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Reflections

Road Rage

Andrew Morris

For a long time, I thought it was just me. So, feeling a bit guilty, I told no-one about it. Thought it might fade with time. Then I realised it was here to stay. I'm talking of course of my secret fantasy of driving down Dhaka's streets in a massive industrial digger. Yellow: it has to be yellow. Every time I come across an irritating driver, I simply scoop him up with my steel grey claw and hurl him, car and all, into a bush. Or alternatively roll over his vehicle like a tank and squash it.

Imagine my relief when, in a moment of weakness, I disclosed this to a close friend, an urbane and respected professional, only to have him reveal that he too had a personal fantasy. His involves having football stadium floodlights attached to his car. Each time someone comes up behind him with their headlights on full beam, he turns on his extra lights and dazzles them. He's obviously thought this through in some detail, and adds, with a touch of relish, "I'd actually like to burn their retinas".

Then, at a sophisticated dinner party one evening, I am chatting to an articulate woman, who seems the embodiment of politeness and charm. But in the course of the conversation, when I discuss my intention to write this article, she discloses that she has her own demonic side which only emerges in Dhaka traffic, letting slip that she occasionally dreams of having an automatic machine gun fitted to her car, so that she can simply wipe out those drivers who annoy her, in a hail of bullets.

It seems that Dhaka traffic brings out the worst in us, proving our careful cultivated social demeanour to be a thin veneer. Underneath all of us, the psychopath lurks, brought to the surface by the driving habits of our wonderful metropolis.

In fact I'd wanted to write about this for a long time, but held back for fear it might turn into a rant. And there is nothing more boring than a ranting <>bideshi<> in Bangladesh, (except perhaps for two ranting bideshis). But having heard the views of these friends, both Bangladeshi, I can't keep it in any longer, so let me share it here. Besides, it's far cheaper to do this with you than paying a therapist.

You know, for a time I tried. I really did. I so desperately wanted to be able to discern in the way people drive here a sort of chaotic beauty, a glorious noisy metaphor for a teeming city getting by. Then I realised I was mistaken and in fact it's just horrible.

So who are these drivers who are so annoying? Let's begin with just one example. It's Sunday morning and I'm sitting in a jam at a busy city centre intersection. All around me, a mass of shuffling, honking, belching vehicles, all jostling for position. Across the road, one of a million near-misses this day begins to unfurl. Heavily pregnant, a woman assesses the traffic and steps out onto a speeding city centre highway. It's a mistake. A bus bears down on her. Is it my imagination or does the driver actually accelerate? Either way, he very helpfully gives her a blast on his horn loud enough to wake the sleeping dead over in Azimpur Graveyard. She just about manages to skip free, with an alarmed look on her face. Meanwhile inside her, the curled-up baby presumably utters the Bangla equivalent of "Whoa! What was THAT??" The lesson brings a whole new meaning to 'pre-natal class'. Listen kiddo, you may as well start learning now, as you'll find out soon enough that out here on the streets, might is right, and that just about every driver in the country lives in a little bubble world where all they can see is their own immediate need.

Our bus-driving villain is not alone: there's a whole rogues' gallery of guilty parties. Other bus drivers who stop wherever they want, causing huge tailbacks, car drivers who half-mount the pavement just to get ahead, drive too close to you, change lanes 17 times between two intersections, flash their lights incessantly, overtake in lethal places, stop to discuss a minor bump right where it occurred in the centre of the street, drive much too fast, brake too suddenly, won't let you in for love nor money, rush aggressively towards rickshaws, willfully neglect looking in the rear-view mirror, try to bump humans out of the way, and career wildly out of side-streets onto busy main roads. And don't even get me started on just about all Maruti owners, and of course CNG-drivers who seem to think that squeezing between that rather large truck and that very big bus is a Good Idea, rickshaw wallahs who really believe they can pedal fast enough to avoid your being crushed by that rapidly-approaching juggernaut, and motorcyclists who weave suicidally in and out of lane, their helmets surreally placed on the handlebars.



Mizan after a day on the roads...

Credit: Snigdha Zaman/IKON Photo

Worst of all are the chronic horn-blowers who seem to have overlooked one simple fact: the horn is there to communicate meaning, but in a situation in which everyone uses their horn simultaneously, it loses all significance and becomes just noise. A bit like everyone talking over each other at a meeting (which is funnily enough what happens at a great many meetings I attend, so maybe I shouldn't be surprised).

The vilest offenders are those who blow their horn crazily all the way home - you'll pick out the particular pitch and melody of their horn and hear it as it screams past you. After 45 minutes' driving, you'll see the same car a mere three ahead of you in the jam. All that aggression, all that noise pollution, for nothing.

Once I had a driver who actually wore out the horn. I never knew horns could expire. He was heartbroken. I was overjoyed.

To resolve this issue, my own considered recommendation to the government is immediately to convert all car horns so that they play the words "I am a complete moron" rather than a musical note. Just watch as horn use reduces overnight. And should the government then wish, on the basis of such sage advice, to appoint me Driving Adviser, I have other equally practical solutions too, most of which revolve around removing offending bits of cars. For drivers who can't stay in lane, I'd remove the steering wheel. For the maniacs who put their foot down the moment they see some open space ahead, I'd take out the accelerator. Simple. But for the vast majority of drivers I encounter on the way to work, I'd go the whole hog and confiscate their cars altogether, replacing them with government-issue bikes. Or donkeys. Just think of the environmental benefits.

There are a few shining exceptions of course. My own driver Mizan, who has the calm demeanour of a Zen Master, has proved that driving in a sane and considerate way is in fact possible here, doing bizarre things like actually slowing down when he approaches a living person, staying in lane most of the time, giving way on occasions to other cars, and best of all, never ever using the horn. He clearly deserves the Nobel Peace Prize.

The funny thing is that, deep down, the vast majority of drivers are probably equally peaceable people, loving dads, jolly uncles. So what happens to such essentially good-hearted types when they get behind the wheel? You know they're decent because if you ever make eye contact, and plead with them to let you in, they usually give way, often with a smile. But without such personal pleading, they stare straight ahead and it's every man for himself. Hang on -- maybe there's the problem, right there in the word "man" -- Dhaka has far too few female drivers, and the roads are overloaded with testosterone.

Let's face it, the whole driving culture needs changing. Somewhere along the line the system has broken down. We seem to have lost sight of one fundamental truth: that driving in a city like ours is essentially about collaboration, not competition. For this complex ecosystem to work, we have to learn the simple art of giving way, but we're a long distance from such enlightenment right now. As things stand, every driver is out to score points. Each of us on every daily journey may win five, ten little battles. But ultimately we all lose the war.

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