

STAR PEOPLE

# ISLAM TODAY:

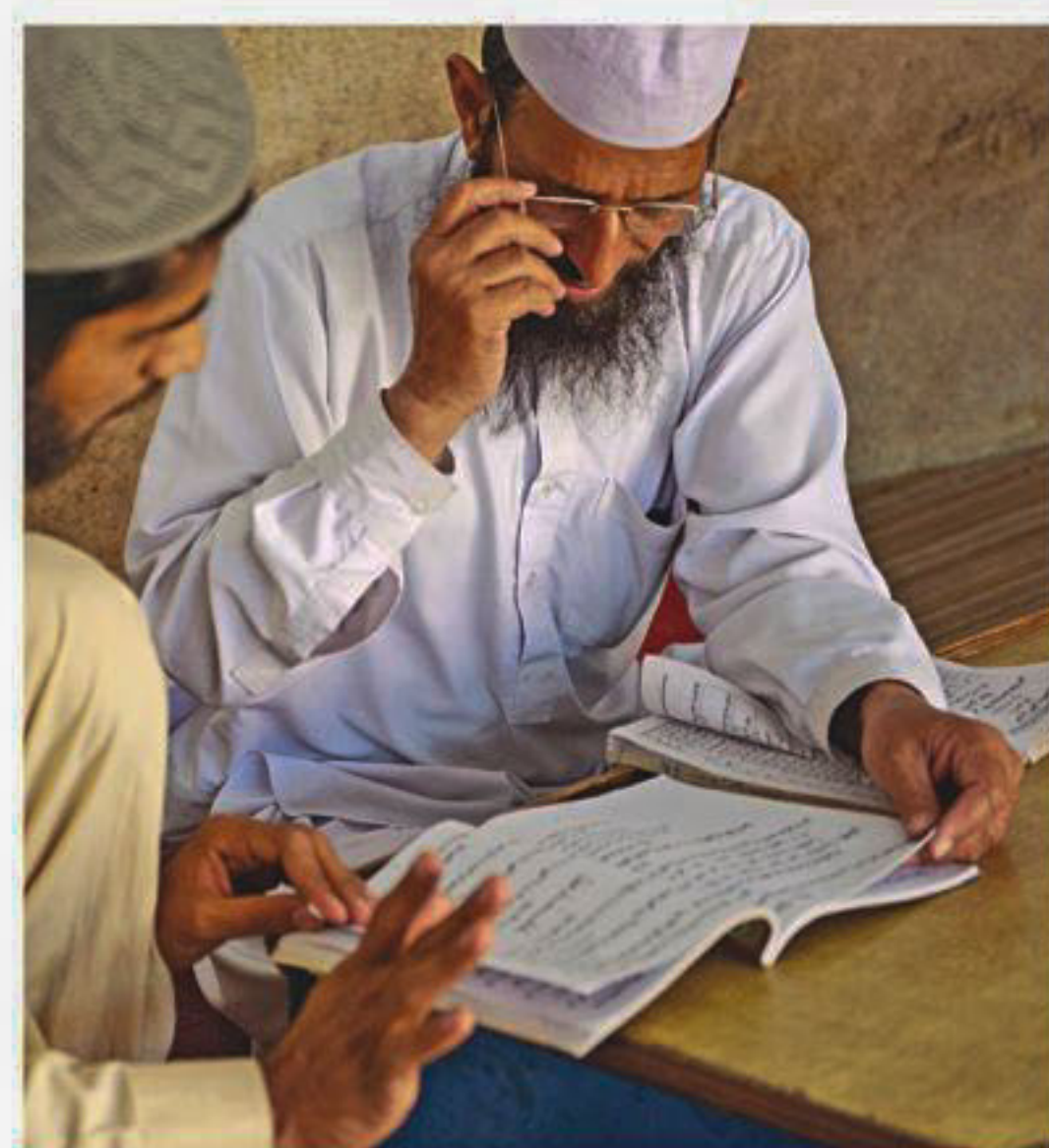
In conversation with Professor Ebrahim Moosa, one of the most prominent intellectual theoreticians on progressive Muslim thought.

NAZIBA BASHER

PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO



Professor Ebrahim Moosa



"The word 'progress' often times becomes a controversial word, amongst both intellectuals and scholars, when the questions of whose progress and what kind of progress arises. And so, I like to define myself as a critical traditionalist. I'm a traditionalist, but with a critical bend," says Professor Ebrahim Moosa, Professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Notre Dame in the Department of History and the Kroc Institute for International Studies, in the United States.

Moosa was previously Professor of Religion and Islamic Studies at Duke University. He is considered a leading scholar of contemporary Muslim thought. Moosa has been named as one of the top 500 Influential Muslims in the World. According to the contemporary scholar Adis Duderija, Moosa is "one of the most prominent intellectual theoreticians behind progressive Muslim thought."

The professor recently visited Bangladesh for a speaker's forum at BRAC University, where he spoke on the topic- "Faith and Education: Contestations around the Madrasa in Bangladesh."

His book was also featured in the speaker's forum- 'What Is a Madrasa?' "This book is basically my own journey in the Madrasas of India." Through his own experience, Moosa tries to educate a general reader about what happens at the best of Madrasas, in terms of what kinds of subjects, texts and people they are studying and furthermore, and what is the importance of Madrasa in the lives of Muslims.

"There's some amount of history, there's some amount of explanation. I take the reader into a classroom in a Madrasa. I also talk about the image of Madrasas in the West and the way it has been marked and stigmatized as institutions of terror, which is not true. There are a few Madrasas in Pakistan involved in collaboration with the Taliban. But the majority of Madrasas don't do that," he says. On account of that, at the end of the book, Moosa also writes letters to his own Madrasa teachers, asking how they are going to change the character of the Madrasas and make them places of intellectual excellence again, "because I've been arguing in my book, that the Madrasa used to be, once upon a time, a part of Islamdom's republic of letters, a republic of knowledge, including cosmopolitan knowledge as well. But over time, in the Indian-subcontinent in particular, Madrasas have become more like institutions that are interested in identity formation, and also have become, what I call, a republic of piety. We have more piety, and less intellectual energy and the kinds of religious answers that deal with reality."

One of the major campaigns that Moosa's book attempts to undertake is saying that people who engage in the study of Islam and produce the knowledge of Islam must engage with lived reality, with the knowledge of today. They must realise that that knowledge is equally authoritative in answering questions like what is the meaning of Islam, how to interpret Islam, what is the meaning of all kinds of rules and regulations that we inherited from the past and how to apply them today in a new way and in a new

context. "In other words, I'm calling for an intellectual renaissance in religious thought in Islam. That's what this book is all about."

Ebrahim Moosa firmly believes that Islam is a religion for all ages and eras. The key is to interpret it according to the time and world we currently live in. "Muslim communities are based on historical traditions. And I'm not saying everything in tradition has to be thrown out. You don't throw the baby out with the bath-water. I think retaining an element of tradition is important. But some parts of tradition have become outdated and anachronistic in today's world- the question of gender, relationship between self and other, questions about practices that understand the world in a very different way. Our world has changed, and with the arrival of science and scientific thinking, how do you bring all those things together in a conversation?" Moosa asserts that progressive Islam doesn't mean changing the Quran or changing Hadith, but is instead about having alternative methodological approaches that are going to allow us to find different kinds of answers from tradition, and answers that will be much

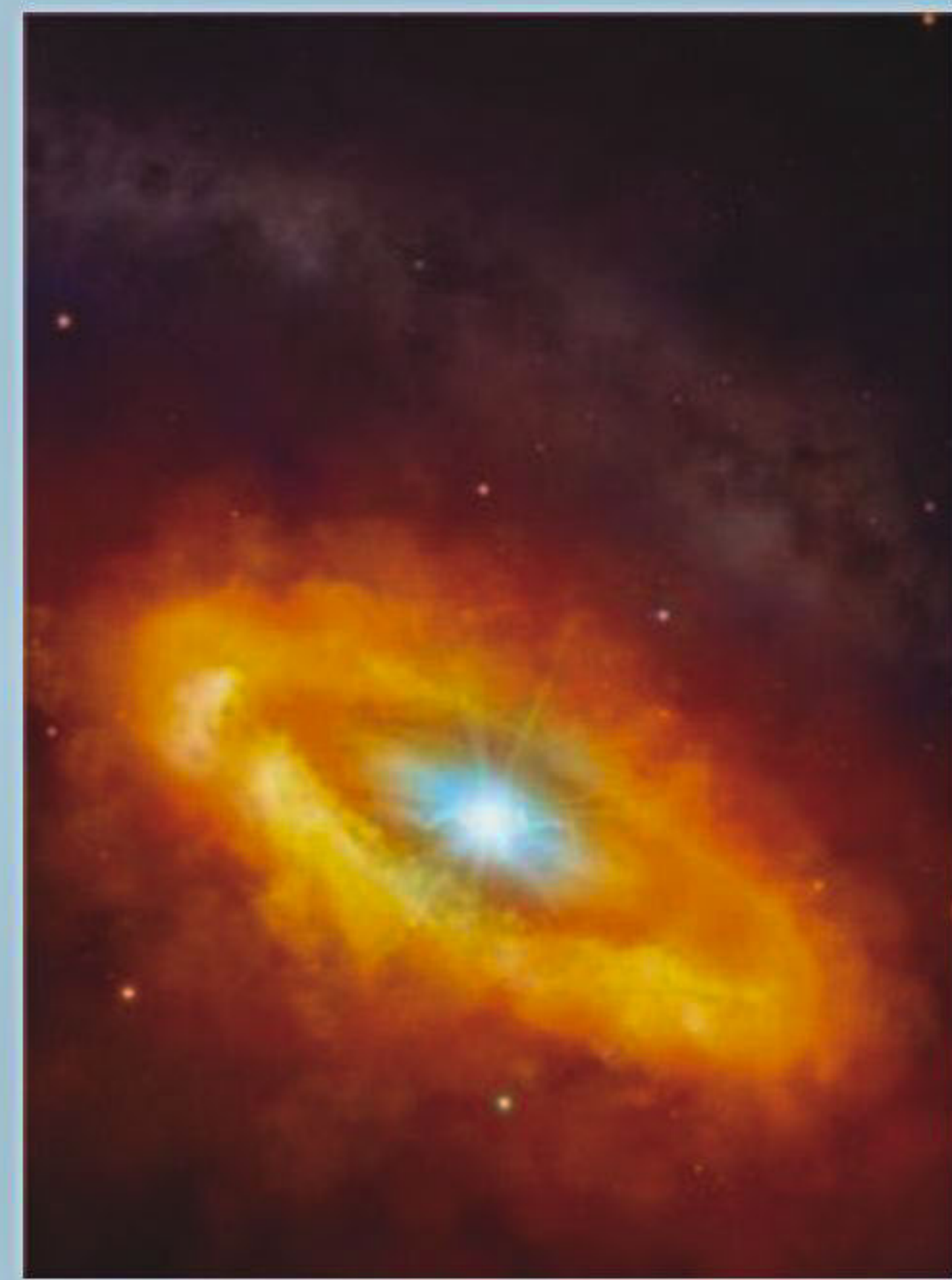
more amenable to our experiences and our way of life, be much more equitable.

"The key thing about progressive or critical traditionalist approach in Islam, to me, is that we must see that all knowledge must substantiate and support the fulfilment of human dignity. Human dignity is at the core of all Islam's messages. And if knowledge does not deliver on human dignity, then that knowledge really is questionable. So those kinds of interpretations of the past that talked about non-Muslims in a particular way, that talked about women in a particular way, are no longer dignified. That has to change. You can only change it when you are prepared to ask questions, and are prepared to challenge the paradigm of interpretation that has been prevalent thus far." Moosa also believes that that is probably one of the biggest challenges for Muslims collectively, "because certain strands of Muslim orthodoxy do not want the paradigm to be questioned. They think the paradigm is perfect. And because they think so, anyone who challenges it becomes the enemy. But that is the only way we can have peace amongst Muslims today."

QUIRKY SCIENCE

## UNPRECEDENTED ENERGY DISCOVERED AT THE CENTER OF THE MILKY WAY

For more than ten years the H.E.S.S. observatory in Namibia, run by an international collaboration of 42 institutions in 12 countries, has been mapping the centre of our galaxy in very-high-energy gamma rays. These gamma rays are produced by cosmic rays from the innermost region of the Galaxy. A detailed analysis of the latest H.E.S.S. data, published on 16th March 2016 in Nature, reveals for the first time a source of this cosmic radiation at energies never observed before in the Milky Way: the supermassive black hole at the centre of the Galaxy, likely to accelerate cosmic rays to energies 100 times larger than those achieved at the largest terrestrial particle accelerator, the LHC at CERN.



The Earth is constantly bombarded by high energy particles (protons, electrons and atomic nuclei) of cosmic origin, particles that comprise the so-called "cosmic radiation." These "cosmic rays" are electrically charged, and are hence strongly deflected by the interstellar magnetic fields that pervade our galaxy. Their path through the cosmos is randomised by these deflections, making it impossible to directly identify the astrophysical sources responsible for their production. Thus, for more than a century, the origin of the cosmic rays remains one of the most enduring mysteries of science.

## ANOTHER CAUSE OF AGING

Could an unhealthy diet and lack of exercise be making you age faster? Researchers at Mayo Clinic believe there is a link between these modifiable lifestyle factors and the biological processes of aging. In a recent study, researchers demonstrated that a poor diet and lack of exercise accelerated the onset of cellular senescence and, in turn, age-related conditions in mice. Results appear today in Diabetes.



Senescent cells are cells that contribute to diseases and conditions associated with age. Researchers from the Mayo Clinic Robert and Arlene Kogod Center on Aging found that exercise prevents premature senescent cell accumulation and protects against the damaging effects of an unhealthy diet, including deficiencies in physical, heart, and metabolic function, equivalent to diabetes.

"We think at both a biological level and a clinical level, poor nutrition choices and inactive lifestyles do accelerate aging," says Nathan LeBrasseur, Ph.D., director of the Center on Aging's Healthy and Independent Living Program and senior author of the study. "So now we've shown this in very fine detail at a cellular level, and we can see it clinically. And people need to remember that even though you don't have the diagnosis of diabetes or the diagnosis of cardiovascular disease or the diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease today when you're in midlife, the biology underlying those processes is hard at work."

Source: Sciencedaily.com

BULLETIN

On March 5th and 6th, the Bhatara neighbourhood of Notunbazar, Dhaka, was brightened up when young artists splashed colors and creativity on street sidewalls. Amidst music, laughter and a captive crowd of passersby, they invoked thoughts on a critical issue that is close to the hearts of many – gender discrimination and

## RECOGNISING INVISIBELLAS

SOHARA MEHROZE SHACHI



women's empowerment in Bangladesh.

On the advent of International Women's Day 2016, Global Shapers, Dhaka Hub launched "InvisiBellas" - a street-art project to shed light on the social position of women. The theme was a tribute to everyday heroines who are overlooked, unheard, uncounted, spoken for, told what to think, say and do. With this project, the Dhaka Hub of Global Shapers aimed to applaud and praise these women, encourage people to raise voices against violators and perpetrators and to break the wall of restrictive social norms with the very essence of the feminine - creative force.

"We sought to touch on issues that are ignored and swept under the rug, hoping to demonstrate how women are, unwittingly and intentionally, dismissed and taken for granted on a daily basis," said Kazi Istela and Mahmudul Kabir, shapers for Dhaka Hub and two of the event organisers.

An underprivileged part of the city – Notunbazar – was aptly selected as the venue for this street art project, as women of such areas are more often repressed than their counterparts in more wealthy echelons of the city. For real change to happen people from all walks of life must be involved, and as such, the work took place out on an open street to bring these concerns to public attention – to as wide an audience as possible.

The 15 participating artists selected a number of gender issues, including the

neglect of household help, the unappreciated role of female Garo beauticians, objectification and vulgar portrayal of women in the film industry, enforced silence that women are expected to accept, child marriage and the docile and unappreciated image of the mother.

Community engagement was an integral element of the project, with the artists engaging local residents and commuters, explaining to them the various underlying themes and issues the paintings depict, encouraging the community people to share their opinions and experiences.

Through the project InvisiBellas, the Dhaka Hub of Global Shapers aims to create a positive movement towards building a society that celebrates instead of disregards, empowers instead of belittles, praises instead of insults women. Ultimately, a society where women are able to think and speak freely is a society that will progress.

Participating artists were Liza Hasan, Kazi Istela, Manik N Ratan, Maleena Dhrity Gomez, Salzar Rahman, Amit Ashraf, Saiq'a S. Chowdhury, Sayeef Mahmud, Wasi Ahmed, Dibrarh Mahboob, Syed Rashad Imam Tanmoy, Mahenaz Chowdhury, Nuzhat Tabassum, Tanzania Haq and Nuhash Humayun.

The official launch of the event was 19th March at the Bengal Art Lounge.

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The writer is a Global Shaper, Dhaka Hub