



# SARIS, JOURNALS, AND A VIDEO TRIPTYCH

*Art to inspire social change*

Cultural Correspondent

## HER WORDS :

### STORYTELLING WITH SARIS

An exhibition about this multi-year art, writing, and advocacy project.

by **MONICA JAHAN BOSE**

in collaboration with the women of the Katakhalī Cooperative, Patuakhali and filmmaker Nandita Ahmed

**July 19 - August 9, 2014**

EMK Center, Dhaka

Supported by



An innovative multi-disciplinary art installation **HER WORDS: STORYTELLING WITH SARIS**, created by Monica Jahan Bose in collaboration with women from Katakhalī and filmmaker Nandita Ahmed, opened at the Edward Kennedy Center for Public Service and the Arts in Dhaka on Saturday, July 19, 2014 to a packed house of almost 200 people. The Kennedy Center was transformed 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 (each with a different video) was projected onto and through the saris in three different places. The event also launched the bilingual book of writing and photos about the **STORYTELLING WITH SARIS** project.

Monica is a Bangladeshi-American artist, lawyer, and activist tracing her maternal ancestors to Katakhalī Village, on the island of Barobaishdia, Patuakhali District, a remote 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 adaptation to climate change. Katakhalī is Bose's ancestral village and part of an eco-empowerment program started by Samhati, a US-based non-profit group of Bangladeshi-American women founded by



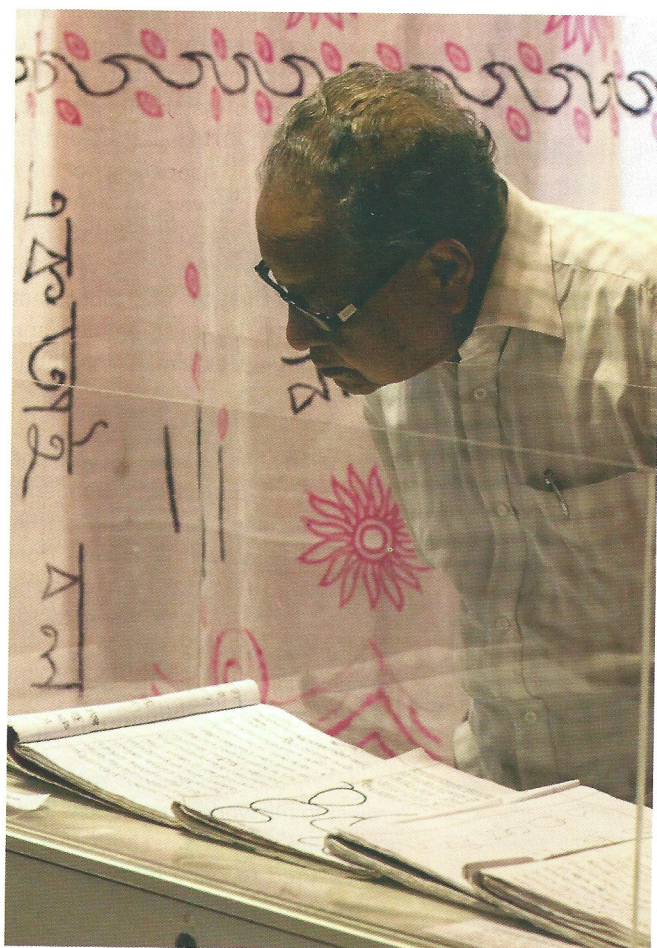
her mother Noorjahan Bose in 1984. Monica lives in Washington DC, while filmmaker Nandita Ahmed resides in Brooklyn, NY. In January 2013, Monica travelled to Katakali, along with her mother, her two daughters, and Nandita, and worked with 12 women to create 24 collaborative saris, collect oral history, initiate journal writing, and commence climate change research. All the saris were worn and photographed. Monica took 12 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 sent to the US and Monica has engaged diverse audiences with performances and installations from these saris as well. Monica then sent a new set of saris to the women to be



Note books. (Photo Ishtiaq Ahmed)

printed and worn.

At the inauguration, the women's voices and songs and sounds from the village filled the Kennedy Center. The video showed the women taking about their lives along with images of them blockprinting, painting, and writing on the saris, the same ones hanging in the installation. The installation also included four glass display cases of the women's own handwritten journals, on notebooks which Monica provided to them as part of the Storytelling with Saris project. Video from the projections fell in shimmers through the saris onto one of the cases holding the journal notebooks filled with the women's writings. The labels on the display cases explained that the journal project will continue as a way of documenting women's lives



Quayum looking. (Photo Ishtiaq Ahmed)



Monika speaking. (Photo Ishtiaq Ahmed)



through their own writing. Monica, filmmaker Nandita Ahmed, and two of the 12 Katakhalis artists, Roxana and Khuku Rani, were present at the opening along with a crowd of artists, writers, activists, scientists, diplomats, students and members of the general public.

The exhibition and book launch was inaugurated Chief Guest US Ambassador Dan Mozena, and Special Guests included Enayetullah Khan of Cosmos Group and Gallery Cosmos, Dr. Saleemul Huq, Director, International Centre for Climate and Development, Art Critic Moinuddin Khaled and Rafiqul Islam of the Liberation War Museum, who served as moderator. Ambassador Mozena stated that the STORYTELLING WITH SARIS project “has so many different layers and stories” — it is the story of Monica’s own journey to her roots, the story of the incredible strength and achievement of the women of Katakhalis, and the story of women’s resilience in the face of climate change. Monica spoke in Bangla and English about the process and goal of STORYTELLING WITH SARIS, stating: “This project is beyond making beautiful paintings. I am sharing with the world the personal stories of these 12 women’s accomplishments and resilience for the purpose of



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activating real change in people’s energy consumption so that we can reduce the impacts of climate change.” She further explained that she wants to work with local climate experts to create a workshop on climate change for the people of Katakhalis. She said, “The people of Katakhalis have a right to know what is happening to their environment and why, so that they can adapt and decide what to do.” She plans to continue this project indefinitely to follow and document and advocate for these women and their community as climate conditions evolve.



Enayetullah Khan was interviewed and stated: “This project is a wonderful blend of art and activism and is truly cross-disciplinary. It moves from printmaking to writing to filmmaking and science. I am particularly moved that Monica is focusing on the achievements of the women of Katakhalis to bring attention to the problems of climate change. She has taken this Storytelling with Saris project to the world stage. She is using art for climate activism. I hope that art can be used to bring more attention to the issue of climate change so that individuals and governments will be moved to take immediate action. I





believe that art can and should be a vehicle for social change.”

Dr. Saleemul Huq, one of Bangladesh’s leading climate scientists and Director of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development, was an invited speaker and stated that STORYTELLING WITH SARIS “personalizes climate change and highlights the resilience of Bangladeshis. Bangladesh is on the forefront of climate adaptation and we need to shift to-wards a narrative about our resilience. Bangladeshis are fighters, not passive victims.” He explained that he is inspired by the STORYTELLING project and its crowd sourcing success and will work with Monica in the future. Art Critic Moinuddin Khaled also spoke at the opening and said that “the sari speaks volumes about women’s lives, and it is a symbol that Monica has been using effectively in her artwork for a long time. 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.”

This is first time this type of social

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practice art project, blending art with activism and science, has been exhibited in Dhaka. The installation immerses the viewer in a different world requiring the viewer to reflect and think about the issues. The response from viewers at the opening was overwhelmingly positive, and many stayed for several hours. Jasim Uddin, a student and member of the Kennedy Center, stated, “I am mesmerized by this...the multiple projections on the saris, which are used as screens and covered with woodblock and the women’s handwriting... I feel the artist’s empathy with these women. There is a powerful message here about climate change and literacy.”

Monica Jahan Bose’s book *Her Words: Storytelling with Saris*, was launched at the exhibition opening. The book includes hundreds of color photographs taken by Monica and by Nandita Ahmed, along with biographical summaries based on oral history, portrait photos, and the actual handwriting of the Katakhal 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 color 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 — Hasina, Hawa, Khuku Rani, Nasima, Noor Sehera, Parveen, Roxana, Salma, Shahida, Shima, Zakia, and Zulekha — and twenty-four saris unfold powerful statements around resilience, achievement, self-identity, womanhood and agency.”

The 12 women’s stories have been presented in Washington DC and New York in several exhibitions, film screenings, performances, and talks, including a recent performance/installation at the Brooklyn Museum and a multi-media presentation at the US Environmental Protection Agency. The project has been funded principally by crowd sourcing through an online funding platform by over 170 supporters around the world. Sponsors of the Dhaka exhibition include the EMK Center, Samhati, the Dhaka Art Center, and Gallery Cosmos.

The exhibition continues through August 9 at the EMK Center, House 5 (Midas Centre, level 9), Road 27 (old), Dhanmondi. Hours: 9:30 am to 8 pm (closed Fridays). There will be an artist’s talk on Thursday, August 7, 2014 at 7 pm. ■

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