

Saris Connect Anacostia and Bangladesh

Unique Project Engaged Dozens
at Anacostia Arts Center

by Virginia Avniel Spatz



"Storytelling with Saris" at the Anacostia Arts Center, opening reception, May 8. Photo: M. Bose

Anacostia and the remote Bangladeshi village of Katakali are oceans and 10,000 miles apart, separated by language and culture. But artist Monica Jahan Bose crafted an unusual way to put the two communities in close touch at the Anacostia Arts Center. Through a multimedia project, "Storytelling with Saris," 12 Katakali women told about their lives and the impact of climate change on their home village. The installation included Bose's artwork as well as specially decorated saris previously worn in Katakali. But the project didn't stop with one-way communication.

Workshop participants helped decorate saris, using a traditional block-printing technique from Bangladesh. They added environmental pledges with the coastal area in mind: "I will bike to work," wrote one, and "I will cut down on electricity." Newly created garments will be used in a performance this fall. Finally, the saris will be worn by Katakali women and eventually rejoin Bose's art installation.

LEAP TO CONVERSATION AND IMMEDIATE CONNECTION

One of the earliest "Storytelling with Saris" participants, we will call her Anna, immediately recruited others. Anna lives at the Calvary Women's Services, but when she was living in her own home she made an effort to turn off lights when they were not being used. She decorated a sari with a light-bulb print, adding a message encouraging others to think about energy use.

Anna told Elaine Johnson, Calvary's education coordinator, about the project. Johnson decided a group workshop for residents and volunteers would align perfectly with Calvary's mission

of empowering women. "Women were immediately interested in creating art and decorating the saris, and also getting information about the project," Johnson said, after the workshop organized by the artist for her group. "There was definitely a connection between what women at Calvary experience and what women in Bangladesh are experiencing. They really enjoyed the process and the narratives resonated with them."

Johnson added, "I believe that the conversation that surrounds art is powerful," noting that Calvary's Life Skills, Education and Arts Program (LEAP) provides arts classes for women at Calvary and opportunities like this one that introduce women to art in the community. "Residents find out about themselves and about others in unique ways when they are part of those conversations."

Anna said that the workshop made her think about what it would be like to live under conditions like those in Bangladesh, where women regularly have to face natural disasters like cyclones and flooding. "It made me think about all of the things that I have, compared to what those women have," she said.

LITERACY AND EDUCATION

In addition to climate change another primary thread in this project is literacy and education, particularly for women and girls. The artwork incorporates both Bengali and English script to encourage discussion of literacy. The workshops also include stories about education in Bose's ancestral village.

During the installation Bose spoke with students of Washington Yu Ying Public Charter School about education for girls and women. She also discussed this topic with "Education Town Hall" at We Act Radio's studio around the corner from Anacostia Arts Center. She told the "Education Town Hall" that her mother, Noorjahan Bose, and grandmother were born in Katakali when it was still common for girls to marry quite young and receive little education. Her grandmother had only a fifth-grade education but insisted that her five daughters and son all be educated.

"My mother was the first ... she struggled to finish school, but my grandmother really advocated for her," Bose related, describing how her mother lived with a variety of relatives in locations where schooling was available. "My mother was the first girl from the village to finish high school ... After that it was sort of a revolution, and many girls remained in school in that community," Bose says that "in my grandmother's legacy" she and her mother join with others to support



"From My Love to Yours" sari created by Calvary Women's Services workshop. Photo: M. Bose

a variety of educational and empowerment efforts in Bangladesh.

ART AND SOLIDARITY

Bose described herself as "Bangladeshi and American, an artist, lawyer, mother, and activist on women's issues and the environment." She called her work – which includes painting, sculpture, printmaking, installations, and performances – "symbolic narratives" that "move strategically across media to address complex issues and engage diverse audiences."

"Storytelling with Saris" builds on the work of Samhati (Solidarity), an organization of Bangladeshi women founded in 1984. Samhati's Katakali project, begun 15 years ago, empowers women and their families through adult literacy classes, skills training, leader-

ship development, scholarships for poor children, a pre-school, and free or sliding-fee health services.

Dozens of adults and children, from Anacostia and the wider region, participated in "Storytelling with Saris" workshops, intimately connecting the DC area with coastal Bangladesh.

To learn more about this ongoing project and upcoming performance visit StoryTellingWithSaris.com. The full interview with Monica Jahan Bose is available at EducationTownHall.org. For assistance or more on Calvary Women's Services call 202-678-2341 or visit CalvaryServices.org. The Anacostia Arts Center is at 1231 Good Hope Rd. SE.

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