

Bibi's dreams



One such graceful person is Bibi Russell, who is in awe with her land and draws inspiration from its people. Everyday villagers are her muse; people toiling in the fields and rubbing off their sweat with the mundane *gamcha*, which is a multi-chequered piece of cloth with whimsical colour combination that grabbed her attention. And she has successfully taken *gamcha* to unbelievable heights, where even a film star like Antonio Banderas flaunts it at a red-carpet event. People in fashion cities like London, Paris, Spain adore her *gamcha* accessories, scarves, bags and now even masks.

"Bangladesh helped me to dream, nurtured my curiosity from my childhood and allowed my dreams to grow with me. After completing my graduate degree in fashion from

London College of Fashion in 1975 and working as an international model, I decided I was ready to come back to my roots in Bangladesh and work with our artisans and crafts to etch a name for Bangladesh in the international fashion scene," says Bibi Russell, designer, Bibi Productions, a fashion house which fused distinctive Bengali cultural elements to her designs.

Bibi's collection has always been based on the love of nature with people at its core. A global innovative and ecological brand in which harmony and humanism come together. "Through art and design it is my intention to showcase the immense talents of local artisans, and provide employment opportunities to empower them, this is my commitment," Russell feels.

Bangladesh is a colourful inspiration; you just need to look around mindfully to discover it. The green paddy pastures, the yellow mustard fields, the red shimul blooms, the village peddler with his paper toys and whirligigs merrily spinning and whirling in the air, the pink cotton candy man, the women in colour saris selling sparkly glass bangles; the fairs, the festivals — inspiration is all around for any imaginative person who wishes to pick up the cues and work with them.



For the very amicable, humble yet classy designer, whose working motto is to 'save the crafts people and help revive their dreams,' she feels that the *gamcha* is the most affordable, ready to wear, eco-friendly, 100 percent cotton and pollution-free fabric.

Self-funded, she closed her shop during the pandemic and has shifted the outlet to her work station in Motijheel, Rahman Building, the space being a gift from her father. A decision she believes she has taken wisely because, till date, she has no dues and is able to pay her workers full salary on time.

"I have evolved myself to survive the pandemic, I have recycled and upcycled my *gamcha* and produced backpacks, fancy bags, purses, wallets, glass holders, masks and other accessories, which were great gift items during Christmas. I had to do something for my workers, as I would not just lay them off," she explains.

Tops, blouses, sari with crochet is another locally sourced working material from Saidpur, with which Russell works. In Saidpur, there are over 500 ultra-poor women working on crochet for Bibi productions. Her designed crochet collars and tops and dresses are exported to Spain and each product has a fine finished look to it. She is also doing some raw silk work with crochet.

"I strongly believe the Bangladesh fashion industry has lot of potential, and designers need not to copy from one another. Each designer must have his or her own signature handwriting all over their work. Paris has so many designers, but you can distinguish Armani from Versace. You can distinguish Lata Mangeshkar from Ferdousi Rahman. Similarly, you should be able to differentiate one designer from the other. There is no need for any identity crisis. Yet, we copy from India or Pakistan for survival. All I want to say is that true designers should evolve along with

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the crafts to get going during rough times," she states.

"Moreover, I recently found out that there is a market for designer wears in Bangladesh, why would people save to buy Sabyasachi for their weddings when clearly, our designers can cater to their needs. Our consumers too should learn to buy local designers for weddings and festivals to support the industry," she explains, adding that though that upscale market is not her target, yet young people do place orders with her for their holiday ceremonies.

Bibi Russell is one such person who would go vegetarian in order to sponsor girl's education with her saved grocery money. She doesn't go back on her promise. On the work front, we will be seeing Bibi Russell doing a fashion show after a 20-year hiatus, in collaboration with House of Ahmed, in March.

"I am extremely happy in Bangladesh, and currently, I am immensely enjoying my work. I love positive criticism as it helps me to grow. I can honestly say 50 percent of the villagers love me dearly just as much as I do. In these uncertain and extremely difficult times, it is our collective responsibility to support the vulnerable people and also protect our exceptional heritage. We can help build the industry by buying locally sourced, locally woven and locally made designer wear," she says.

From *gamcha* to Jamdani we must save our age-old handloom industries, so this Falgun, buy from our local designers. Remember, deshi first, deshi always!

— RBR
Photo: Sazzad Ibne Sayed
Model: Borno, Arpita, Noble, Antora, Efa, Simmi
Make-up: Md Hossen
Wardrobe: Bibi Productions
Styling: Zabin Iqbal
Location: Bengal Carpet Mill, Ford Nagar, Dhamrai