

Heart of the Gallery

By Ekram Kabir

FOR Shameem Subrana, her journey started within her family outposts. Arranging art pageants was a collective joy for each member of her family. Then encouraged by the same set of people, her initiatives expanded; she started to host house shows at their Dharmodi residence. Acclamation poured in from the Charukala teachers, her contemporaries, friends and well-wishers. She decided to set up an art gallery. It was, after a series of interpretive discussions, named "Gallery 21". After two years' consistent hard work and commitment, her mind never weary for a moment, trekking some unfamiliar tracks, her family stretched: almost the entire artist community got attached to the harmony of her kinship. But Subrana, when she began, did not know she would succeed in making so much noise among the artists, especially painters, as well as the connoisseurs of art. She was quite content, for she was making the people of Bangladesh's cultural arena happy a considerable extent.

Since the time Subrana initiated her gallery on October 31 '97, with each passing week, with each passing month it was hectic but not without satisfaction. Looking back to her memory lane, two years, she finds significance in what she has accomplished. And rightly so, since the day at Charukala Institute, this was one of the moments she wanted to go through in her professional life as an artist.

"My early intention about the Gallery was to create a site, a proper place, for the Bangladesh artists to get their art works familiarised through exhibitions. Later, when I received friendly responses from all our artists, my concept grew and shifted. In phases, I came to understand that, like everything, art

and craft in Bangladesh needed an earnest promotion, it needed right kind of patronisation," said a matured Subrana, the first female art-gallery owner in the country.

Indeed, with every single display at her Gallery, Subrana matured. So did her Gallery. Now "Gallery 21" celebrates the trail of twenty-six occasions out of which seventeen were solo performances and four group displays. Seminars and related functions, and theatrical appearances have also adorned the history of this show-room. One of the most notable time was possibly the painters' help for the affected during the last deluge by selling their on-the-spot sketches as well as water colours. "What made us delighted during this particular event is the participation of school children; they came in crowds and got their portraits done with the little pocket money they saved," says Subrana. Another exhibition that enthralled everyone in September this year was Yasmeen Ara Lina's solo performance. Like everybody else, the demise of Sufia Kamal and Professor Abdur Razzak also saddened Subrana. These two towering figures made their distinguished presence at an exhibition last year.

Coming back to her prime purpose, Subrana can now feel gratified that she could instill ambition in young, very young, painters of the country. "In fact, I felt entranced by the fact that there are some young friends of mine who have benefited from their displays at this gallery," says the smiling proprietor.

She has some good reasons to feel so. And an important suggestion to her is, she should not hesitate to feel satisfied. Because, those who saw the crowd at the inauguration in October '97 could feel a kind of extended relief among the

fresh talents. These people, always looked forward to exhibit their works, were suddenly brimming with enthusiasm at the new expo-centre in the capital.

Dhaka, however, has witnessed the rise of a couple of art galleries over the years, but most of these have either closed down or are giving less importance to the interests of artists. So far, artists in Bangladesh are dependent, to a great extent, on foreign cultural centres while getting a chance to exhibit their labour. They go through the drudgery of waiting in a long queue. Setting up some art galleries and running them with correct kind of effort would redeem their ows in many ways. The number of onlookers, and of course buyers, would certainly increase and people who usually avoid going to exotic cultural centres would start frequenting places like these.

Says Subrana: "I can tell you from the little experience I gained through twenty-six occasions that if galleries in Bangladesh are run with compassion, then our cultural caucus would see immense progress. Culture of a country develops when its people become inclined to knowledge. Yes, knowledge is very important, because it enlightens; but enlightenment in the real sense of the term is not to shrug a careless shoulder to anything; you have see and judge everything you come across and then, choose what is best for you."

She, however, had a pledge when she first thought of setting up the gallery; a pledge to extend support to Bangladesh's young painters, sculptors, etc. A close communication with this bunch has taught her that these people have immense talent, and she believes that they would definitely project the country to an internationally respectable position.

"So far, I have tried to stick to my promise as far as the young artists are concerned; they are getting preference here. We certainly have a lot to learn from our celebrities, and of course, their exhibitions would get due esteem; we want them to teach us more about art and the art market.

Speaking about art market Subrana says, "The emphasis must not be to create unnecessary demand. And all of

us concerned should be vigilant about the fact that any kind of pressure does not dishearten and unnerve buyers who are basically our patrons. Contrarily, when art is meant for heart's sake, we don't need to create a market for it. Galleries probably are the places from where a person, even an ignorant one, can learn a lot about paintings etc., more than reading books. That's the magic of looking at a beautiful piece of art."

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Worth remembering: Poet Sufia Kamal and Professor Razzak along with Professor Khan Sarwar Murshid at the Gallery 21 in February this year.

Having achieved considerable amount of success in just two years — although 'carrying on' for that long in this part of the world is a Herculean task — she now has to plan a strategy to go forward; a plan that matches her Gallery's nomenclature. She realises that she needs to play a more important role in the next century, when lot of things likely to experience a sea-change. A computer network and a web site of the gallery, already on cards, Subrana has some more schemes mapped out in her attempt to draw world attention to Bangladesh's art, the country's cultural heritage.

"Why can't we do make our art globally popular? We can also be eulogised by international critics. Well, this demands commitment by those who are working for it. Private owners are doing their part, which, I hope, will intensify in the coming time, but at the same time, the government-run galleries must take the lead. Like, when I was a student, I always wished Zainul Gallery at the Charukala to thrive with art and artists. And thankfully, these days the gallery named after Shilpacharya seems quite busy with displays of artists working with various media," explains an optimistic Subrana.

Coming this far with a pace more than usual, says an indebted Subrana, would not have been a reality without support of her closest folks. At this juncture, with many more miles to go, she considers herself blessed by many. Her mother-in-law, among them, has been exceedingly compassionate by providing a large part of her house to furnish the Gallery. In fact, encouragement and cheers from everyone held Subrana industrious, even in her whirly family chores. Family, no doubt, has been at the heart of "Gallery 21".

Ekram Kabir is a Daily Star staffer

reflections

Fallacies, Bangladeshi Style

by Hasina Habib

ON 15.03.98 The Daily Star printed an extract from a translation of Aroj Ali's Matubbar's Bangla book, "The Quest For Truth" (translation). The introduction above the extract, which included a quotation from Syed Monzorul Islam, refers to Mr Matubbar as "the Socrates of Bangladesh". The extract, itself quite intriguing, lead me to buy the book. More high profile people inside the book including Principal Sayedur Rahman, Professor Sirajul Islam Chowdhury, Ahmed Sharif and Hasnat Abdul Hai, all appear on the flyleaf of the cover applauding Mr Matubbar's ability to question the way Islam accounts for the world around us. Minor references are made to other religions. I read the book several times and have come to the conclusion that Mr Matubbar has not dealt with any major issue either competently or thoroughly.

The writings of the little educated philosopher are, indubitably, stamped with intelligence. His tremendous eagerness to know — loosely speaking — the Unknown makes for an exciting writing style. However, I was deeply disturbed by the ignorance and fallacies about religion in his essays. Aroj Ali belittles religion and attacks it with arguments that show little knowledge of actual religious teachings as found in the holy texts. His writings must have been based on research, yet Aroj Ali did not read the Quran. Had he read it, it would have been impossible to write certain things that he has. This ignorance of the holy texts has been supported and complimented by the so-called intellectuals of our country. The reason for this could be that Aroj Ali's attitude and reasoning expresses the way they feel. One often reads about such people in print, how they joke about things they've overheard about Islam and the Quran. The ignorance of such individuals regarding religious matters hurts and embarrasses educated scholars of religion and theology. It is beyond comprehension why the intellectuals of this country persist in maintaining an attitude that implies the Quran (often the whole concept of religion) is for stupid, illiterate people. These individuals need to read the Quran before criticising what the 'stupid, illiterate' people follow, and should find out what it is that they are abusing and rejecting. Since they are in a position to influence many people it is a shame that they do not assess the exactitude of their information before forming their opinions. My attempt here is to point out the incorrectness of some of the arguments Aroj Ali raises with regard to Islam.

In Aroj Ali's "Aroj Ali Matubbar's Rochna Shomogro, Volume 1" (page 111) he writes,

"... the sun and the moon all the celestial bodies move swiftly, each in its respective orbit. (Quran XXI: 33)

The sun must not catch up the moon, nor does the night outstrip the day. Each one is travelling in an orbit with its own motion. (Quran XXXVI: 40)

The sun runs its course to a 'settled place'. This is the decree of the Almighty, the full of knowledge. (Quran XXVI: 38)

Scientist Maurice Bucaille writes in his book "The Bible, the Quran and Science" (page 166).

"Having called modern concepts on the formation of the universe to mind, reference was made to the evolution that took place, starting with primary nebula through to the formation of galaxies, stars and (for the solar system) the appearance of planets beginning with the Sun at a certain stage of its evolution. Modern data lead us to believe that in the solar system, and more generally in the universe itself, this evolution is still continuing.

How can anybody who is aware of these ideas fail to make a comparison with certain statements found in the Quran in which the manifestations of divine Omnipotence are referred to.

The Quran reminds us several times that: "(God) subjected the sun and the moon; each one runs its course to an appointed term."

This sentence is to be found in sura 13, verse 2; sura 31, verse 29; sura 35, verse 12 and sura 39, verse 5.

In addition to this, the idea of a settled place is associated with the concept of a destination place in sura 36, verse 38: "The Sun runs its course to a settled place. This is the decree of the All Mighty, the Full of Knowledge."

"Settled place" is the translation of the word *mustaqarr* and there can be no doubt that the idea of an exact place is

attached to it.

How do these statements fare when compared with data established by modern science?

The Quran gives an end to the Sun for its evolution and a destination place. It also provides the Moon with a settled place. To understand the possible meanings of these statements, we must remember what modern knowledge has to say about the evolution of the stars in general and the Sun in particular, and (by extension) the celestial bodies that automatically followed its movement through space, among them the Moon.

The Sun is a star that is roughly 4.2 billion years old, according to experts in astrophysics. It is possible to distinguish a stage in its evolution, as one can for all the stars. At present, the Sun is at an early stage, characterized by the transformation of hydrogen atoms into helium atoms. Theoretically, this present stage should last another 5.5 billion years according to calculations that allow a total of 10 billion years for the duration of the primary stage in a star of this kind. It has already been shown, in the case of these other stars, that this stage gives way to a second period characterised by the completion of the transformation of hydrogen into helium, with the resulting expansion of its external layers and the cooling of the Sun.

In the final stage, its light is greatly diminished and density considerably increased; this is to be observed in the type of star known as a 'white dwarf'.

The above dates are only of interest in as far as they give a rough estimate of the time factor involved, what is worth remembering and is really the main point of the above, is the notion of an evolution. Modern data allow us to predict that, in a few billion years, the conditions prevailing in the solar system will not be the same as they are today. Like other stars whose transformations have been recorded until they reached their final stage, it is possible to predict an end to the Sun.

The second verse quoted above (sura 36, verse 38) referred to the Sun running its course towards a place of its own.

Modern astronomy has been able to locate it exactly and has even given it a name, the Solar Apex: the solar system is indeed evolving in space towards a point situated in the Constellation of Hercules (*alpha lyrae*) whose exact location is firmly established; it is moving a speed already ascertained at something in the region of 12 miles per second.

All these astronomical data deserve to be mentioned in relation to the two verses from the Quran, since it is possible to state that they appear to agree perfectly with modern scientific data.

Elsewhere, Aroj writes about the sky:

"Generally 'sky' indicates empty space. But some religious authorities say that there are seven skies. How can this be?

How can space be quantified in numbers? Those who demarcate the sky with numbers — do they mean 'planets' by the word 'sky'? He goes on to write that the idea of the sky being made up of different layers (as described in religious texts) seems unbelievable and figments of imagination. Aroj Ali's thought totally astounded me. Consider the mountain-top air that is oxygen depleted — something that should have given Aroj a clue as to how the sky can be divided. The concept of air density alone should have prevented Aroj from proposing that religion (in particular, Islam) is just a lot of hocus-pocus. To counter his argument, below I have quoted from the book "Scientific Indications In The Holy Quran". As the title indicates, this remarkable book uses science to assess and collaborate what the Quran says about the physical, material world. The book is a joint effort of nine dedicated scientists and writers; this is only a part of what they wrote on the heavens.

Then he directed himself to heaven and gave order and perfection to the seven heavens: in this part of the verse it is stated that Allah directed His attention to the creation of the sky. Previously it was supposed that the sky is a solid dome hung over the earth and in this dome are fixed the sun, moon, stars, planets and other celestial bodies. But this early picture of the solid dome has not been scientifically substantiated. The celestial bodies are not fixed in any dome but are whirling in space (21: 33 : 36: 40). So creation of the sky here means creation of the celestial sphere with all the celestial bodies contained in it, i.e. the universe.

Astronomers have found it convenient to divide space into seven encompassing regions. These are:

First region contains the sun and terrestrial planets, Mercury, Venus and Earth. The radius of this spherical region is 8 light minutes.

Second region contains the solar system, including the outer planets, Mars, Jupiter, Asteroids, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune and Pluto. The radius of this spherical region is 5 light hours.

Third region contains some 20 near neighbours of the sun. The radius of this spherical region is 20 light years.

Fourth region contains the Milky Way galaxy. Previously it was thought to be the entire universe. But about 100 million such galaxies have been detected. Our Milky Way galaxy is a gravitationally bound rotating congregation of about 100 billion stars. The radius of this spherical region is 50,000 light years.

Fifth region contains some 20 loosely bound cluster of neighbouring galaxies. This is known as local group

of galaxies. The radius of this spherical region is 2 million light years.

Sixth region contains cluster of local group of galaxies. This is known as the local super-cluster. It is the largest of celestial formations. Enormous volumes of relative of relatively empty space have been found between super-clusters. The radius of this spherical region is 75 million light years.

Seventh region is the limit of the known universe. It contains all super-clusters of galaxies. It also contains quasars, the most curious of all the celestial bodies, spread out in all directions at great distances detected upto 20 billion light years and beyond.

Here I would like to add an interesting story about the precision of the Quran. In "The Bible, The Quran and Science" Maurice Bucaille tries to explain the story of the eleven planets (as written in Sura Yusuf) he suggests that Prophet Yusuf (PBUH) could have been imagining two extra planets. The Bengali translator Akhtarul Alam wrote a footnote for this and offered his own opinion on the discrepancy between the prophet's count of the planets (11) and the number of planets modern science steadfastly maintained (9). He wrote that Prophet Yusuf (PBUH) was not imagining those two extra planets — it is not feasible that the Quran would be mistaken in such an important detail. He reasoned thus: the Quran has always been proven to be scientifically accurate, if it stated that there are 2 more planets out there then there are 2 more planets to be discovered by modern science. In a more recent edition the translator rewrote this footnote. This time he wrote about the two planets, Vulcan and Poseidon, that had been discovered in the time in-between the editions of the book. His claim had been justified — there is no such thing as a mistake in the Quran. What appears to be a mistake is actually the result of our limited understanding of the world.

There are many modern scientific discoveries that have been written about in the Quran ages and ages ago. Do the disbelievers think that these are mere coincidences? If their convictions do not concur with the facts of the Quran they are quick to ridicule the holy text. More than anything else what they need is the capacity to admit they are fallible and that there may be things in this universe which are beyond their comprehension.

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