

NATIONAL ROAD SAFETY DAY

'Transport sector has become a big hub for extortion'

Mozammel Haque Chowdhury, Secretary General, Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity, talks to Naznin Tithi of The Daily Star about loopholes in the Road Transport Act and why anarchy on our roads continues with more and more people falling victims to road accidents.

Has there been any noticeable change in our transport sector after last year's road safety movement?

After last year's countrywide road safety movement, we hoped that there would be some significant changes in our transport sector because of the big promises made by the government. But unfortunately, the government could not keep its promises, and so no substantive changes have been made.

According to the WHO, every year 21,000 people die in road crashes across the country and every day 150 people fall victim to road accidents. We have found in our study that the majority of the victims are schoolchildren. So, I think there should be specific programmes focusing on the safety of the schoolchildren on roads.

Every year, the government observes the National Road Safety Day. A seminar is held and some posters are put on display at different points of the city. That's all. I think this day should be observed with more seriousness, with

lane roads have been expanded to four lanes. However, many important issues that should have been given priority were ignored. In a densely populated country like Bangladesh, emphasis should be given on improving the public transport system. For example, we need to increase the number of public bus services which can carry a lot of people and can reduce traffic jam as a result. But we don't see any steps to develop the public bus services. Instead, what we are observing is an alarming rise in the number of small vehicles such as Nasimon, Karimon, Easy bikes, motorcycles, etc. In Dhaka, more than 300 motorcycles are being registered each day. The increased number of small vehicles have not only been causing more small-scale road accidents but are also increasing the traffic congestion on the roads. Sadly, the government does not have any policy to control the number of small vehicles.

Also, on the one hand, the government has been saying that the vehicles without fitness certificates will be withdrawn from roads, while on the other hand, opportunities have been created for these vehicles to run on the streets. A decision was taken to withdraw 20-year-old buses from the roads some 12 years ago, which is yet to be implemented.

There were some specific directives from the PM about making our roads safer. Are any of those directives being enforced by the transport authorities?

Among the six-point directives given by the PM in 2018, only one is being implemented to some extent: keeping the doors of running buses shut. But it is being enforced only in Dhaka and when there is a traffic sergeant present on the road. However, only a few of the buses follow this rule. There were three other important directives from the PM—mandatory use of seatbelts by the passengers, keeping a replacement of the drivers in buses, and ensuring a break for the drivers during long-distance trips—which have not been implemented.

The Road Transport Act-2018 is yet to be put into effect allegedly due to opposition from the transport owners-workers. There is one particular provision that the transport workers



Mozammel Haque Chowdhury

are opposing. Is there any justification for their demand to amend the provision?

According to the law, the maximum punishment for killing a person by reckless driving is five years' imprisonment. It is a non-bailable offence. The provision will only be applicable if a driver kills someone deliberately. The transport workers have been opposing this provision and creating pressure on the government to reduce the punishment to three years' imprisonment and to make it bailable. They are misinterpreting the provision, saying that they cannot drive with a death warrant hanging over their heads.

There is no justification for their demand because the law only gives five years' imprisonment for a crime as serious as killing a person. There is no provision of death penalty in the law for deliberately killing a person. With a little background check, the necessity for this provision in the Act will be clear to you. There was an incident in Gazipur where a woman resisted when a trucker was trying to drive his vehicle through her land. She stood in front of the truck and told the driver that she would not let him

drive through her land because it will damage it. The driver told her to move away but the woman did not comply. So, he ran her over with his truck, killing the woman instantly. This is an example of a deliberate murder in which a driver killed a person using his truck. There were two more murders like this. When the court gave its verdict in the case, the transport workers called a three-day strike across the country, bringing the whole country to a standstill.

Of the six members of the committee that formulated the Act, four of them were influential leaders of the owners' and workers' association and also members of the ruling party. So, the Act is already in favour of the owners and the workers. Now a committee has been formed to amend the law. We do not know what changes are being made because the process is not transparent and the government has not yet revealed anything to the public. Since the law has been passed in parliament, any amendment to the law can only be done there. Therefore, we are not clear whether the committee has been working according to the law.

Did you, from Bangladesh Passengers' Welfare Association, give any alternative proposal to the government regarding the law?

We had given the government some proposals to make the law people-friendly. We have been talking about reforms in the transport sector for long. We have been saying that people must have a say in this law because it is they who are the victims of anarchy in our transport sector. If the people's voices are not heard and their participation is not ensured in the various transport committees, enforcing the law will not help develop our transport sector and the anarchy and mismanagement in the sector will continue.

The transport sector has become a big hub for extortion; thousands of crores of taka are being extorted from this sector every year. Extortion in the terminals has been encouraged through this law. Currently, to bring a new bus on the road, the owner has to give a huge amount of bribe to the local transport committees. We demanded that all kinds of extortion, including at the terminals, should be stopped. But our demands were ignored. We have not been given any scope for a bargain in this law.

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an aim to create awareness among the people and other stakeholders in the transport sector about road safety. For creating awareness among the schoolchildren, the government can arrange debate and essay competitions in schools on this day.

The government has undertaken some big projects for infrastructure development with an aim to reduce traffic jam. Quite a few bridges, overpasses and flyovers have been built and the construction work for some others is underway. Also, under these projects, some of the two-

A cherished scholar lost to reckless driving

MOHAMMAD ZAHIDUR RAHMAN

MOHAMMAD Shah, a well-known scholar and professor of history at University of Chittagong, died on September 29, 2019. After a fatal road accident at Hathazari, Chattogram, in which he was involved, he was put on life support, and on the eighth day in hospital, he breathed his last. What a tragedy! We, his students, couldn't hold back our tears.

Born in 1952, Prof Mohammad Shah was a brilliant student in his early days. He achieved his honours and master's degrees in history from University of Chittagong. He completed his MPhil from Jawaharlal Nehru University, where he came in touch with renowned historians like Harbans Mukhia (his thesis supervisor), Romila Thapar, Bipan Chandra, and others. As a Commonwealth Fellow, Mohammad Shah was a proud student of some eminent historians of the West including Peter Robb (his supervisor), Francis Robinson, Peter Hardy, and Kirti Narayan Chaudhuri at SOAS University of London, where he got his PhD titled, "In Search of Identity: Bengali Muslims, 1880-1940". His dissertation was published from K P Bagchi & Co., Kolkata in 1996 which brought him critical acclaim, both nationally and internationally. His other book, "Pan-Islamic Movement in India and Bengal", was published from Royal Book Company, Karachi in 2002.

Prof Mohammad Shah had the unique quality



Prof Mohammad Shah (1952-2019)

to enliven his surroundings easily. He was simple and enterprising. As a researcher, his academic credentials established him as an erudite scholar. There are two books, twelve book-chapters, forty-plus articles and many more titles to his credit. He was very studious and could discuss any issue in the classroom or at any forum and

adda. He was a devoted researcher of Bangladesh. Sometimes we would call him a "seminar man" as he constantly attended seminars and symposiums, and often turned a seminar into a festive occasion by making interesting questions and comments.

He was one of the teachers who helped to popularise the history of civilisation and historiography at the history department of our university. He served for around four decades at the University of Chittagong. He was a visiting fellow at Royal Holloway College, London. From 2018, Prof Shah was working as an adjunct professor at the Department of History and Philosophy, North South University. Two years back, on his farewell day at our university, he said: "Today is the beginning of my retirement life. I am satisfied for being able to complete my career successfully. Retirement does not mean the end of life; it is just the beginning of a new chapter of life. It is like changing the tyre of an old car with a new tyre. That is what I understand by the term 'retirement'."

The more tragic part is that this accident in which he was run over by a car didn't get any media coverage, either in print or online. These types of deadly accidents are happening around us every day.

Mohammad Shah was a very sincere teacher who never missed a class intentionally. He taught thousands of students with utmost care in a career spanning around forty years. He was very student-

friendly and always remained surrounded by the students. To us, he represented Brad Henry's definition of a teacher: "A good teacher can inspire hope, ignite the imagination, and instill a love of learning."

Mohammad Shah had an unquenchable thirst for knowledge. Being a lifetime academic, he was always busy doing research and conducting classes. I remember sometimes he would call me around 5am in the morning. Naturally, I missed his calls at that hour. When I returned his call, usually after 8am, he would say, from the other side of the phone: "After being professors, most of the university teachers in Bangladesh do not continue their study. This is an irony, and you are no exception, Zahid. At 5 in the morning, a professor must be at his reading table or out for a morning walk." He kept saying all this without giving me any chance to reply. I mention this incident only to show how Prof Muhammad Shah always inspired his students to acquire knowledge.

With his death, we have lost a great teacher, the likes of whom are urgently needed to fix the moribund state of our education sector. Prof Shah was a perfect example of a mentor. His tragic and untimely death is an irreparable loss for us—his students—and for the overall education sector.

Mohammad Zahidur Rahman teaches history at University of Chittagong. Email: zahidhistory@gmail.com

ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



October 22, 1962
Cuban missile crisis

On this day in 1962, US President John F Kennedy alerted Americans to the Cuban missile crisis, declaring a naval blockade to prevent further missile shipments to the island country 90 miles (145 km) off the coast of the US.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS	33 "Stand" band	9 Plague
1 Wonderland	34 Genesis	11 Face mask
visitor	36 Arp's art	attachments
6 Saudi native	37 Tennis star	15 Buddy
10 Arrested	38 Mist	17 1507 master-piece
11 Parasol offering	39 Letter after psi	20 Depressed
12 Sells for	40 Alaskan native	21 – Paulo
13 Identifies	41 Sea dogs	24 Tough spots
14 Lawyer: Abbr.	42 Lab activity	25 Made, but barely
15 Dangling art		27 Darling of baseball
16 2016 Olympics host		28 Know-how
17 Disfigure	1 Citation's jockey	29 Metal man
18 Ready to go	2 Thai's neighbor	30 Fragrance
19 Rowboat	3 Yet to come	31 Electrician, at times
features	4 Metropolis	35 Band's bookings
22 Light gas	5 Print measures	36 Secluded valley
23 Move slowly	6 Obsessed captain	38 Dyeing tub
26 Sorcerers	7 Harold of "Ghost-busters"	
29 Unrefined	8 "Skyfall" singer	
32 – Alamos		

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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

BEETLE BAILEY



BABY BLUES

