

HER WORDS: A MERGER OF ART AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

“The women of Katakali are so confident and resilient. They are truly inspiring. We have a lot to learn from the people of this remote village.” This is what artist and activist Monica Jahan Bose had to say after returning to Dhaka on January 26 from a trip to her ancestral village of Katakali, on Barabaishdia Island, Patuakhali District. Monica visited Katakali after 19 years to work on a project that she calls “Her Words: Storytelling with Saris,” a collaborative art and story project with a dozen women of the Katakali women's cooperative. New York-based Bangladeshi filmmaker Nandita Ahmed accompanied Monica and her family on the trip to document the project with photos and videos. It was an incredible week of discovery, bonding, and celebration.

Monica's last trip to the island was in 1993 after the death of her grandmother, whose home is now used for a women's eco-empowerment project designed and funded by Samhati, an organisation of Bangladeshi women in Washington DC. “My grandmother was married at age seven and never had the chance to go to school. But she insisted that all five of her daughters go to school. She wanted a better life for all the women of her village. She would be very happy to see what the women have accomplished.” Monica's mother Noorjahan Bose founded Samhati in 1984, and the empowerment project in Katakali was started in 2000. The cooperative is now run by local leadership, including Monica's aunt, Mahmuda Hossain Lina, who spends much of her time on the island coordinating the work.

On January 17, 2013, three generations of women – Monica, Noorjahan, and Monica's two daughters, Tuli and Koli – started the long journey from Dhaka to Katakali, arriving just before dark on the evening of January 18. Katakali has no roads, rickshaws, cars, electricity or running water. Monica remarked on the stark contrast between the polluted, crowded, and filthy Dhaka port and the pristine, sparkling clean Barabaishdia Island.

The next day, Monica had a meeting with the members of the women's cooperative and began work on the “Her Words” project, which celebrates through writing, art, and oral history the achievement of literacy by the women of Katakali. Twelve women from the Katakali cooperative were recruited for “Her Words”: Hawa (age 25), Zakia (age 40), Roxana (age 25), Nasima (age 35), Khuku (age 35), Noor Sehera (age 34), Shima (age 23), Khuku (age 35), Salma (age 30), Hasina (age 45), Shahida (age 32), and Julekha (age 35). These women all survived cyclones SIDR and AILA (by taking shelter in the health center built by Samhati); but most lost their homes and all of them lost their animals, crops, and possessions. Samhati rebuilt the destroyed homes, deeding them to the female head of household. Samhati provided adult literacy and other classes to help these survivors rebuild their lives.

On January 20th, Monica organised a writing workshop for the twelve women, who were encouraged to write whatever they could about themselves and to draw words and images with pencil, pen, and paint. The women were very excited to each receive a journal, a pen, pencil and sharpener to continue their writing after Monica's departure. Monica plans to collect these journals in a few months and give the women new journals. Monica met with each woman individually several times to learn about her life and her aspirations. The meetings



were recorded on video and audio by Nandita Ahmed. Nandita remarked: “The women looked directly at the camera and were not shy. I was surprised that they were not self-conscious at all.” During the early morning and evenings when the workshops were not in session, Monica visited each of the women's homes to better understand their lives. During these visits, she was offered tea, coconut water, and their most prized food, fresh duck eggs. She was surprised to find that most of the women had solar power in their homes. Solar panels are produced locally and are purchased under a three-year payment plan.

The sari printmaking workshops were begun by January 21 and involved working in collaboration to create 24 saris, using hand

children, and farming as well the usual activities of the cooperative.

The week ended with the women wearing the saris they made and taking group and portrait photos. The women really enjoyed the fashion shoot – laughing and posing with delight. Each woman was paid for her work with Monica and she will keep one of the saris to wear around the village as a sign of her achievements. Monica will take 12 saris back to Washington DC to be exhibited. She said that she was sad to leave Katakali. “It was thrilling to finally meet these women after working for so many years on the Samhati project. I had seen their photos, but it is completely different to meet them and work with them so closely for a week. I wish I could have stayed for a whole month in this beautiful

educate their daughters and were not going to try to have a son. Although most of the women were married young (average age 15) and did not have the chance to go to school when they were girls, all of them are sending their children to school and hope that they will go to college. Each woman said that her most exciting achievement was learning to read and write and that she wants to learn more. All of them are growing vegetables with the help of the cooperative and improving their families' nutrition as well as selling some to supplement their income. Monica said, “The West has a lot to learn from Katakali. They waste nothing and have no carbon footprint. They live peacefully and are leading productive lives. The women are incredibly empowered and are improving their community.”

Monica found that the villagers had never heard about climate change and the impact of sea levels rising (she did not have the heart to tell them the forecast). But all of them do worry about cyclones and storm surges. To better understand the geography of the area, she and her daughters crossed the Darchira River by dingy boat to visit nearby Char Ganga and took a “trawler” boat 20 miles south to Moudubi, a sparkling sandy beach on the southern tip of Barabaishdia Island facing the Bay of Bengal.

The “Her Words” project will be premiered in September 2013 at the Brentwood Arts Exchange gallery at the Gateway Arts Center near Washington DC. The exhibition will run for six weeks and will include a panel discussion and workshops on the project, literacy, and empowerment, a book about the 12 women, and photos and videos about the project. “Her Words” will bring to the US the stories of the women of Katakali and this courageous community. Monica is also creating a performance art piece using these saris, which will speak to women's autonomy. Monica hopes to bring the “Her Words” exhibition and performance to Bangladesh in 2014. “Her Words” will continue with more writing, sari making, exhibitions and presentations in different venues. Monica has friends around the world supporting and following the project and plans to continue this global collaboration for an indefinite period.

Monica Jahan Bose is a Bangladeshi-American artist and activist based in Washington DC, where she is part of Red Dirt Studio. She studied art at Wesleyan University and Santiniketan and law at Columbia University. She regularly comes to Bangladesh to create and exhibit her work. She is a board member of Samhati and the South Asian Women's Creative Collective in New York. ●



PHOTO: NANDITA AHMED AND MONICA JAHAN BOSE

woodblock printing, painting, and writing. Each woman worked in collaboration with Monica and one or two helpers to create two unique saris that she and Monica signed. A table was borrowed from the library so that several saris could be made simultaneously. Many of the women are trained in woodblock printing and were teaching Monica the proper techniques. Monica in turn urged them to be more creative by adding writing and painting and stamping the blocks in irregular patterns or freely, with no pattern at all. Monica had brought with her dozens of woodblocks carved with images she had drawn, words the women have learned, and the Bangla alphabet. The Katakali women added their own collection of woodblocks and their imagination and hand written script to create an incredible range of saris. It was an intensive and joyous week of art making, writing and storytelling, while still juggling the work of cooking, taking care of

place with these amazing people. There is so much more I want to learn.”

Monica explained that she learned a lot from the women of Katakali. They have dignity and courage and have gained from working together with other women of the cooperative. They are incredibly strong to live in a remote island with no amenities and the constant threat of storms. They live very simply and work hard to keep their homes and village spotlessly clean. They walk many miles daily and generate no pollution or trash, using solar power and small oil lamps and living mostly on the food they grow and the fish they catch. They have consciously improved their lives and have much more freedom and education than their mothers.

The twelve women of “Her Words” were all born into large families, but most have just two children. Those with two girls and no boys said that they would

