

Why is underage driving so prevalent on our roads?

It's high time for govt to finalise and implement Road Transport Act, 2018

WHILE we are disappointed at a recent report by this daily, which detailed an incident of how students protesting for road safety confronted a 19-year-old illegally driving a microbus while the vehicle's driver slept beside him, it is, unfortunately, too common a scene in our country. The young driver could not produce a driving licence or any other papers to the demonstrators, but claimed he had been driving the vehicle for the last four years without any issues. He may have meant this to be a reassuring statement, but it's anything but that. We are left to wonder how ineffectively the current road safety laws are implemented if a 19-year-old has been able to drive a passenger-laden motorised vehicle since he was 15 years old. It should be noted that the student protesters suspected that the driver was even younger than he claimed to be.

There is little doubt that recklessness on the roads—including the fact that teenagers are able to drive any motorised vehicle, from cars to buses, carrying people—is perpetuated by the authorities' apparent apathy towards road safety. Otherwise, how is it that the Road Transport Act, passed three years ago, is still in its draft form waiting to be vetted by the law ministry? Despite the first seven months of this year seeing a 42.25 percent hike in road accidents and a 39.98 percent rise in deaths in said accidents (compared to the same period in 2020), why did the government decide to delay the act's implementation by allowing transport owners and associations to negotiate some of its key sections? Who is to say how many of those thousands of lives lost on the roads were due to underage drivers being allowed to ply the roads, manning all sorts of vehicles? Anyone, including the traffic police, need only look at these drivers to know that they are clearly not old enough to drive. So, we wonder if bribes exchanging hands is the cause of human hauliers regularly being driven by adolescents on our roads.

We believe that the focus of the law should be shifted from underage drivers, who likely drive vehicles for very low wages to support their livelihoods, and instead be redirected towards traffic police and vehicle and transport association owners who allow these adolescents to put their own and others' lives at deathly risk. We also urge the government to speedily implement the Road Transport Act, especially in the face of the recent protests by students for safer roads and public transport. We hope that the coming years will not be reminiscent of 2018 as this year has been, in terms of poor safety on the country's roads and the authorities' apathy towards the situation.

Overpopulation in Dhaka getting out of control

It's causing huge economic losses and making the city unliveable

NEARLY eight percent of the jobs in Bangladesh are concentrated in Dhaka city, and 40 percent are concentrated in the greater Dhaka region, which includes Gazipur and Narayanganj cities. Such extreme concentration of people and economic activities in the capital are having negative impacts on the national economy, according to a new study. The study found that some 31.9 percent of Bangladesh's urban population live in Dhaka, whereas the country's major cities that have over a million inhabitants contain only 3.5 percent of the urban population. In the last 10 years, Dhaka's population has increased by more than 50 percent.

In 2017, Bangladesh's per capita income and GDP was 11 percent lower than its potential, due to the excessive concentration of resources and economic activities in the city. In 2019, the GDP loss as a result of that amounted to USD 35 billion. At present, Bangladesh is losing 6-10 percent of its GDP because Dhaka's growth has crossed the optimum rate—and that is a huge loss. That just goes to show how long overdue it is for the government to take measures to try and reduce the huge population load that is currently on Dhaka.

Another issue of major concern is that such overpopulation is leading to urban poverty remaining stagnant. For example, the study shows that from 2010 to 2016, the extreme poverty rate in rural areas declined from 21.1 to 14.9 percent, but there was virtually no change in urban poverty rate. Additionally, the traffic congestion that arises from this huge concentration of people is causing losses amounting to 2.9 percent of the country's GDP.

All things considered, it is becoming increasingly clear that not only is the population burden on Dhaka leading to worsening living conditions, but it is also causing significant economic losses, as well as environmental damage. Therefore, it's high time for the government to urgently develop other regions of the country to try and reduce some of the load from Dhaka. Some decentralisation measures and locating the government's own agencies—most of which are in Dhaka—outside of the capital would be great steps towards that end. City authorities also need to be empowered so that they can pursue the necessary development goals that they have on their own, instead of always having to rely on the centre. Whatever steps the government can take, it should take them now, before Dhaka's overpopulation situation becomes worse and the city becomes completely uninhabitable.

Prof Rafiqul Islam: A great chronicler



BLOWN' IN THE WIND

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

THERE was a 10mm glass wall at ULAB that separated Prof Rafiqul Islam's office room from mine for more than three years. He was the only professor who had a TV in his office, and he would listen to the news in loud volume, usually once after lunch. Almost every day, I would see media men coming in with their paraphernalia to get the opinion of this public intellectual on many national issues. I would see him walking briskly along the faculty floor, maintaining a respectful distance. We would exchange pleasantries, but hardly any real conversation. On several occasions in the last seven years of our acquaintance, we



Prof Rafiqul Islam with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, her family members, and others at the inauguration of the countdown to Mujib Borsho celebration at the National Parade Square in Dhaka on January 10, 2020.

PHOTO: PFD

had sat side by side in the faculty lounge during different birthday celebrations of colleagues, shared stage during national or cultural events. He would recount anecdotes or reflect on some national events. We met on several occasions to organise events or seek his opinions on university-related issues. His voice modulation commanded the attention of his audience. Like others, I would listen to him in awe while he would storyboard his memories.

From his accounts, his snippets of the past, we would know who Prof Rafiqul Islam really was as a person. His bio-blurbs are full of credentials, such as national professor, Bangla Academy president, professor emeritus, Ekushey award-winning Nazrul scholar, eminent linguist, language warrior, former vice-chancellor of ULAB, or even the favourite teacher of our prime minister. Somehow, they seem inadequate in defining the man

I constructed from his memories.

Recent studies suggest that memory is not only a reflection of the past, but also a pathway for the future. Our remembered life story indicates what we will do tomorrow. According to the surrealist Spanish-born film-maker Luis Buñuel, "Our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, even our action." Losing your memory is equal to losing a basic connection with who you are. This is true at both individual and national levels. Prof Islam had the uncanny ability to cast back to events from his past to conjure the "semantic memory" of dates, times and places, and to reconfigure the moment and relive it from the inside. He was a time-traveller who could return to the present to explain the demands of the present and chart the future. He was a living legend as he witnessed different crosscurrents of our sociopolitical and cultural life that is tinged with our national identity.



Prof Rafiqul Islam with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, her family members, and others at the inauguration of the countdown to Mujib Borsho celebration at the National Parade Square in Dhaka on January 10, 2020.

PHOTO: PFD

He enrolled into Dhaka University in 1951. He completed his MA in Bangla language and literature from the university in 1956, and joined his alma mater as a scholar-cum-lecturer. In 1959, he obtained a Fulbright scholarship to pursue his MA in general linguistics and cultural anthropology. He joined the Department of Bangla of Dhaka University as an assistant professor in 1961 and taught there for 40 years, before his retirement in 2000. Among his favourite students was Bangabandhu's daughter. When Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina held his hands to lead him to the parade ground on Bangabandhu's homecoming day celebration as part of the Mujib 100 inauguration, the nation saw how influential he was as a teacher.

"I used to live in the railway colony. My father was a doctor. I had seen them around 1948—those people, mostly students participating in the procession.

How old was I? I sat for matriculation in 1949; so, I was a student of Class X. I was very young then. But in 1951, I became a student of Dhaka University. And as a student I became directly involved in the Bangla Language, Literature and Cultural Movement," Prof Islam told our colleague Sohana Manzoor in an interview. "You know what happened in 1952. It's history now. I had a Voigtlander camera with which I took pictures. I was a part of the procession that day, too. I was not one of the wounded," he added (*The Daily Star*, February 17, 2018).

When the All-Party Language Committee was split in opinion over the violation of Section 144 clamped by the then Pakistan government to diffuse the student protest over the question of state language on February 20, 1952, a young Rafiqul Islam stood up and told the committee president, Abul Hashim, to leave the matter to the students. In response, Hashim retorted, "I do not like to learn politics from a boy like you" (Islam, R, *Bangla Bhasha, Sahitya o Sangskritik Andolon*, 2006). Yet, the protest happened; he joined the Language Movement procession with his camera. We are all grateful for the photographs that he as a young man captured. He spoke to witnesses and recorded the immediate reactions of the participants and family members of the victims of the Language Movement. He made sure that ULAB curated his prized possessions; the photograph collections are displayed on every Ekushey February to remind our next generation of the proud legacy of our language.

After his retirement from Dhaka University, he was approached by the editor of *Ajker Kagaj* and ULAB founder Kazi Shahid Ahmed to help him consolidate his ideas of doing something for the country. Prof Islam was instrumental behind the creation of a university that has Bangladesh in its name. Eventually, he became the vice-chancellor of the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB) and remained so till 2007. During his tenure, he initiated quite a few traditions at the university, including the adoption of Tagore's "*Mora Satyer pore mon...*" as a theme song. The powerful lyrics is quite telling of his own life and the university, with which he was involved till the last day of his life:

"Today we shall offer our mind to the cause of truth,

Long live truth.

We shall follow, worship and launch a treasure-hunt for truth,

Long live truth.

Not to think of a lie despite misery,

Not to serve a lie despite poverty,

Not to tell a lie despite penalty.

Long live truth."

At ULAB, Prof Islam led the Center for Bangla Studies and brought out invaluable research-oriented publications, designed curricula, and integrated

understanding of Bangla culture as one of the core values. But it was in his reminiscences in different university programmes that he would remind us of the different junctures of our history: the 1947 Partition, the Language Movement, the 1969 Mass Uprising, the Liberation War, and the tragedy of August 15, 1975. His photographic memory helped him outline a clear, coherent picture of our past. Because of his training in classical anthropology, he could share very personal observations in a very objective manner.

In our last Victory Day event, he recollected his experience of 1971. He told us how he, along with some other Dhaka University professors, were captured by the Pakistan Army in August 1971. They were kept in a "VIP cage" in Agargaon. Dr Nurul Islam, Prof Rehman Sobhan and Prof Anisur Rahman approached US Senator Edward Kennedy, who called the then Foreign Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to precipitate their release. He told us how earlier he had lost his father in March 1971 when there was a firing going on near their house at RK Mission Road. His father hit his head hard while trying to get away from the bed and succumbed to his injuries in a state of coma. Prof Islam had to stay in his Dhaka University residence to attend to his father. The police officials informed the then vice-chancellor to warn some of his colleagues who were on the wanted list of the Pakistanis. When Prof Islam was arrested and taken to Ramna police station, the officer-in-charge was surprised that the message had not been communicated. The OC allowed Prof Islam to call the VC, who seemed surprised that one of the professors could get away. He thus warned us of the frequent betrayals that characterise our national life.

Prof Islam would tell us about his visit to the martyrs after the August 15 massacre, and give gory details of the killings. I had the good fortune of working with him in the national Mujib 100 subcommittee on publication and translation as well as on the ULAB project of a commemorative volume on the father of the nation. Prof Islam and I edited the bilingual volume. I read his article and was inspired by the clarity of thoughts and convictions that defined him as a writer. He was supposed to speak at the book launch on October 7. For the first time, he sounded frail over the telephone. He said, "I am not feeling well. I would rather join online." He was the one who led the year-long Mujib 100 programmes at ULAB. We decided to stream his recorded speech, and probably it was his last recorded video. He developed a lung condition due to old age, and it started deteriorating fast. On November 30, 2021, the news came. An era ended. ULAB lost a guardian and the nation a chronicler.

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How can we start the open data revolution?



MAN AND MACHINE

MOINUL ZABER

HOW well do we know ourselves? What is the best way to even measure the country's progress? How can we practise evidence-based public policy? How can we engender innovation? One

of the scientific ways is to take a "data-centric approach." This means that the government primarily takes the driving seat to ensure that the country's data assets are properly and timely curated, and are made available for the agencies and residents to consume. Unfortunately, the traditional means of collecting, manipulating, and building indicators of progress has become too slow and very expensive at this age of computational revolution. Scientists around the world are now talking about the potentials of Big Data and machine learning as complementary, and sometimes as an alternative path to facilitate data-centric decision-making. We also want to see ourselves at the forefront of technology. But before we jump on the Big Data bandwagon, we need to put the focus on creating value from our traditional sources of data. However, the question is: Where do we start?

To be honest, there is no playbook to start the process. But every scientist and practitioner will agree on one thing: we need to establish a culture of data-centric decision-making in all possible spheres of our societies. This is the job of the modern government that has already chosen to walk on the path of "digital transformation." The first task of the government is to make an effort to make any data available. Why? There are several reasons behind it. Firstly, it benefits the government itself by making inter-institutional decision-making an easy task. Agencies working in silos amass a vast amount of data that other agencies could benefit from but do not have the access to. Secondly, non-governmental

organisations and businesses can make better decisions on innovation, investment, and expansion. Finally, academia and research organisations can help improve the government's data efforts by scrutinising the structures and processes which can ensure better data-centric governance.

The second task is to ensure "usability." Availability is important, but it does not ensure the use. Data must be "reusable," meaning they should be in open formats

countries around the world embraced this philosophy as a tool to ensure transparency and efficiency, and engender innovation.

Bangladesh approved an open data strategy in 2016. But the strategy focused only on the release and publication of data at the national level. Even though the country has many key ingredients in place to implement a high-impact open data programme, a look at the open data platform tells us that the



It's high time Bangladesh understood the true value of open data and made full use of it to become truly innovative and progressive.

FILE PHOTO: AFP

that can be read by software, and users will have the legal right to "reuse" them. Why? While a large amount of data is published on government websites, most of them are meant to be read as stand-alone documents and not reused for other purposes. This makes these data unusable by modern computational and statistical software.

Making data available and ensuring their reusability is the philosophy of the "open data" movement. This global movement picked up steam in 2013 when G8 leaders signed an "Open Data Charter." This charter promised to make public sector data openly available, free, and in a reusable format. Over time,

progress has been very slow. If we assume the number of datasets uploaded as a measure of activity, Bangladesh till early 2021 uploaded 134 datasets, while our neighbours Nepal and India have 616 and 10,224, respectively. In general, supply increases where there is increasing demand. It seems that there is a general lack of demand for using the open data platform in Bangladesh.

Around the world, open data platforms not only helped governments get organised and do away with siloed decision-making, but also engendered many innovative services. The UK government records the category of the person and organisation requesting

datasets on the website data.gov.uk. They report that after private individuals, start-ups and SMEs are the largest categories of requesters. Open data start-ups like CityGrows built open data platforms that help non-technical government staff build and customise digital services. Estonian ICT company Datal has been developing a new early warning system based on satellite open data for large infrastructure such as railways, highways, bridges, ports, etc to make them more accessible and secured. In South Korea, a start-up named Modu Parking released an application that lets parking space owners lease out their spots to others. The company started by aggregating data about car parks from municipal open data portals. Around the world, there are many such stories of innovation.

Unfortunately, stories like that are rare or non-existent in Bangladesh. This points out our inertia to make evidence-based decisions and the lack of awareness of the innovative use of data. We collect data for the sheer fact that it must be collected, being unaware of its intrinsic value. Moreover, most of the government agencies and potential non-government users are likely not aware of the 2016 strategy. Academia has not come forward with innovative research either, which would pressurise the government to make this platform a rich source of information and innovation.

If Bangladesh wishes to become a truly innovative country, we need to focus on our data assets. We need to create demand by raising awareness that in turn will ensure the supply of quality data. One way to do it is by involving academia to come up with innovative projects based on our available data resources. If the government does not show interest, private organisations and academia should come forward. Let the data revolution begin by making the open data initiative a success.

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