Understanding Vastness

AMITAVA KAR

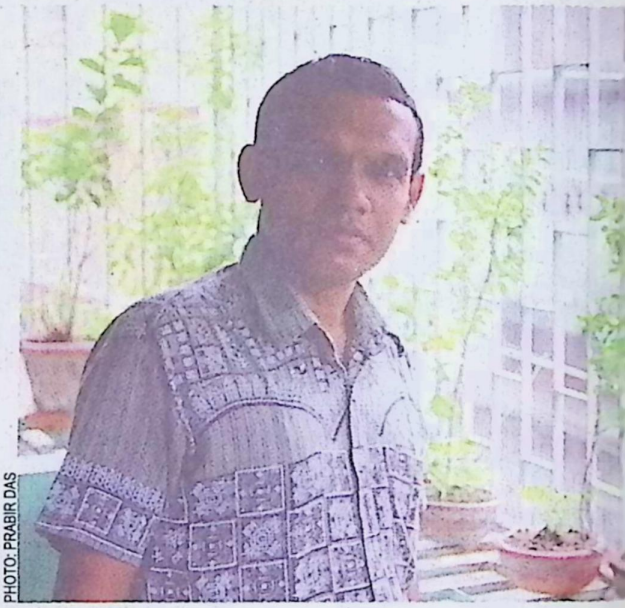


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Asif believes that people are instinctively curious to know about their place in the world and the universe.

Admit it. You have no idea about the size of the solar system. That's okay. No one else does either. Even knowing the numbers doesn't help much. If I tell you the Earth is about 8,000 miles in diameter and 93,000,000 miles from the Sun, does that give you any sense of the distances involved? No, because the numbers are too big. For most of us, things that are so far removed from our daily experience — like fluid mechanics, rocket science and Paris Hilton — are inherently hard to understand. "But not if you can relate them to events in your daily life," says Asif, science communicator and author of several books on science. "If I tell you that the life span of a star is 15 to 20 billion years, it will mean nothing to you. But if I tell you that in terms of years lived, you are to the stars what a butterfly is to you, it would make much more sense to you."

Asif has a gift for putting the fizz in physics and taking the sigh out of science.

He takes complex matters of science such as the Theory of Relativity, Origin of Life or Evolution and presents the audience with a simpler but accurate version.

If I ask you, by the standards of traditional culture, thought highly educated, to describe the Second Law of Thermodynamics, chances are your response will be negative. Yet I am asking something which is the scientific equivalent of: Have you read a work of Shakespeare's?" It is indefensible that someone is considered ignorant for not having read Shakespeare, and yet the same charge does not apply when it comes to fundamental scientific concepts, like the second law of thermodynamics.

Asif says, "It is because science education is inadequate and neglected in our country. Occasionally we see programmes where students are photographed wearing T-shirts and making a V sign and told by a distinguished guest to devote themselves to learning science. It means nothing. Because there is no discussion involved."

In his school days in Narayanganj, he loved going to the riverside for a walk. A lot of people came to him to listen to him talk about science. One day someone suggested that he started charging a small fee. So on May 18 1992 he gave a talk on *Logical Deficiency of Euclidian Geometry*. In the audience sat two people--a student of class seven and a candidate for the HSC exam---each of whom paid Tk 25 each. So what is the deficiency of Euclidian Geometry? "In Euclidian geometry, it is possible to prove that all triangles are equilateral angles. But that's not possible in reality," explains Asif.

That was the beginning. Since then he has emerged as a popular communicator of science who can charge as much as Tk. 10,000 for a lecture. He has also written several books namely *Euclid and Elements*, *Gonit Ebong Biggan-i Mohajagotik Bhasha* (Mathematics and Science: The Universal Language), *Carl Sagan—Ek Mohajagotik Pothik* (Carl Sagan: A Cosmic Traveller), *Bhobishyote Jawa Jabe, Jabe Na Pechone Phera* (You can Go To Future But Cannot Come Back), *Mohabishsho O Nokkhotrer Jonmo Mrityu* (The Universe and the Lives of Stars), *Mohajagotik Aloy Fire Dekha* (The Cosmic Light).

So far he has given 258 lectures on topics as varied as *Cosmic Calendar, Geological Timescale, Enigma of Time, Lives of Stars, Urbanisation and the Story of Destruction, Origin of Life and Evolution* in major venues all over the country.