

Fashion talk with Bibi Russell



We at Lifestyle were delighted to have the opportunity to speak to the inspirational fashion guru! Over sips of tea, Bibi talked about her life, her dream for this country and the fashion scene of Bangladesh.

EVEN THOUGH EVERYONE KNOWS YOU, TELL US A LITTLE ABOUT YOURSELF.

I am Bibi and I work with the crafts people. My main aim is to save and revive the crafts people so that they can come out of poverty and that the next generation of crafts people can have good health and education. Everything I do is fashion for development.

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO GET INTO FASHION AT SUCH A YOUNG AGE?

My childhood was in Bangladesh. When you grow up in a country like this and you have your eyes and ears open, there is everything to inspire you. I was born in Chittagong and I grew up in old Dhaka and at that time old Dhaka was fantastic. In our house we had everyone, from politicians to musicians to artists. I was inspired by this place and its people.

YOU WERE A RENOWNED INTERNATIONAL FASHION MODEL BUT IN 1994 YOU LEFT ALL THAT BEHIND AND RETURNED TO BANGLADESH TO PURSUE A CAREER IN DESIGN.

WHAT LED TO THAT MOVE?
Everyone has a dream. Abul Kalam famously said that people not only dream during the night but also in the daytime. Back then our house was open to everyone. People used to come and sell us fruits and

vegetables. I used to sit with them and ask them "Who made this beautiful 'lungi' or 'sari' that you are wearing?" They said "Oh our neighbour."

So I used to ask my parents what the point was of having so many colour pencils when they were better at colour combinations." I think I was always destined to come back here and to support and help the real artists and crafts people. That is what I did and that is now, my dream.

TELL US ABOUT BIBI PRODUCTIONS.

Bibi Production is focused on Fashion For Development. I wanted Bibi Productions to be different from other companies. I started to visit different places and parts of Bangladesh to find people who had the same love for this kind of work as I did. Of course, I was going to pay and Bibi Productions is fully funded by me with whatever I earned throughout my life. But, I am just the founder. The other people all have designations and are an integral part of Bibi Productions.

I realised that the people who work here have to feel like this is theirs. None of the people who work here are relatives or family members but they are a lot more than that. Bibi Productions will always belong to the people.

DO YOU THINK ENOUGH OF OUR TEXTILES REACH THE INTERNATIONAL MARKET TODAY?

It could have been more if there was more support from corporate sectors and other people, but I can tell you that my collection always does well internationally and is usually sold out. I think we need to promote our textiles positively.

I work in India and am a state guest to uplift khadi in India but the difference is that they promote their things extremely well. I think you need to have more people and experts in the field who will work hard to promote these textiles a lot more in the international market.

RECENTLY YOU WERE AWARDED THE "BEGUM ROKEYA PADAK" HOW DOES IT FEEL TO RECEIVE SUCH AN AWARD?

Receiving such an award honestly gave me all of my strength back. My father is from Rangpur and Begum Rokeya is from North Bengal. So I come from there and ever since I was a child, my parents had always told me what she had done for education at that time. I was very inspired by Begum Rokeya and Begum Sufia Kamal. I am absolutely thrilled. I received dozens of awards over the years but nothing compares to the Begum Rokeya Padak and my award from Bangla Academy.

WHAT DO YOU THINK OF ECO-FASHION?

Eco fashion is very important. In today's world everybody wants to keep it eco-friendly, but it shouldn't be a gimmick. It should be the real thing.

WHERE DO YOU THINK BANGLADESH FASHION HAS IMPROVED OR FAILED?

I read the newspapers. We are still not in the first step of the ladder. Personally, I think that designers must step up. The young generation is the future. So you must understand and care about what is ours and fight to preserve it and give it more life.

Today it is your turn to take it forward. The future of Bangladesh is there and it has a lot of potential, but people need to step up. I think through fashion you can make significant social and economic development.

IS THERE A MESSAGE AT THE HEART OF YOUR COLLECTIONS?

I am a spokesperson and my message is always to support the crafts people.

ARE YOU WORKING ON ANY PROJECTS IN DHAKA RIGHT NOW?

No matter where I am working, Bangladesh is always on my radar. Whatever I do here, I do it on my own. If I think of producing 10 of something here, I end up producing two. And if I think of producing 10 of something elsewhere, I have the financial means to produce 30. I am working nonstop in Bangladesh but it is not as flexible as it is for me outside. But I am still trying and working on my dream, always.

IS THERE SOMETHING YOU'D LIKE TO TELL THE READERS WHO MIGHT BE INTERESTED IN FASHION DESIGN?

Fashion is a culture; a necessity. Stay true to who you are and represent your country and its people as best as you can. Finally, don't forget to reach for your dreams!

By Naveed Naushad

Photo: LS Archive/ Sazzad Ibne Sayed



Bibi Russell is a Bangladeshi fashion designer and former international model. She is a global icon and a spokesperson for the crafts people of Bangladesh. A Fellow of Bangla Academy she has received numerous awards over the years, including the Cross of Officer of the Order of Queen Isabella and more recently, the Begum Rokeya Padak. Under the slogan - Fashion For Development - she set up Bibi Productions in 1995 to save the crafts people and help revive their dreams.