

May I have the left lane ... please?

SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

MUCH has been written about the monumental traffic jams that literally inflict physical, psychological, economic and emotional trauma on street users daily. For a trip that takes roughly 15-20 minutes during the wee hours or during Eid holidays, it literally takes 4-6 times longer at most other times.

Banalities aside, the atrocious traffic mismanagement in our cities comes at a huge cost: in lost productive hours, economically wasteful burning of fuel, exasperating pollution, physical trauma, heat exhaustion, health externalities, and much more. The emotional costs are not trivial either. The seething anger in commuters that flares up occasionally is likely to grow in scale and intensity and people can be seriously hurt if a limit is crossed. Shootings have occurred in California's highways during traffic snarls.

To a large extent Dhaka City's traffic woes are behavioural and call for a behaviour change. I have said this before and wish to emphasise it again. When we go to our offices, we follow norms - of being timely, of dressing appropriately, of behaving with decorum, etc. There are norms at home which bring a sense of order within the family unit. In more regimented environments such as the military, discipline is paramount. Somehow, being on the streets unleashes within us a level of callousness, disrespect, aggression and unsavoury behaviour that seem to fit only the rule of the jungle. There are literally no norms; anarchy rules supreme.

I believe a few simple things can still be done to ease the misery. I will have written about one idea - managing the street intersections where many of the travellers' woes originate (*The Daily Star*, Sept 18, 2015). Nothing has yet been done on this score. Here are a few additional ideas that could be given a try. I offer them if only for the record!

Visualise Manik Mia Avenue if you will. Going East to West, I want to turn left on Mirpur Road. Most of the time the *left lane* is clogged with traffic that will be *turning right* - buses, autos, cars, trucks, motorbikes, rickshaws - you name it. Now repeat this scenario for all left turning streets in Dhaka and you'll see how these blockages cause costly and irritating backups. If you look behind you, there are substantial empty spaces where the traffic could easily queue up and wait. Instead, the vehicles are driven all the way to the front, battling for every inch of space, thus blocking all lanes. I call this Q-Averse behaviour: these drivers will simply not form a queue.

For one thing, such behaviour represents a defiance of traffic rules. It is also a message to the traffic department that they can be shown

the fat finger. It challenges their authority and taunts them to "let's see what you can do." Every single day these violators depict the traffic department as weak and impotent in enforcing traffic discipline. It is indeed an indirect and sordid rating of the calibre of the traffic management authority.

For another thing, the streets are being taken over by a new breed of unruly people who lack simple decency. They lack respect for others and their discourtesy is astonishing. Is this what we have become with development? Is this really development? Should development lead to anarchy?

What can we do about the growing breed of the Q-Averse? I propose a simple solution: the vehicles blocking the left lane MUST be made to turn left. But this cannot be done by the oft-harried "lone" traffic policeman who manages the intersection. He needs a team to support him. Obviously it is impossible to place teams of police officers at every intersection. Here is where special teams of 10-15 policemen (termed SSF - Swarm and Sting Force) with authority can show up at random intersections (especially where violations are



ILLUSTRATION: FREEPIK.COM

most common) to direct all traffic as suggested including the flag-waving kind that is often a flagrant violator.

A second problem that arises is at the U-turns. In the first place, why are there so many U-turns on some major streets? And why are there so few traffic policemen (or none) at each of these U-turns, allowing the rebellious traffic to go crazy? Here is my second proposal: For each long stretch of road let there be fewer U-turns, but at each one let there be several traffic policemen. Their task

would be to ensure that U-turns are only made from the right lane (street markings are vital here) and when such turns are being made, the oncoming traffic from the opposite direction is made to stop so that the two streams do not converge to clog up the intersection. Vehicles not in the right lane must be made to go straight on.

A third problem is that of public vehicles (buses, tempos, microbuses, etc.) that stop anywhere they please to pick up and drop off passengers.

Sometimes several buses line up in parallel so that nothing can pass them by. Designated places must be properly marked for pick up and drop off. Special penalties must be imposed by the SSF on vehicles stopping at the intersections.

The final thing to be enforced is to stop vehicles going in the wrong direction, especially the ones that wave flags, sport stars, or display other markings (especially of some academic institutions) to signify their importance and assert their right to do wrong! Keeping them on the correct side of the street requires the backing of our highest offices; else the traffic policemen will continue to display clueless expressions or look the other way. By taking a strong stand on this matter, it will bode well for the city.

The above proposals focus on *traffic management*. However, there are deeper issues of traffic planning that also need to be addressed from a longer term perspective. Both must be made to work in tandem to solve the multitude of unpalatable problems that have mushroomed over the years while being systematically ignored.

It may also be mentioned that a variety of interest groups have continued to make use of the streets as a resource to be exploited (parking, beggars, street vendors, footpath stalls, etc.), thereby making the traffic experience so trying and unbearable. It is their minds and interests that need to be unclogged before our streets can be really unclogged and our experiences improved measurably.

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ELECTORAL INTEGRITY

Challenges for the next election commission

M. SAKHAWAT HUSSAIN

ELECTIONS are the only instrument of democratic and peaceful transfer of power with the consent and choice of the majority. Therefore, the rights to vote and participate in elections are part of the basic human rights. Human rights and democratic principles are valued world over as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and International Convention on Civil and Political Rights. This includes the "freedom of opinion and expression, freedom of peaceful assembly and association, the right to take part in the government of one's country through freely elected representatives, the right of equal access to public service in one's country, and the recognition that the authority of government derives from the will of the people, expressed in genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret ballot" (International IDEA on Electoral Integrity).

Elections must be conducted with integrity for strengthening democracy, furthering development, and for social and individual security. Where elections are held and integrity is not challenged, the bedrock democratic principle of political equality is honoured: citizens select their leader and hold them accountable. Where elections lack integrity and politicians, the leaders, officials and institutions are not accountable, the public is denied of "equal opportunity to participate in and influence the political process. In such cases public lose interest in the election and faith in its outcome and the government formed would remain weak and away from public.

In that case institutions would render into empty shells deprived of ethos, principle and the spirit of democracy is dampened. Government thus formed would tend to be authoritarian and disconnected with people", as Pippa Norris endorsed. However, International IDEA and the said scholar define electoral integrity

the campaign, on polling day and its aftermath.

Electoral integrity not only gives boost to social integration and upholds the rule of law, but regularly scheduled elections with universal and equal suffrage, and held in secret ballot, has tangible benefits. One of the benefits is that it empowers

overcome to achieve electoral integrity to meet the attributes of effective electoral governance. These are: 1) Building the rule of law to substantiate claims to human rights and electoral justice; 2) Building professional, competent electoral management bodies (EMBs) with full independence of action to administer

and equal political participation; and 5) Regulating uncontrolled, undisclosed, and opaque political finance.

To overcome those difficulties, the role of the EMB (Election Commission in our case) is most vital, when the rule of electoral law and right to vote without

EMBs capable of taking independent action. EMBs must conduct the election so that it is technically credible, free, fair and acceptable in the perception of the stakeholders, including the public. EMBs should be responsible and guided by the electoral laws and regulations in the whole range of electoral tasks. EMBs also have to be transparent in electoral dispute resolution. The competency and credibility of EMBs can thus shape overall perceptions of, and confidence in, the integrity of the election. The role of the stakeholders in meeting the challenges is as important as of the government of the day. Credible elections at home and its acceptance would boost sustained democracy and increase the democratic credibility as international standard demands.

The next election commission has to face and prove their worth, as it is apparent that we have lost in the field of electoral integrity whatever little was gained in the past few elections. The electoral system after the 10th parliamentary election is under serious strain; people's faith in the system and institutions, particularly the Election Commission, is on the wane. Therefore the selection process of the new commission and people, who are to manage the election and be involved in electoral dispute resolution as one of the important stakeholders, would be very important. The role of the government and political parties would also be important in upholding electoral integrity as envisaged in international human and political rights.

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ILLUSTRATION: THE SEATTLE TIMES

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as: "any election that is based on the democratic principles of universal suffrage and political equality as reflected in international standards and agreements, and is professional, impartial, and transparent in its preparation and administration throughout the electoral cycle including during, pre-electoral period,

women, fights corruption, delivers service to the poor, improves governance and ends political or ethical conflicts peacefully. Moreover a peaceful transfer of power takes place, which is the essence of democracy.

International IDEA identifies five major challenges which need to be

elections that are transparent and merit public confidence; 3) Creating institutions and norms of multiparty competition and division of power that bolster democracy as a mutual security system among political contenders; 4) Removing barriers - legal, administrative, political, economic, and social - to universal

discrimination is to be ensured, which then would take care of the rest of the challenges. EMB must ensure electoral integrity by conducting the election and administer the entire electoral processes with competence, professionalism in a non-partisan and transparent manner. This would need professional and fully independent

QUOTABLE Quote

ITALO CALVINO

If on a Winter's Night a Traveler

What harbor can receive you more securely than a great library?

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Diplomatic skill
- 5 Convoy component
- 9 Notions
- 11 Serving perfectly
- 13 Summer of song
- 14 Skier's spot
- 15 Skill
- 16 Hero's love
- 18 Away from the wind
- 20 Hurried flight
- 21 Albee creation
- 22 Quite
- 23 Work wk.'s end
- 24 Sch. for priests
- 25 Gung-ho
- 27 "The Rehearsal" painter
- 29 Cinch
- 30 Lines through circles
- 32 Gun holder
- 34 Yeoman's "yes"
- 35 Nostalgic song
- 36 Golf feat
- 38 Note from the boss
- 39 Cornered

DOWN

- 1 Kind of pool
- 2 Found darling
- 3 Ty Cobb, e.g.
- 4 Shoe shade
- 5 Light lunch
- 6 Bus. course
- 7 Department head, e.g.
- 8 Engaged
- 10 Deli buy
- 12 Likely to cause disease
- 17 Important age
- 19 City district
- 22 Star in Lyra
- 24 Hush-hush
- 25 Friend of Aramis
- 26 Spectrum color
- 27 Scottish river
- 28 Designer
- 30 Pricey
- 31 Canary chow
- 33 California valley
- 37 Verb for you

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott