Can AI solve the insanity of Dhaka's traffic?

NO STRINGS ATTACHED

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ILLUSTRATION: **BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY**

I might be wrong but when we talk about artificial intelligence (AI), isn't it assumed that some plain, regular "intelligence" must preclude it? In other words, it is expected that before jumping into the rather new and unexplored realm of artificial intelligence, we should have at least dabbled a bit in some old-fashioned "common sense."

The announcement of the Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) installing an AI-driven signalling system to fix Dhaka's number-one debilitating disease – its paralysing traffic congestion – is a bit of a jolt to our pea brains. After all, how can we forget the much-hyped-about automated traffic lights in all the main streets installed 15 years ago, at a cost of Tk 119 crore, that may be described by brutal critics as resulting in "a big fat zero"?

Experts are not impressed with the latest news and are decrying that "no science will work unless roads are expanded and discipline enforced." Let's focus on the word "discipline" and see what we have of it when it comes to our streets.

Along the less than seven percent of the city area that are roads, we have about 17.8 lakh registered vehicles rushing through. These include the over three lakh private cars, one lakh vans, 84,000 plus microbuses, 78,000 trucks, 37,000 buses, 30,000 taxicabs, thousands of other vehicles such as taxicabs, covered vans, human haulers, tempos, jeeps, tractors, auto-rickshaws, nasimons and so on, which are circumvented by daredevils zigzagging on about nine lakh motorbikes. Interspersed between all this are the snail-paced rickshaw vans carrying everything from garbage to furniture, and the thousands of rickshaws driven by nonchalant pullers who actually try to race against private cars and will take sharp turns on the busiest roads.

But let's not forget the hordes of self-righteous jaywalkers who will perform praiseworthy acrobatics to climb over or squeeze through road dividers, consciously risking dismemberment and death, rather than walk to the footbridge just a few feet away. They will also think nothing of calmly crossing a busy thoroughfare with just the power of The Hand. The expectation is that no matter what speed the motorised vehicle is running at, it must come to a screeching halt as soon as that magical raised hand is seen.

Given these realities, it is not surprising that the streets resemble a battlefield where the victorious is whoever can elbow the others out to come out first. This is no football game where foul moves will entail red cards or penalties – the referees, in this case, the traffic cops, are either absent, or busy halting commoners for VIP movement. No, this is full-on war where one must go to one's destination and be ahead of others, at all costs.

In the hierarchy of vehicles, buses have all the power. They may be rickety – with broken windshields and backlights, and battered, with most of their coating scraped off, and emitting the blackest of smoke – but they rule the roads completely and always have "right of way." They can stop in the middle of the road to pick up passengers, ram into smaller vehicles, nudge other buses while in a high speed race against them – *in the middle of the road*, perhaps flattening the human bodies that dare to come in their way – and zoom away without inviting even a cursory glance from the traffic police who has been made indifferent with some magic "tea money." Trucks, too, enjoy this power, but only after dark do they live up to their "killers on the road" title.

The next in rank are the monstrously large SUVs that usually belong to a VIP or a "VRP" (very rich person), and both titles come with similar levels of entitlement. These vehicles will just keep edging away the little vehicle, be it a sedan or an auto-rickshaw, using their special sirens (sometimes wireless speakers) to intimidate and shoo away the minions.

But private sedans, some of them swanky sports cars, do enter the race – especially if they are driven by the offspring of a VIP or VRP. In fact these precious creatures often think of themselves as little Schumachers and will whiz by on Airport Road and the little lanes of residential areas alike, adding to the thrills and palpitations of those in the other vehicles or travelling on foot.

Obviously logic and common sense do not have any role to play in Dhaka's mad and maddening traffic, which is why the much celebrated automated traffic signals did precious little and the traffic police went back to the age-old way of controlling traffic – with their hand movements and a rusty whistle.

Against this backdrop, how will AI signalling work? Will AI be able to fix the complete lack of regard for traffic rules and basic decency of drivers and jaywalkers when they are on the streets? Will this "intelligence" be able to stop the wheeling and dealing that make it possible for dilapidated vehicles and stuntmen disguised as drivers to go about their business of making Dhaka the seventh worst city in traffic management? Will AI be able to make sure motorised and non-motorised vehicles do not ply the same roads? Will it help to expand the road area to the 25 percent level needed to detangle the continuous gridlock? And will it clear the footpaths, stop the double and triple parking on busy streets? Most importantly, will artificial intelligence be able to prevent the 40 plus new private cars entering Dhaka's streets every day?

Perhaps we need to introduce some good old "natural intelligence" to our traffic management, before elevating it with the artificial kind.

When the American Nightmare kills a Bangladeshi Dream

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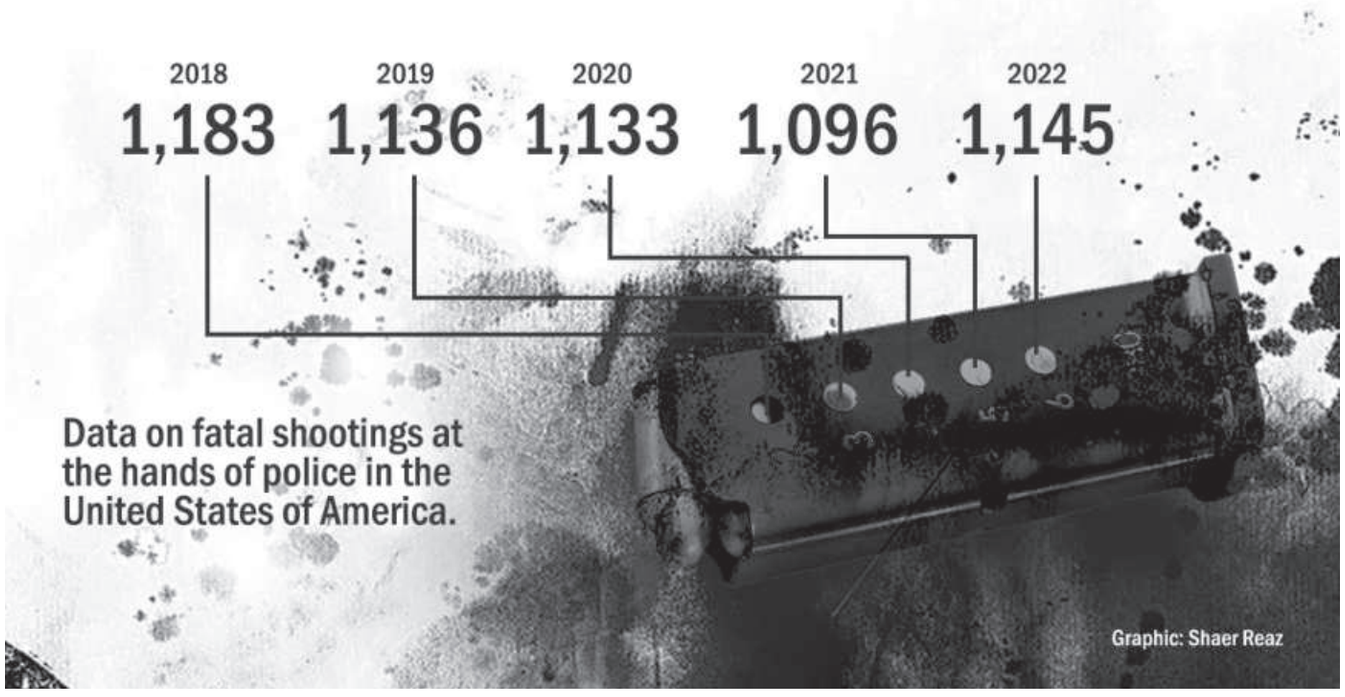
It is always unsettling to hear about people's lives being taken under the most arbitrary pretexts by law enforcement agencies who are in charge of ensuring the overall security of all citizens. The assertion that George Floyd's death would be – and must be – the last such killing at the hands of law enforcement spread throughout the weeks following his murder by a Minneapolis police officer on May 25, 2020.

Unfortunately, there has been no progress in the rate of fatal police violence in the US.



In a tragic turn of events, a young Bangladeshi student, Sayed Arif Faisal, was fatally shot to death by police in the city of Cambridge, Massachusetts, on January 4. This has spurred protests and enraged the Bangladeshi community living in the US state. The Bangladesh Association of New England (BANE), which described the death as a "racist incident by white police officers," strongly denounced the "brutal killing" and demanded a fair probe of the incident and punishment of the police officer who opened fire. The victim's family has denied the police's claim that Faisal was carrying a large knife. As of yet, no evidence has been provided by authorities. The very public debate about police brutality in the US has been rekindled by this deadly use of force by the police.

Statistics from the last two decades show that US society is confronted with a wide range of domestic human rights issues, and hate crimes, mass shootings, structural racism, and police violence have increased alarmingly. According to a new study in *The Lancet*, there have been around 32,000 police-related killings in the US during 1980–2019, with nearly 55 percent of these killings being misclassified or unreported.

The racist actions of the Trump administration are well-known. But it is distressing to note that there has been no change in the situation of racially-motivated police violence during the current Biden administration. Despite Biden's pledge to end the situation, law enforcement organisations killed 1,183 people in 2022, averaging about three deaths per day, according to Mapping Police Violence, a non-profit research organisation. Similar patterns have been documented by *The Washington Post*, which concluded that since 2015, police have killed almost 1,000 individuals annually.

This shocking regularity of killings suggests that nothing has changed substantially under the Biden administration to disrupt the nationwide dynamic of police brutality. Instead, it appears to be getting worse year after year.

Extrajudicial executions are wrong in every way, both morally and judicially. They violate core human rights and supersede the "right to justice" in addition to breaking international laws and conventions. But unfortunately, a culture of impunity for police brutality also exists in the US judicial system. Police officers are given unique legal protections under US law in both criminal and civil proceedings.

Racial discrimination permeates the fundamental fabric of US society and the country's political system. Sadly, racial profiling is still a regular practice in a number of US states. It leads to the hypothesis that white US Americans' perception of black people in the US, a country that preaches democratic values, is nonetheless still aligned with the mindset prevalent in times of slavery. Despite making up only 13 percent of the population, the rate of fatal police shootings of unarmed black people is more than three times as high as it is for white people.

In light of recent developments, Robert Reich, Clinton's secretary of labour, said the socioeconomic structure in the US today is identical to the apartheid system in South Africa.

Numerous studies have found that gun violence has escalated to be a serious social issue that cannot be stopped. The US-based think tank Pew Research Center estimates that a total of 45,222 people died in gun violence-related incidents in 2020, which is 43 percent higher than a decade ago, 25 percent more than five years ago, and 14 percent more than the year before.

The most fundamental human right – the right to life – is threatened by gun violence. It has significant and lasting psychological impacts on individuals, families, and on the larger community. In a 2014 report, the NGO Human Rights Watch noted that minority populations are disproportionately affected by these violations: "Victims are often the most vulnerable members of society: racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants, children, the elderly, the poor, and prisoners."

Despite the US' advanced technology and well-trained police force, more than a thousand people are killed by on-duty police officers each year without due process of law. Now, concerns have been raised regarding US police's role in reducing the rising tide of violence. Human rights organisations accused the US government of failing to do more to halt these atrocities.

The State Department's goal of promoting human rights abroad would undoubtedly be called into question by the bleak picture of the human rights situation there. Since the United States has an undeniable history of police brutality and its police departments have been guilty of countless murders, it would be challenging for Washington to uphold its moral standing to pass judgement on other countries.

Finally, extrajudicial executions by law enforcement agencies aren't normal in any society, whether it be in the developed world or the developing world. Every crime must be tried in fair tribunals, and offenders must receive just punishment. Governments must not be allowed to normalise police brutality. Washington's moral position to criticise other nations on rights issues will gradually erode until it is willing to uphold such rights itself.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Check marks
6 Ticket half
10 Extreme pain
11 Like new pennies
12 Enticed
13 Words to a hitcher
14 "Citizen —"
15 Magic word
16 Binary digit
17 Hot blood
18 Evergreen shrub
19 Collapse
22 Thick slice
23 Blocks
26 Debutante's wear
29 Storage spot
32 Calendar box
33 Role for Keanu
34 Vim
36 ERA or RBI
37 Concur
38 Personal record
39 Exploding stars
40 Bert's buddy
41 Dance unit
42 Intended

DOWN
1 Discuss
2 Big lizards
3 Ithaca school
4 Pants part
5 Barrett of Pink Floyd
6 Oxford, e.g.
7 Slightly drunk
8 Bring together
9 Already
11 With cunning
15 Old hand
17 Security clip-ons
20 Research setting
21 Pester
24 Big Sky setting
25 Give the oath of office to
27 Put down
28 Procrastinator's words
29 Succotash half
30 Silver bar
31 Audacity
35 Take in
36 Royal address
38 Rep.'s rival

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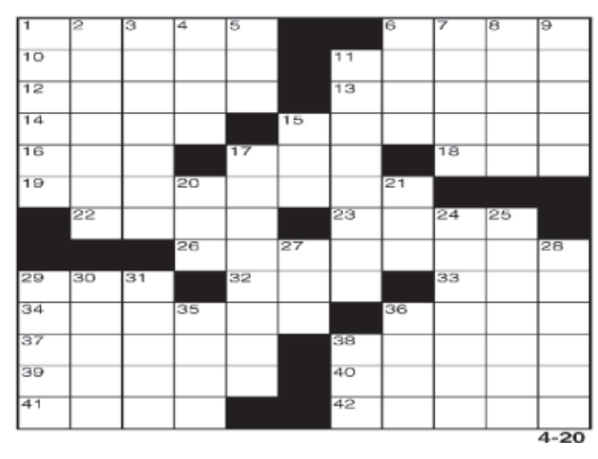

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SUNDAY'S ANSWERS

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