



INTERVIEW

The Bibi Russell phenomena

Twenty-three years ago, fashion designer Bibi Russell returned to Bangladesh because of a profound attachment to her country, as her heart called for the colours in the 'Gamcha...Grameen Check...Rickshaw Art...!' These words and many more are almost synonymous to her name. In fact there is a lot more to the genius designer that we are aware of. In a friendly dialogue with the maestro we planned on finding out her global initiatives, in the least.

"Gopal bhaar was speaking to the king in a murmured voice" – these are probably the first few words we walked into at Russell's office. Then some eager giggles... It would have been very easy for an unfamiliar person to get confused but we knew that Bibi Russel was up to her usual practice of teaching the street children their morals for the day.

It's not unusual to witness the tall and lanky figure of the ex-supermodel navigating carefully between the young learners, asking them about their daily lessons and whereabouts.

Once finished with her duties, she'd greet you to her charming office room resembling the interiors of a quirky deshi movie set. Then if you are lucky enough you'd get to have a meeting with the enigma sharing her life stories. In that case we were a bit privileged since she spared considerable amount of her valuable time on a rendezvous with us.

This time we had tons of questions regarding her designing vision and global initiatives.

"Bongali is a brand that I have been recently affiliated with" admits Russell. She feels very close to the project because it

deals with girls who have been trafficked to India from neighbouring countries including Bangladesh. "It's depressing to witness such an atrocity in the 21st century, especially when we are putting up a satellite into space - that there are girls who are facing an ancient system of trafficking and slavery!

I feel like 'Somebody' up there put me up for the good work. It was probably because of 'His' divine blessing that I am working on this project," says the renowned designer.

Russell claims that the girls from Liluah Home, a rehabilitation centre for women in Howrah, did not even know how to thread a needle even a month earlier, these very girls with enough motivation, perseverance and hard work learned how to make fashionable sustainable garments immaculately, putting up a show, that became 'the talk of the town' in West Bengal.

"With this initiative I have learnt how easily we could empower the rural community and also revive our dying crafts," confesses Russell.

Taking the initiative was all that was required. The morally broken down girls surely taught her that anything is possible only with perseverance and hard work.

West Bengal is not where Russell stopped. Because she went as far as Rajasthan and Sri Lanka to promote their local handloom and design world class sustainable wear. "As a designer I feel the privilege to work with handloom and create a global momentum for the industry. It's my passion," acknowledges Russell.

"The Khadi festival in Rajasthan was huge. They have branded the region uniquely and so massively that it's worthy of worldwide praise and recognition. As a state guest to India, I was once again welcomed to work with Khadi especially woolen Khadi and Kota Doria, promoting both, as sustainable and fashionable garments," says the maestro.

Russell adds on to reveal, "This time I am going to South India to attend the National Handloom Day on the 7th of August. There, I am planning to work on many unique fabrics including the South silk and make it appealing to the larger crowd. I can't wait to work my hands around the exclusive material..."

"...As a designer I have always felt the need to exert the majority of my dedication and efforts around designing. This is what I do best! People around the world have

recognised my talent. They respect me for my experience, ideas and for what I have done with the Gamcha and Grameen Check," reveals the whizz designer.

In the meantime, our tête-à-tête over a cup of hot tea was nearing the end and Bibi Russell opened up her heart about Bangladesh.

She eulogised the rich heritage, crafts and treasured handloom of the country pointing out the willingness to place them in the global forefront. "I can't do this all alone, of course. I need some help. I hope that someday people will come forward and work with me on this very initiative," says Russell.

And of course our hope stays strong because of her. With the help of light bearers like Bibi Russell, we can surely remain inspired.

Maybe someday in the future we will get to see Bangladesh and all its eight major divisions showcased in front of the world with pride.

That day too shall come...

By Mehrin Mubdi Chowdhury
Photo courtesy: Bibi Productions