some unspecified reason. They committed the crimes with total impunity, and without any embarrassment, at all.

Generally, ordinary citizens are unaware about the law of their land, having a vague idea about the concept of the rule of law, and accountability of each and every citizen, irrespective of one's position, wealth, and power. Again, the same people understand what's right and ethical, and what's wrong and unethical. They never give any blank cheques to the ruling elites. People often feign compliance, and hide their contempt for their rulers out of fear or expediency. Good rulers must feel the pulse of the people -- dissent is, after all, not so invisible! And throughout history, dissents led to revolts, anarchy, and revolutions.

In view of the protests against the excesses of the MP, it seems that people have come to the point to yell "Enough is enough"! Salim Osman might have put the last straw on the camel's back. His using of cheap, religious and communal sentiments of the people is absurdly wild and dangerous. It could wreak havoc on Narayanganj, and eventually on the whole country. It could backfire as well, to the advantage of Islamist outfits, who are gradually spreading their tentacles in Bangladesh. As I have mentioned above, the Al-Madina Shilpi Gosthi's glorification of Salim Osman as a "defender of Islam" is ominous. In sum, the Narayanganj episode has spelt out one thing, i.e. there is a growing surge of fanaticism, if not extremism, in Bangladesh. Islamisation in the country has already infected large sections of Muslims, who have become far more intolerant than before.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### If winter comes, can spring be far behind?

I am often reminded of a line from Shelley's poem *Ode to the West Wind*: "O, wind, if winter comes, can spring be far behind". It conveys a bright picture, giving us hope that one day winter will be gone and spring will come with all its glory.

This 'winter' could be compared with the suffering that the people of our country are currently experiencing. The

disappointments and the darkness enveloping us lead to a terribly depressing atmosphere. We are waiting for spring, when all our sufferings and agonies will be gone and we will once again experience the bright, beautiful spring of hope and dreams.

Nur Jahan  
Chittagong

### Corporal punishment achieves nothing good

New research from the University of Michigan says children who are given corporal punishment emerge as anti-social, defiant and aggressive people. And the University of Texas at Austin that co-produced a study analysing 50 years of research on corporal punishment involving over 160,000 children, totally agrees. The research concluded that children who

are regularly hit are more likely to defy their parents, experience increased anti-social behaviour, aggression, mental health problems and cognitive difficulties.

Researchers identified some long-term effects among adults who were hit as children. Among the findings: The more they were hit, the more likely they were to exhibit anti-social behaviour and to experience

mental health issues.

In a nutshell, corporal punishment achieves nothing good; never has, and never will, but causes incalculable damage to a child. It is evil, cruel, inhuman, wrong, and needs to be abolished in all settings.

Sir Frank Peters  
On e-mail