

## Street usage: A call for behaviour change

*Syed Saad Andaleeb*

THE traffic mess seems to be getting worse by the day. Having spent more than two hours getting back home from Mohakhali to Dhanmondi recently, my frustration level knew no bounds. On several occasions I could have picked a row with a bus driver, many pedestrians, several rickshaw pullers, and numerous car drivers. But what sense could I alone instill in them? I felt more helpless than angry.

Every single day Dhaka's streets bare a side of us -- as selfish, rude, pushy, arrogant, and oblivious to the needs of others. How we behave on the streets of Dhaka may, in fact, reflect a big part of who we are as a people! Need our behaviour be so aggressive, so grating, and so devoid of decency? And from where do we learn it?

There are many causes behind the traffic mess that provokes bad behaviour. Some alleviation strategies require long term thinking (improving public transportation, increasing road capacity, creating new development hubs in other parts of the country to redirect labour migration, relocating businesses, implementing zoning laws, etc.). For immediate relief there is one glaring problem: the terrible lack of discipline and the dysfunctional state of "street behaviour." Let me elaborate briefly.

\* Pedestrians cross the streets "anywhere" they feel like. At a busy intersection (like Mohakhali), they emerge from everywhere and just about cross anywhere they please; many even make a dash diagonally across, risking life and limb. They impede flow and contribute substantially to the horrendous chaos.

\* Buses stop wherever they please, as long as they please. They exert their will like lords of the street. Shamelessly and arrogantly they block the traffic and don't even seem to see it as a violation of the law. Who emboldens them so?

\* Lagunas (the new tempos) pick up passengers or drop them off in the middle of a busy street. Many drive on the wrong side just to avoid a U-turn further away. No passenger complains.

\* Beggars throng nearly every intersection, knocking on windows, plaintively making their case. Some more maimed than others are not even in the direct line of sight of a driver and could be easily overrun. Not surprisingly, they have not yet been noticed by any social service agency to try and give them a better life.

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\* Motorbikes are a nightmare, striding footpaths or whizzing in and out of invisible corners or by-lanes. They are veritable catastrophes waiting to happen. Some are so bold, they make a dash at the stop light as soon as the traffic police turns his back, oblivious to oncoming traffic. That there is the wife and child on the back seat is of no concern to them.

\* Rickshaws, from time immemorial, park haphazardly on the streets, narrowing the channels and conduits that slow down the traffic. And when they are on the move, they cruise along all over the street, simply refusing to stay on the side. Many make turns without even looking back; as if it is the sole responsibility of the motor vehicles to watch out for their unpredictable behaviour.

\* Passengers wait for buses right in the middle of the road. Their confidence is in their strength of numbers: who will dare ask them to stand back near the curb? This is another serious problem requiring behavioural change.

\* Cars have a penchant to change lanes more frequently than necessary. The fast and flashy cars always seem to be testing their smooth glide. And making a right turn or a U-turn from the far left is a regular feature with huge potential for traffic hazards: a behaviour that needs correction.

\* Frequently these days flag cars of brazen politicians or high-up government functionaries demonstrate their right to do wrong by driving on the wrong side. They seem to believe that the flag grants them immunity and is an emblem that confers the right to show disrespect to other street users: audacious behaviour indeed!

\* Then there are the lackadaisical strollers, three or four in row, who walk on main streets to signal a message: make me move! All the while the traffic backs up.

\* The footpaths have also probably been auctioned off to the highest bidders to sell their ware that causes pedestrians to crowd the streets.

The fact of the matter is there is a growing aura of undisciplined behaviour everywhere; and with that -- unfortunately -- comes a blatant disrespect and disregard for others.

Why is this so? What image do we project to visitors who take back a street experience that speaks volumes about us? What needs to be done to instill in us proper street behaviour?

It is not that we are incapable of showing discipline. For example, when the army takes over during an emergency everyone seems to fall in line quite effortlessly; somehow discipline appears rather magically. And a retired army man recently mused, with pride, how car drivers within the cantonment area dare not cross the speed limit. Traffic weeks are also periods when drivers of all vehicular traffic show much greater deference to the concept of discipline. Clearly, when a disciplining force is present, there is order everywhere. How can this disciplining force be strategically deployed to keep all “street users” alert and responsive?

Here is an idea to instill new behaviours! Most of the problems are at the intersections where the number of law enforcers is severely limited to apprehend violators. Assuming that it is not possible to increase the number of law enforcers substantially, there is an alternative strategy: massing. This requires a mobile special force, in teams of 15-30 or more, in special and imposing uniforms, who will show up in force, randomly, at various locations, every day, especially at traffic trouble spots. There they will take command. This group must be authorised to impose serious penalties to all violators of the type I have outlined. Their strength is in their numbers to pursue violators vigorously.

Pedestrians could be fined a fee for crossing at the wrong places or be detained in a special enclosure for a given duration. Buses blocking intersections should be imposed a large fine and the licenses of the drivers impounded for a certain period. Similar punitive measures could be imposed on car drivers, with much harsher penalties for the idiot driver driving on the wrong side.

Serious offenders must complete a training or certification programme before they can get back their licenses. For a second similar offence, retrieved from computer databases, a long-term driving ban must be imposed. It is also important to penalise “owners” or “dedicated users” of vehicles appropriately so that they learn to rein-in their drivers.

The list of what to do is much longer but I stop here given the scope of this piece. Moreover, I know not if the will is there among the decision-makers to do the right things. Seemingly, they do not care about the various stakeholders who pay a large price every day -- in time and frustration -- for the wrongful behaviours of abusive street

users. Or perhaps we need a new breed of decision-makers to replace the incompetent ones.

I must end with a call: to beseech social science researchers to examine and understand more deeply the phenomenon of “street behaviour.” The real problem as I see it is that various groups of street users have not been behaviourally trained to use their streets as a resource.

In this regard, behaviour change theories are likely to provide dividends. For example, the principles of operant conditioning -- especially punishment and negative reinforcement -- can play a vital role. Without developing and implementing a comprehensive behaviour change strategy, the lack of respect that is shown daily on the streets

of Dhaka will surely take a turn for the worse.

Understanding the deeper roots of where the malaise begins -- emanating perhaps within the family unit and among those who influence behaviours -- and finding ways of addressing the problems is now an emergency. In this endeavour, good research must drive good policy. Otherwise, the cost to the nation will continue to climb -- in time lost, inefficient energy usage, unabated pollution, adverse health effects, rising medical bills and much more.

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