

dhaka live

An immersive installation of saris, journals, sounds, and video

Monica Jahan Bose exhibits Storytelling with Saris in Bangladesh



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Khuku Rani is painting on a sari and the video image is seen on the very sari that she has painted. The 12 saris hanging in Dhanmondi's EMK Centre have travelled from Katakali Village to Washington DC, to Maryland, to New York City, and now they have returned to Bangladesh to tell the stories of the women of Katakali, a remote island community in Patuakhali district. This innovative multi-disciplinary art installation uses saris, video, and journals to showcase the long-term art and advocacy project, 'Her Words: Storytelling With Saris', created by Monica Jahan Bose in collaboration with 12 women — Hasina, Hawa, Khuku Rani, Nasima, Noor Sehera, Parveen, Roxana, Salma, Shahida, Shima, Zakia, and Zulekha — from Katakali Village and New York-based Bangladeshi filmmaker Nandita Ahmed.

Monica Jahan Bose is a Bangladeshi-American artist, environmental lawyer, and activist tracing her maternal ancestors to Katakali Village, on the island of Barobaishdia in the Bay of Bengal, an area severely affected by climate change. For the last two years, Monica has been collaborating with 12 women from her ancestral village on an art, writing, and advocacy project to highlight the women's educational and environmental achievements, including their

newly acquired literacy and the many ways in which they are bravely adapting to climate change. Katakali is the site of an eco-empowerment program started in 2000 by Samhati, a US-based non-profit group of Bangladeshi-American women founded in 1984 by Monica's mother Noorjahan Bose. In January 2013, Monica Bose travelled to Katakali, along with her mother, her two daughters, and Nandita Ahmed (who documented the project with photo/video), and worked with 12 women to create 24 collaborative saris, collect oral history, initiate journal writing, and commence climate change research. All the saris were worn by the women and photographed. Monica took 12 saris back with her to the US, while 12 were kept by the women to wear in the village for the next eight months. The used saris were eventually also sent to the US, and Monica has engaged diverse audiences with performances and installations from these 24 saris. Monica sent new saris to Katakali for the women print and wear.

Monica Bose has transformed the EMK Centre into a red and pink glowing space with draping saris covering the windows and ceiling and cascading onto the floor while a three-channel video (showing each woman through three different images) is projected onto and through the saris to the walls and display cases filled with handwritten journals. The women's

voices and songs and sounds from the village fill the space. The video shows the women taking about their lives along with images of them block-printing, painting, and writing on the saris, the same ones hanging in the installation. The stories of the women are also contained in the women's own handwritten journals, on notebooks which Monica provided to them as part of the Storytelling with Saris project. The journal project will continue as a way of documenting women's lives through their own writing. Monica will continue to follow these 12 women as their lives and climate conditions evolve, creating a documentation of this inspiring community.

The exhibition and related book Her Words: Storytelling with Saris were inaugurated on July 19, 2014 by chief guest US Ambassador Dan Mozena. Monica Bose, Nandita Ahmed, Noorjahan Bose, and two of the 12 Katakali artists, Roxana and Khuku Rani, were present at the opening along with a crowd of almost 200 people, one of the largest turnouts the capital has seen for an exhibition. The 110 page book includes hundreds of colour photographs taken by Monica and Nandita, along with biographical summaries based on oral history, portrait photos, and the actual handwriting of the Katakali women, transcriptions of local oral tradition songs, and essays by curator Leah Stoddard and

sociologist Dr Roksana Badruddoja.

Dr Badruddoja writes that the project "is an urgent call for the representation of women of colour through their own voices, where the power to define and represent lies with not only the woman who designed and implemented the project, but also with the women who participated... Twelve women and twenty-four saris unfold powerful statements around resilience, achievement, self-identity, womanhood, and agency." Ambassador Mozena remarked that the exhibition contains many layers and stories, including the story of Monica's own journey to her roots.

He said, "I think the greatest story represented in this art is that of the resilience of Bangladeshi women. The participants in this art endeavour are tough... they have survived successive cyclones; they have learned to read and write; they have improved their lives and their community through hard work and determination."

Monica spoke in Bangla and English about the goal of the project: "This project is beyond making beautiful paintings. I am sharing with the world the personal stories of these 12 women's accomplishments and resilience. I want to activate real change in people's energy consumption so that we can reduce the impacts of climate change."

She plans to work with local experts to create a workshop on climate change for the people of Katakali.

Dr Saleemul Huq, one of Bangladesh's leading climate scientists was an invited speaker and said that he is inspired by the way that Monica "personalises climate change and highlights the resilience of the Bangladeshis. Bangladesh is at the forefront of climate adaptation, and we need to shift towards a narrative about our resilience."

Art critic Moinuddin Khaled also spoke: "Through saris, writing, and oral history, Monica has captured the reality of women's lives in a unique way. The use of everyday saris that are actually used and worn by women creates direct links to their everyday work and activities."

The lively group of speakers was moderated by Rafiqul Islam of the Liberation War Museum, which has partnered with the American Centre in establishing the Kennedy Centre in Dhanmondi, Dhaka.

Among others, artist Hasan Mahmud, who has been following Monica's work for several years, has appreciated this project.

This is the first time such a social practice art project, blending art with activism and science, has been exhibited in Dhaka. The installation immerses the viewer in a different world requiring reflection on the issues.

The exhibition continues at the EMK Centre, House 5 (Midas Centre, level 9), Road 27 (old), Dhanmondi from 9:30 am to 8 pm, except for Fridays, until August 9. There will be an artist's talk on August 7, 2014 at 7 pm.

Follow the project on storytellingwithsaris.com and [facebook.com/StorytellingWithSaris](https://www.facebook.com/StorytellingWithSaris)

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