

“Her Words: Storytelling with Saris”

by Monica Jahan Bose



"Her Words: Storytelling with Saris" is a collaborative printmaking and story project celebrating the achievement of literacy by women in the remote island community of Katakhalī, Bangladesh, which is my ancestral village and part of an eco-project run by Samhati, a Maryland charity. These women all lost their homes in recent cyclones and have been working with Samhati to rebuild their lives. I will collaborate with 12 women to: create 24 large scale (18-foot-long) woodblock prints on sari fabric using words the women have learned along with designs and images; have them write their own stories; record their oral histories and take portrait photos of them wearing the saris; and document the project through photo and video. Each woman will keep one sari to wear as a statement of her achievement, and the remaining folio of 12 sari prints will be brought back to the US to be exhibited. The project will culminate in an exhibition, panel discussion, and event in the MD/DC area showcasing the prints and unveiling these stories and portraits, which will be published in a color catalog. There will also be workshops with children celebrating art and literacy. “Her Words” will bring to the US the submerged stories of a community that has been adversely affected by climate change and may well disappear by mid-century.

In my work, I use the sari and other garments as metaphors for the human body and spirit, investigating gender, identity, desire, and women’s role as carriers of tradition. My work also uses Bengali script as a political act affirming multilingualism and universal literacy. I have been working on literacy and health projects with the women of Katakhalī for many years and wanted to collaborate with them on a special project to mark their victory in learning to read and write. This project uses the sari as an art material, a story board, and a garment, merging art and advocacy to celebrate the empowerment of women.

The saris will be white, red, and black, reflecting different stages in a woman’s life.

June 14: talk on project at 39th Street Gallery, 3901 Rhode Island Ave, Brentwood, MD @ 7 pm

June 16: Kickoff Party and Open Studio, 2017 Belmont Rd, NW, Washington, DC @ 3 – 7 pm

June 24: Leave for Bangladesh!