

In the sixties, thanks to a couple of self-taught musicians, our country took its first steps towards rock and roll music. This genre was completely new to the people at the time and was practised by just a handful, mostly expat communities. After the 1971 Liberation War, however, it took off – bringing us legendary artists and bands such as Azam Khan, Souls, Pilu Momtaz, Happy, Lucky Akhond, among others.

The man I want to talk about today is someone who has played a very important role in this musical uprising. To this day he is considered a living legend in the music community – yet he doesn't sing or play any instrument. Abdur Rafique – known as the first true roadie, the first guitar technician, a musician's doctor, the real life MacGyver – is the oldest music technician of Bangladesh.

television itself was an amazement to them and the people who repaired them were no less of a deal. One can say that was my first and last experience of fame," Rafique states.

Meanwhile, the rock music scene started to make its way into the mainstream as artists like Azam Khan, Ferdous Wahid, Pilu Momtaz emerged. "More and more amplifiers and speakers

"Goutom da of Surasree (a famous musical instrument store) was the first one to suggest I open up a shop to repair musical instruments," says Rafique. "I had my doubts, but after being persuaded by a bunch of musicians, I opened up my little shop and named it Rafique Electronics." The same shop still lies in the corner of science laboratory where Rafique works his magic.

James and Ayub Bachchu, various artists have been to Rafique's guitar den. "I was always a big fan of music and before I even knew it, I was at the centre of the music industry. Talents such as Kamal, Niloy Das, and Labu have walked through that door and it still surprises me how lucky I am to have a cup of tea with these musicians," beams Rafique.

After all these years, Rafique is now

| MUSIC |

STRINGS, KNOBS AND ROCK AND ROLL

APURBA JAHANGIR



Abdur Rafique – the oldest music technician of Bangladesh. PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

In the early sixties, around the same time that Bangladesh Television started its broadcast, Rafique began his life as a technician. "There was an institute in Elephant Road where one could learn the basics of electrical engineering, repairing radios and such. Coming from a lower middle class family, I had to drop out after finishing my intermediate exams to help pay the tuition after I got admitted to this institution," says Rafique.

His first job as a technician led him to become one of the handful of television repairmen in Bangladesh. "At that time television wasn't a household item. There were maybe one or two televisions in a single neighbourhood. I remember when we used to go repair televisions in a not-so-modern neighbourhood; people used to gather around to see us. The

were being imported, and alongside my TV repairing gig, I started to fix speakers," Rafique recalls. One day, Rafique was given an unconventional job of repairing a keyboard. "It was a keyboard of the famous group Zinga Goshty. A very sci-fi looking instrument, if I can say so myself. The keyboard had a tape machine built in, and there was an antenna to grab the mic signal. I took a look at it and within two to three days, I was able to fix it. I thought it was no big deal and took the instrument as a general electronic device, but this particular job opened all kinds of doors for me," he says. At the time, you had to send your keyboard to Japan or India to get it fixed, and so it was a pretty big deal when word got around that Rafique, a Bangladeshi, had fixed a keyboard.

Till the late seventies it was still mostly keyboards and amplifiers for Rafique. "I remember one of the first guitars that came into the shop was owned by the legend Happy Akhond. It was an American Fender Stratocaster. Wonderful rosewood finish. To tell you the truth, I was quite scared to work with this guitar because at that time instruments such as these were very expensive," claims Rafique. "After finishing the job, I felt an unusual confidence within me. Happy was very pleased with the work and he recommended some of his friends to come by the shop with their guitars which somehow led to where I am now."

Since that day, Rafique has been known as the 'guitar doctor'. From primary guitar players to legends such as

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slowly trying to close shop. "The truth is I have been trying to retire, but musician friends are the ones who have been stopping me from doing so. I am not getting any younger and to be honest it's a strain to work hours on end. I have already stopped repairing keyboards as my body doesn't allow it, and who knows, maybe after a year or two, I will finally head towards retirement."

Retirement or not, Abdur Rafique's name will forever be alive within the country's music community. A true rock star, Abdur Rafique, despite being on the sidelines of the industry, has made enormous contributions. If there was a rock and roll Hall of Fame in Bangladesh he would have had a place in it along with the crème de la crème of the music industry. ■

| OPINION |

Being a single working women and a regular commuter in this city, I often have to deal with reserved seats for us. The arguments are hardly ever rational. Instead they always go like this – if women demand gender equality on one hand, why will they get special privileges and reserved seats?

Well, that debate, right now, is hot cakes all over the media following the startling introduction of a new law.

A few days back, the cabinet approved a draft 'Road Transport Act-2017' prepared by the Road Transport and Highways Division, which states that if someone wrongly occupies the assigned seats for women and disabled commuters, he will be jailed for a month or fined Tk. 5,000. The moment the news went viral on Facebook, people turned the tables on us – what would be the law if we, the women, occupy a male seat? The fact that people seem to also think that any and every seat other than the priority places are reserved for men shows how little understanding there is about the issue.

So, needless to say, the law disturbed some already muddy waters.

Since the issue seems to have gotten very confusing, let us take it apart and debunk some fallacies, shall we?

With the expansion of the public mass transit around the world, keeping priority seats has become a marker of how efficient the transport system is. Bangladesh introduced the idea of reserving seats for women, disabled and children in 2008. Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), Metropolitan Transport Authority and the representatives of women's rights movement conducted a collaborative meeting in this regard and came up with a decision that every bus has to reserve nine seats for women, disabled and children, while for minibuses, the reserved number of seats will be six. It was also decided that, these seats should be reserved behind the driver so that they can board easily and don't need to face unwanted push by the male commuters while getting down from the buses.

The fact that the women's rights movement was involved in this shows that it came out of a real need. A 2010 journal of Bangladesh Institute of Planners mentions that around 41 percent of female commuters face sexual harassment and groping while travelling by public bus in Dhaka city. I have had the same experience as well, not too long ago. I was trying to get into a bus at Farmgate during rush hour. I managed to push through a huge crowd of male commuters, but unfortunately couldn't manage a seat. Suddenly I felt a man intentionally rub his elbow from the back. I lost my balance and fell forward. I was uncomfortable, angry and I started yelling at him. But to my surprise, the morally-challenged man gave me a very general excuse that it was a mere - 'hard brake'. It wasn't a brake.

Though a few women took my side in fighting against that person, the male commuters started saying that it was not intentional.

It happened with me – I knew it was intentional, but they didn't believe it. There's actually a word for this – mansplaining – that is, when a man makes assumptions about you without taking into account what you actually think. I was angry and upset and I felt unsafe knowing nobody will take my side should something happen to me.

During rush hours, the drivers are reluctant to pick up women. I have seen so many women almost beg the bus conductors to let them get in after office hours. It happens because the drivers and conductors believe that female passengers are slow to get on the bus and require more room. As a result, women need to wait for a long time in the bus stops and suffer from catcalls and molestation. A report titled 'Safe Cities for Women' by ActionAid Bangladesh also found that in Dhaka, 87 percent regular women commuters face sexual harassment in bus stops.

Since statistically women are more prone to getting

PRIORITY SEATS FOR WOMEN FONDLE-FREE ZONE

NILIMA JAHAN



PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO



sexually violated in public transport, having reserved seats then becomes a matter of their right to safety. This is not about equality – this is about equity.

The new law, however, is making a mockery out of our rights. Cooperation from men cannot be enforced with a stick. A law like this would mean that a male commuter sitting in the priority section, when there are no takers around, can be jailed.

Policy analyst Syed Mahbulul Haque, who is also the secretary of Centre for Laws and Policy Affairs, informs that the draft law will create conflict. "At first we need to work on changing our mentality which can only be changed in a positive way to make a women-friendly environment everywhere with the cooperation of men," he adds.

Advocate Salma Ali, executive director of Bangladesh National Woman Lawyers' Association (BNWLA), also mentions that instead of creating a law that can create more conflict, the transport committee should sit with the bus conductors and drivers and train them to develop a gender-sensitive attitude. "Also, the male commuters should develop an attitude of respecting women and that should be ensured and monitored through family, educational institutions and training in the workplaces," she adds.

The trick, really, lies in changing the patriarchal and entitled mindsets of men. Till that ideal can be achieved, reserved seats can provide women a form of a safe space and enable them to move without constantly worrying about their safety and discomfort. ■