

Monica Jahan Bose: Artist

By Suchi Rudra

From Dhaka, it takes 30 hours, 2 boats and a few miles of hiking through the pristine, automobile-free Bangladeshi island of Barobaishdia for Monica Jahan Bose to arrive. The destination? Bose's ancestral village of Katakhal.

For the Bangladeshi American, going the distance is a necessary part of her endless journey as an artist-activist, and Bose fights with clever creativity to promote women's issues and educate about climate change.

While Bose lived in New York City during the 1990s and later in DC from 2000 to 2006, she practiced law in the areas of environment and human rights, and became highly involved in several women's organizations, as well as with the promotion of legislation that dealt with domestic violence.

But having fallen in love with painting as a child, the artist-at-heart could not abandon her first passion, and continued to pursue art. Bose has now exhibited her work, which also focuses on women's issues, in the US and around the world, including Tokyo, where she had her first solo show in 2000, and in Paris, where she lived and worked for five years from her own studio.

Her latest trip, a 10-day visit to Katakhal in January of this year, is part of an ambitious project that successfully combines her art and activism, or "artivism" as some have

dubbed the concept. "Her Words: Storytelling with Saris," is a colorful, multi-dimensional and constantly-evolving project that emphasizes the issues that Bose takes to heart.

Accompanied by Nandita Ahmed, a Bangladeshi filmmaker from Brooklyn, Bose's time on the island was spent intensively working with 12 Katakhal women to help them document their live and stories through printmaking with saris, journaling and interviews. Partially funded through the crowd-funding website Kickstarter, the project will include a display of the 24 saris created by the women, video projections of their time together with Bose, performances and a full-color, bilingual book that brings together the women's stories in their own handwriting with photographs and information about the island.

The idea to collaborate with the village women first came to Bose during her printmaking residency in 2011 at the Dhaka Art Center in the Bangladeshi capital. Many of the Katakhal women are trained in wood-block fabric printing, and Bose wondered if it would be possible to work with them to realize larger versions of her prints by working on saris (which are 18 feet long) rather than on paper. These women were cyclone survivors who had recently learned to read and write, and Bose wanted to work with them to print words and images on saris to express

their empowerment.

These village women, who were married off as teenagers, had never been asked to write about themselves, and Bose wanted the women's stories to be told in their own voices, "because too often, Asian women are presented in an exoticized manner. I wanted this to be empowering for them. And all these women are also Muslim, so I think it's important to recognize that they're living very different lives than the stereotypical image of Muslim women."

Bose, who works out of her home studio and also belongs to DC's Red Dirt Studio, has long had a hand in the empowerment of Katakhal's women by serving as a board member of Samhati, a DC-based nonprofit for Bangladeshi women established in 1984 by her mother, Noorjahan. Samhati's implementation of an eco-empowerment program for the villagers in 2000 has improved adult female literacy and helped to educate the men and women of this cyclone-ravaged region about safe water and sanitation, nutrition and health, and sustainable farming and fishing practices.

Due to climate change, the soil in Bangladesh has greatly reduced crop production, Bose explains. "Now, the villagers are learning how to get better crops from lower quality soil. The fish are moving away from the tropical seas because it's become too warm, so the villagers are shown how to raise tilapia in ponds."

Climate change, especially the rising waters around Bangladesh, is something that deeply worries Bose.

"Twenty percent of Bangladesh is going under water, but people in the US are busy watching Kim Kardashian," she says.

Bose also voices her concern about the villagers of Katakhal who, due to lack of information and media input, have never actually heard of the world's global warming crisis.

"They don't know about the sea levels rising, about carbon emissions, or why there are no more fish. I envision going back to the island soon with a climate change scientist to let



them know in a gentle but informative way, not to cause panic. We will help them learn to measure and keep track of the rising sea levels so they can make their own decisions."

Bose's innate desire to educate and inform also led her to create "Bus Stop Bangladesh: a performance/installation for Storytelling with Saris", which introduced the public to her new project in June 2013 through the venue of a bus stop shelter in Maryland, just one block north of DC. The interactive outdoor performance used a backdrop of fluttering saris and everyday sounds (birds, women singing) recorded from Katakhal to evoke the feel of village life on the island. Bus Stop Bangladesh, which involved a three-day performance, was funded by Art Lives Here in partnership with the National Endowment for the Arts.

An exhibition about the project entitled "Layer by Layer: Storytelling with Saris," opened in September 2013 at the D.C. area gallery of the Brentwood Arts Exchange in the Gateway Arts Center. The exhibition featured an installation of saris with multiple projections of video images onto and through the saris.

The idea, Bose explains, is to immerse the viewer and the saris "with the process of making the saris and the women's lives and stories. It is a multi-layered installation."

Bose's exhibition will be traveling to Bangladesh this summer, with an opening on July 19 at the Edward M. Kennedy Center for Public Service and the Arts. To follow the project, visit www.storytellingwithsaris.com.

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