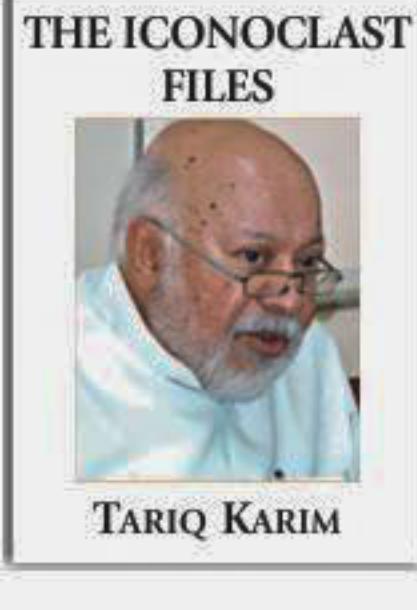


Whence comes our culture of impunity?



THE ICONOCLAST FILES
T HESE days, I assail myself with questions triggered by the everyday acts of thoughtlessness that I witness committed by the multitude around me

everywhere, young and old, male and female, I witness them cutting in ahead of me in a queue I am in with other people, senior or not, whether at a bank counter, or a cash counter in a shop, or at a high-rise office block rudely jostling to get space in a crowded elevator. Attending an event of serious topical content or merely to watch a film or performance, my ears are relentlessly assailed by the cacophony of people in the rear chattering away constantly in disturbingly high decibel levels, totally oblivious of the right of others to enjoy the show or listen to the serious discourse; by the boisterously loud conversations of groups in restaurants or public places without any concern for the right of others to enjoy their own space and food and company in peaceful quietude; by the public sharing of loud-voiced conversation of people using their ubiquitous mobile phones, conducting business transactions or romancing the person at the other end of the line.

I witness the countless acts of sheer indiscipline, blatant disregard of traffic laws, and utter disregard for safety of other users on the same road, whether by the dangerous behemoths that are the myriad buses, trucks and luxurious over-sized SUVs, by passenger cars, auto-rickshaws, motorcycles, rickshaws, cycle vans and human propelled carts, and even pedestrians jaywalking at will. My

ear drums are agonisingly blitzed by the incessant blaring of horns by the vehicles around and behind me, even when it is eminently evident that the gridlock has everyone hostage in its relentless grip and road vehicles cannot metamorphose into helicopters.

I see and listen, helplessly, to the frantic gasping, hiccupping and wailing by turns, of the ambulances screaming for passage to ferry its patient, very likely in dire need of life-saving medical attention and recall how, nine years ago, a close and dear relative died in the ambulance carrying her to the hospital because it was stuck in the traffic jam for almost an hour and could not reach it in time for her to receive that emergency attention.

I am often exasperated, and sometimes angered, by the ineffectual presence of traffic cops who appear to be disruptively compounding the chaotic traffic flow by confusingly over-riding the programmed signals. At the same time I am also struck, quite often, by admiration at how just a few ineffectually empowered policemen try to cope with an impossible situation, often risking their own lives by physically stepping in front of the relentless, forward-surfing avalanche of vehicles of all categories, trying to force it, like King Canute, to come to halt.

These everyday, inconsiderate actions of our populace demonstrate starkly the complete absence of a civic culture that defines civilised behaviour in any society. I recall imbibing the notions of responsible citizenship from my childhood, not merely enjoined by my parents and elders at home, but also having had to study compulsorily a subject called Civics in secondary school. Alas, apparently those instructive voices and tools no longer exist.

We seem to have totally forgotten

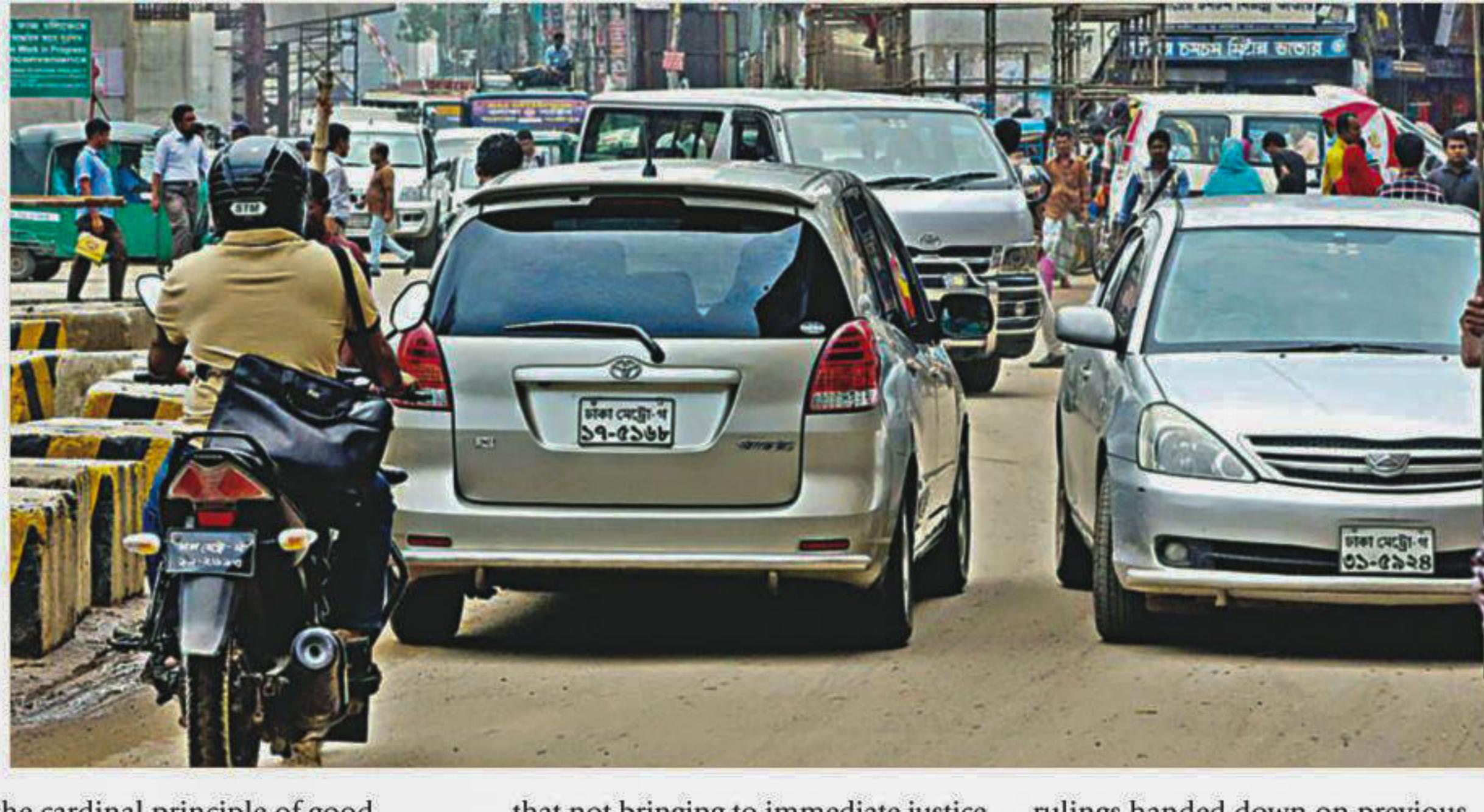


PHOTO: STAR

the cardinal principle of good citizenship: that citizens while demanding rights, in the public and private spheres, must also accept their own responsibilities, to the state as well as to fellow citizens. One's personal right cannot be at the expense of the equal rights of others. One's rights end where the rights of another commence; and just as one has a right to expect respect for his or her rights from others, he or she has an equal responsibility to respect the rights of others.

Assailed by a combination of all these experiences, I am overwhelmed by a sense of *Weltschmerz* (a feeling world-weariness). I am forced to ask myself: how have we come to this sorry pass? This was not the culture and set of values that I grew up with, these were not the values that I imbibed from my forbears, parents and teachers. Why, and how, has all this changed so drastically, just three generations down the line?

Over a decade ago, I had written

that not bringing to immediate justice the heinous crimes against humanity committed during the war of liberation was akin to ignoring the original sin that was bound to open the way for impunity besmirching our earlier long traditionally held mores. Condoning that original sin perhaps had laid the bedrock of the culture of impunity that was subsequently built upon by unscrupulous thugs of different varieties, some apparently enjoying political patronage, getting away scot-free with all sorts of criminal activity. All other crimes actually pale into insignificance when juxtaposed with that original sin. Why should any criminal fear the rule of law, or ordinary citizens have any respect for the institution of justice when these are commonly perceived as failing us?

The legal code and the system of temporal justice is built upon by the establishment of precedents and the application of the principle of *stare decisis* (that is, determining points in litigation according to precedent) to

rulings handed down on previous related cases. Conversely, we may imagine, the validation of lesser crimes, if not in law but in people's minds, is also built on the analogical application of the *stare decisis* principle to ignoring, and by implication, condoning, the nation's original sin. If the most horribly unimaginable of transgressions is ignored or condoned, all lesser transgressions within and under that rubric automatically become equally, if not more, legitimate and acceptable, and the mutation of culture, whether civic or political, takes place. Once set, it takes generations to change.

Common sense dictates that a crime that is similar in nature, even if lesser in proportion or triggered by inflammation of primal passions, regardless of magnitude, committed by anyone, should remain a crime in the eyes of the law. It cannot be a prosecutable offence for one set of actors, and condonable for another.

Otherwise, the core of the legal edifice is bound to become compromised, that is, its statutes termite-infested. That will render respect for law and justice tenuous, and transgression of the rule of law condonable. We need to mercilessly question ourselves: is this how we have encouraged the inevitable growth, and enlargement, of this pervasive, mindless culture of impunity?

Faulkner in his *Requiem for a Nun*, had said, famously: "The past is never dead. It is not even past." As long as the truth is not revealed in its entirety and faced squarely, catharsis will elude the nation, as will a chance at expiation and reconciliation. The truth can never be addressed in segments, selectively; it must be addressed holistically.

But perhaps all is not yet lost, I reassure myself. This flicker of hope is kindled by the recent image of a brave officer in uniform, dedicated to bringing discipline to a chaotic traffic, firmly but respectfully positioning himself squarely in front of a very officious-looking vehicle that was very clearly transgressing the law. This image is as iconic as another similar image seared in my mind since 1989: of a lone man, standing in front of a convoy of tanks on a road leading to Tiananmen in Beijing, bringing that convoy to a grinding halt, even if fleetingly at that time.

In the end, it will be akin acts of brave citizens, individually and collectively, mustering courage to stand up and make such statements, willing to incur the wrath of the all-too powerful state, to redress what has gone so awry and wrong. The state of the State, for its good or bad, is always in the hands of its citizenry.

Tariq Karim, a former career diplomat and academic, is currently Visiting Fellow at BRAC University.

Solving our waterlogging woes

City corporations should take the role of the lead agency and coordinator

Iqbal Habib, Member Secretary, Urbanisation & Governance Programme, Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon (Bapa), talks to **Naznin Tithi** of The Daily Star about why lack of coordination among the agencies concerned is the main barrier to solving Dhaka's waterlogging problem and how this issue should be addressed.

Dhaka has been plagued with severe waterlogging for the past few years. Although research and studies have been done on this and several projects have been undertaken by the government to solve this problem, no palpable improvement is in sight. Where are the gaps that still paralyse this city every time it rains?

Dhaka's waterlogging problem cannot be solved through any isolated project. If the government is really sincere about reducing Dhaka's waterlogging, it needs to make a well-coordinated and comprehensive plan. Any project that is taken whimsically without considering all the factors contributing to the problem is destined to fail. Many such projects had been taken in the past and a large amount of money had been spent, but we have hardly seen any improvement of the situation.

Dhaka once had at least 52 canals. But according to Dhaka Wasa documentation, there are only 26 of them. Over the last two decades, most of the canals, water bodies and retention areas, and even the rivers have been encroached upon by powerful people. Regular dumping of solid waste or garbage by locals has clogged many canals and drains. The city's drainage system is on the verge of a total collapse due to lack of proper maintenance. The increased rainwater runoff is creating acute waterlogging as there is a decreasing trend of groundwater recharge due to rapid concretisation of urban spaces. All these factors combined have contributed to this problem and we need to solve this problem through comprehensive solution-based efforts.

It is true that the government had cleaned and recovered some of the canals of the city in the past, but within a short period, those canals got blocked again with solid waste or



Iqbal Habib

garbage. There are many areas in the city without any designated place for garbage disposal. As a result, locals use these water channels and open drains as their garbage dumping ground, resulting in waterlogging. Stinky and polluted black water is flowing through these open channels or canals due to an absence of any sewer network. Therefore, as long as we do not have an integrated solid waste management system with comprehensive sewer coverage, no project will yield any result.

In the last few months, because of only 40 or 50 mm of rain, many areas of the city remained under water for three to six hours, whereas previously 80 to 100 mm of rain would create such waterlogging. In the previous years, only some particular areas faced extreme waterlogging but nowadays an increased number of areas get submerged

under knee-deep water even after a regular seasonal shower.

The government has taken a new project worth Tk 1,100 crore to recover 33 channels. According to the LGRD minister, after the project is implemented, the city's waterlogging problem will be totally solved. What's your view on this?

I don't think the new project will have any impact, as these are random projects taken without any consideration of the bigger picture. As usual, under this new project, some of the canals will be recovered while several others will be re-excavated. Even the total number of canals is misleading: there is one canal in Kallyanpur that has been shown as five canals, with the same name with extensions 'Ka', 'Ka', 'Gha', etc.

What I do not understand is why Wasa has been given this job in the first place; it should have been given to the city corporations instead. Although after 1988 Wasa assumed the responsibility to clean and maintain the drainage system of the city (it was even preparing a drainage master plan), it has failed to perform its duty. And last year, its managing director claimed that Wasa was not responsible for maintaining the drainage system of this city. Later, it was unanimously decided that the responsibility of Dhaka's drainage management would be given to the two city corporations. Besides, the clogged runoff water, created due to our misleading "Cordon Approach" oriented city planning with embankments around, could not be pumped out due to the poor mitigation capacity of the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB), as it has failed to set up more pump stations for doing the job.

It is obvious that there is a lack of coordination among different government agencies. How do you think this problem should be addressed?

In July 2017, at the initiative of late Mayor Annisul Huq, a meeting was held at the Dhaka North City Corporation's office where the LGRD minister, Water Resource minister, Housing and Public Works minister and high-ups from different relevant government ministries and members from various related agencies were present. I also attended the meeting. We took several decisions to solve Dhaka's waterlogging. One of the major decisions was that the city corporation, being the only elected body out of all the 54 service providers under 11 ministries, would take the role of the lead agency and coordinator for a comprehensive drainage solution for Dhaka, and Wasa would assist them with their human and technical capacity. But unfortunately, after the mayor's death, everyone seems to have forgotten the decision taken at the meeting.

Other important decisions taken at the meeting were: a) All in-hand drainage related projects of all agencies must be completed before the beginning of the next monsoon with utmost urgency; b) A time-based "Comprehensive and Integrated Drainage Master Plan" would be prepared with short- and long-term targets; c) Solid waste management and sustainable sewer network management would have to be considered an integral part of the drainage master plan; and d) The participation of the public has to be ensured at all levels, from planning to implementation, with the involvement of political and social organisations.

Currently, the two city corporations,

Dhaka Wasa, Rajuk and DC's office have been working to recover the city's lost canals and water bodies. But there is a serious lack of coordination among the government agencies that are largely responsible for managing the city's storm water drainage system. It is still not clear as to which agency does what. We know that the Ramchandrapur canal has been freed recently. But I am sure, without any solid waste management system in the area, this canal will be blocked again soon. How crucial is the implementation of the Detailed Area Plan (DAP) when it comes to saving our city from waterlogging? We know that DAP is not being implemented due to the opposition from influential realtors ...

If we want to save this city, we need to revive its natural system of water flow with due importance. And to do so, there is no alternative to implementation of the DAP. No doubt that land grabbers are powerful but they are small in number. The majority's interests must be given preference to the few unscrupulous realtors' interests. Already Rajuk has taken some measures to recover the wetlands and retention areas grabbed by realtors. The High Court has also given some commendable rulings on this issue. The Hatirjheel Integrated Project is an example that recovering land from the clutches of powerful people is possible. In order to implement that project, 304 acres of land were recovered. Furthermore, if land could be acquired for building elevated expressways or flyovers, it can also be done to recover canals and water bodies. What we need is strong political commitment on the part of the government and the involvement of the public in making and implementing the plans.

ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



JULY 18, 2013

DETROIT BANKRUPTCY

The city of Detroit, Michigan, filed for bankruptcy, becoming the largest US municipal bankruptcy ever at USD 18.5 billion

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 32 Leaf lifter
- 33 Sch. supporters
- 34 Dance tape
- 35 Foreword
- 37 Head out
- 39 Summer fruit
- 40 Passover feast
- 41 Spirited horse
- 42 For fear that
- 43 Lazy fellow
- 44 Get cozy
- 45 Tire holders
- 46 Preakness, e.g.
- 47 Played like Pan
- 48 Boarder's spot
- 49 "The Simpsons"
- 50 Calm
- 51 Armada unit
- 52 Battle souvenirs
- 53 Implied
- 54 Blender button
- 55 O'Connor's successor
- 56 Clear
- 57 Had it!"
- 58 Bizarre
- 59 Get cozy
- 60 Tire holders
- 61 Preakness, e.g.
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