



VISUAL: TEENI AND TUNI

How to not ‘be a woman’ on Bangladeshi public buses



Afia Jahin is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.

AFIA JAHIN

Picture this: In late October of last year, it's the night of the Sitrang cyclone. It has been raining in Dhaka city since morning, and in the evening that turns into a storm. I don't feel relieved like I usually do as my time to leave the office draws nearer. But head out I must. Predictably, my go-to bus for Mirpur is nowhere to be seen that night, just as the other public buses which occupy every square foot of the Farmgate intersection. Miraculously, though, armed with my going-going-gone umbrella, I only have to stand on the roadside for a couple of minutes before a bus appears – a single-decker, accordion-style, red BRTC bus carrying (and this will shock you) all women. It won't take me as close to home as I would like, but that will have to do. I rush to the entrance and hop on.

This was also when I first noticed the frustration of the men on the roadside as they realised that this is one bus they cannot board. So much so that, at a later stop, when myself and the other passengers were habitually stopping men from

mohila uthais na!" ("Don't let women get on!").

Alas, women's side of reality is even less rosy. The five to nine (depending on the bus' size) reserved seats that male passengers seem to covet are really no prize. They are usually placed on top of the engine, making the seats too hot to sit on comfortably. Moreover, the women's seating area is usually more cramped, with leg space being slim to nil. Then there's the proximity to the driver, who is often no more a gentleman than the male passengers whose gaze (and touch) the reserved seats are supposed to protect women from.

And while I openly admit that women passengers are really not as good at standing on a moving and swerving bus as their male counterparts, one really cannot expect them to be, either. Childhood may be a different story, but starting from puberty, girls are discouraged from being active or agile. Beyond their studies, most are taught to shelter themselves from the male-

women-only buses, too, has not met fruition. Now, the four buses only offer two trips, operating on one single route.

It is unfortunate that what really stands between women and affordable transportation is a lack of profitability. Still, nowadays, the ratio between male and female passengers on any given bus is much closer to being equal than what it used to be even a decade ago. More students and working women now use public transport within the capital, given the mode's affordability.

But the exclusionary "rules" imposed by transport companies – coupled with the deficient supply of public buses themselves – mean that many women, especially during the rush hours, are unable to board a bus even if they want to, and might ultimately decide to use a different, more expensive mode of transport. For them, the rare sighting of a women-only bus is always a welcome blessing. When I boarded that all-women BRTC bus in October, for instance, I felt relieved in equal parts because I had found a ride home during a storm and because I wasn't having to be alert about men standing too close to me and touching me inappropriately. More importantly, I felt that I was occupying my place on a city bus as a dignified and deserving citizen, not as a social pariah who inconvenienced men simply by existing.

As such, a feasible solution might be for our government to subsidise the operation of women-only buses to make up for the alleged low occupancy rate of non-peak hours. This would also bring the country closer to achieving a number of sustainable development goals (SDGs) by 2030, such as Goal 5 (Gender Equality), Goal 10 (Reduce Inequalities), and Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities).

All things said and done, travelling on public buses is one experience I have never been able to romanticise. It is obvious that women and their mobility are something our society actively opposes (and will continue to oppose for a long time), and that public transport is where this is best exemplified.

But beyond the technicalities of laws, regulations, and The System, my suggestion to women would be to simply take up space. If you can walk, do so briskly and surely, no matter how many men are crowding the footpath that is also rightfully yours. When a man is seated next to you on the bus, don't cower into the corner. Instead, claim your half of the seat (that you are paying for) physically and, if needed, verbally. And when you see a man occupying a seat reserved for you by law, demand that he leaves it. Be coarse when needed. Plant your feet firmly onto the bus floor and try to keep steady against the impractical system given to you. Even having a patriarchal mob practically pressed against you, stand tall and occupy *your* square foot or so of space.

After all, in the words of womanist writer and activist Audre Lorde, survival "is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled... to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish."

Shabbir Ahmed Shuvo: An inspiration for future (and all) generations



Dr Abdullah Shibli is an economist and works for Change Healthcare, Inc., an information technology company. He also serves as senior research fellow at the US based International Sustainable Development Institute (ISDI).

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

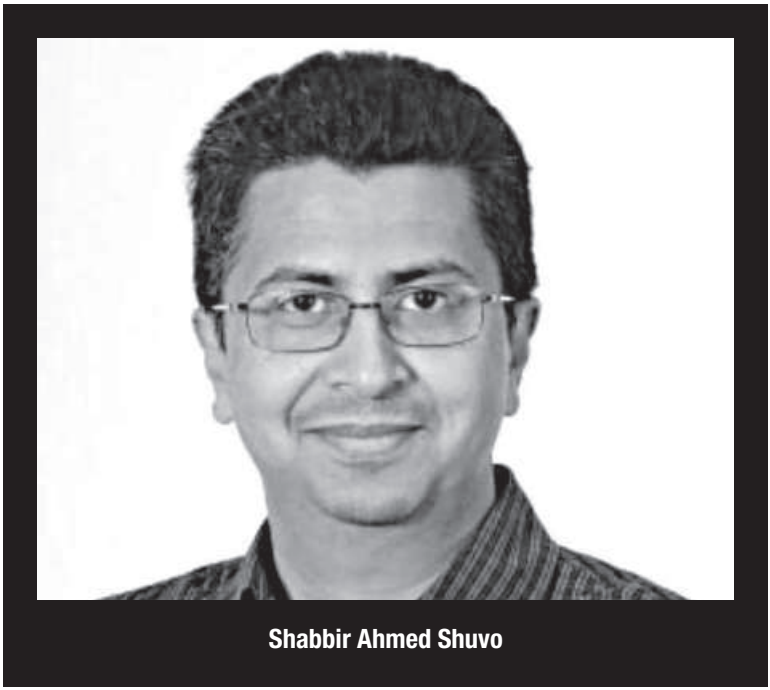
Shabbir Ahmed Shuvo, a Bangladeshi scholar of international repute, has left his legacy for many generations to come. His untimely death three years ago created a void in the emerging field of stochastic optimisation theory, where Shuvo established his indelible mark within a very short span, but an incredibly frenetic life filled with unbounded achievements.

Shabbir Ahmed was the Anderson-Interface Chair and Professor in the H Milton Stewart School of Industrial and Systems Engineering (ISyE) at Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, USA, when he passed away on June 19, 2019, after a short bout with cancer. He truly was a polymath, and his contributions to stochastic optimisation theory, methodology, algorithms, and their application furthered our knowledge and advancement in the field of energy, logistics and supply chain, chemical engineering, power system design and operations, and healthcare.

Shuvo was an alumnus of Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), where he became a lecturer in the Department of Engineering and Technology after he graduated in 1993. Soon after that, he enrolled in the graduate programme of the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign where he received his MS and PhD in 1997 and 2000, respectively, in Industrial Engineering with a concentration in Operations Research. Accolades

and recognition for his pioneering work in his field of expertise rapidly followed.

As a lifelong student of the ever-evolving discipline of decision-making under uncertainty, I can appreciate the challenges and scholarship that Shuvo faced when he started his career at Georgia Tech. Decision-making in every business sector – from energy distribution, transportation, and production planning, to finance, engineering design, and health



Shabbir Ahmed Shuvo

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care – involves decisions to be made in the presence of uncertainty. Shuvo's life is an example of his determination to continuously move forward and leave his imprint on a multitude of scholarly areas.

During his PhD studies, Shuvo conducted research work on multi-stage stochastic optimisation at the prestigious IBM's TJ Watson Research Center leading to his appointment as an assistant professor in the School of Industrial and Systems Engineering at Georgia Tech.

Shuvo achieved global recognition for his ground-breaking ideas from the earliest days of his academic career. He received the INFORMS Dantzig Dissertation Award (First Prize) in 2000. INFORMS is the leading international association for professionals in operations research, analytics, management science, economics, behavioural science, statistics, artificial intelligence, data science, applied mathematics, and other relevant fields. He subsequently received the CAREER Award from the National Science Foundation in 2002; the IBM Faculty Award in both 2002 and 2005; the 2017 INFORMS Computing Society Prize; and the 2018 Farkas Prize from the INFORMS Optimization Society for outstanding contributions to the field of optimisation. In 2014, he was appointed both as an ISyE Stewart Faculty Fellow and a College of Engineering Dean's Professor. He was a Senior Member of the Institute of

Nemhauser added.

"Shabbir was a superb scientist and person, he had many things to contribute to the world, and he left us way too early. Words cannot express the sadness I feel," said Dr Dimitris Bertsimas, Boeing Leaders for Global Operations Professor, MIT Operations Research Center.

To honour Dr Ahmed's legacy, Georgia Tech has established a graduate fellowship in his name to support PhD students to inspire the next generations of leaders in the area of optimisation. His cohort at BUET also launched a scholarship programme in his memory. "Stand by the Humanity – BUET 87 Foundation", a US-based non-profit organisation, launched the "Optimization Under Uncertainty" scholarship programme for students of BUET. The mission is to carry on Dr Shabbir Ahmed's vision and commitment to excellence, and to inspire innovative research and worthy achievements. It will motivate students of acumen to pursue higher studies and propel young minds in Bangladesh to embark on their journey ahead with indomitable spirit and fierce efforts. His family, friends, and admirers hope that the scholarship will enable the recipients to make their imprint in the global paradigm of "Unbounded Achievements", which was Shuvo's life-long guiding principle.

getting on, one man screwed up his face into a half-leer, half-frown and demanded, "Ken? Apnera ki amader bus e utthen na?" ("Why? Do you not use our buses?") Mon dieu, the brother had put me in my place!

Self-soothing sarcasm aside, where is a Bangladeshi woman to go, then, if she is supposedly undeserving even of the place specifically reserved for her?

From what I have observed within the capital at least, most men seem to harbour a negative attitude towards women receiving "special treatment" on public transportation. It starts, of course, with some men acting as if buses having "reserved seats" for women is somehow the same as depriving the former of their human rights. More recently, some buses have also been refusing to let women on if there are no seats available and if they will have to stand during the journey. Much kudos for such performative chivalry, I say!

If only this sentiment was consistent and men didn't loudly express their discontent at women sitting on regular, non-reserved seats. Men's complaints even take them to the point of demanding, "Ai

dominated outside world. As such, even in a country that is half theirs by law, girls and young women grow up practising being as anonymous as possible, so as to avoid commonplace sexual harassment or violence.

So, how can women travel on public transport without feeling like sub humans?

The most realistic and provenly effective solution is women-only buses. However, they are a sight rarer than a bi-yearly blood moon. The first women-only buses were introduced in the capital in 2010 by the Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation (BRTC). Rangs Motors followed along with their own Dolonchapa buses in 2018. And while the number of these buses plying our roads was never able to meet commuter demands adequately, the situation worsened during the pandemic recovery period.

According to a report by *The Business Standard* from October 2022, of the original 22 women-only buses from the BRTC, 18 have been phased out for various reasons over the years. The four that remain only operate on four routes. Dolonchapa's plan of expanding from four to 60

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

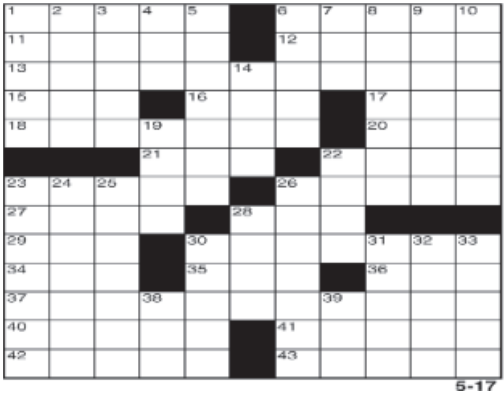
ACROSS

- 1 "The Lion King" hero
- 6 Diamond covers
- 11 Musical chord
- 12 Love, to Luigi
- 13 Long Island resort town
- 15 Lawyer: Abbr.
- 16 Ram's mate
- 17 Verb for you
- 18 Craves
- 20 Luggage ID
- 21 Nap site
- 22 Greek cheese
- 23 Fathers
- 26 Bike part
- 27 Raging's Grand-
- 28 Sheep call
- 29 Roulette bet
- 30 Fast fish
- 34 Gorilla or

- gibbon
- 35 Oscar winner
- Mahershala
- 36 Badminton need
- 37 Area of central London
- 40 Caesar's language
- 41 Honking birds
- 42 Halts
- 43 Threaded fastener
- DOWN
- 1 Place
- 2 Steaming
- 3 View obscurers
- 4 Sluggish's need
- 5 Sticks
- 6 Domesticates
- 7 Band blaster
- 8 Took turns
- 9 In fair shares

- 10 West African nation
- 14 Really impressed
- 19 Alpine goat
- 22 Accomplishment
- 23 Stretches out
- 24 Words of emphasis
- 25 Reaches by bike
- 26 Kitchen waste
- 28 Island east of Java
- 30 Denounces strongly
- 31 Door sign
- 32 Baseball's Pee Wee
- 33 Scatter
- 38 Pointer
- 39 Brief time

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MONDAY'S ANSWERS

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