4-2020

Scholar-activist Anthropology in Nepal: Radical Women Artists on the Liberation Front

Diana J. Fox
Bridgewater State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons, and the Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol39/iss1/11

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.
Fundied by a CARS Faculty Librarian Research Grant, I traveled to Nepal in January 2019 meeting women social and political artists raising consciousness about discrimination and their new rights enshrined in the 2015 Constitution. Being a woman and an artist is new in Nepal, historically the purview of a specific caste of men. Since the 2006 end of the bloody, decade-long Maoist-led civil war, both formally educated woman artists in Kathmandu and women trained by Mithila folk artists (an art form from Janakpur in southern Nepal along the India border where the art form emerged) are challenging pervasive, de facto inequalities: menstrual taboos, child marriage, sexual violence, huge gender literacy gaps, and caste discrimination. Their art critiques social, political, religious, and economic hierarchies that entrench discrimination and limit opportunities, not only for women but out of caste Dalits (formerly “untouchables”) and Nepal’s indigenous groups. The artists draw on historical, aesthetic and thematic traditions from Hindu and Buddhist mythology (the two primary religions of Nepal) and indigenous design and patterns, blending them with modernism, abstraction, and realism. By connecting social structures of inequality to individuals through the power of art and intertwining these ideas with the rich 2,000-year history of Nepal, these women strive to usher in a new era of liberation that discards oppressive structures without destroying the aesthetic beauty and skills of Nepal’s art history.

As a scholar-activist in the social justice tradition established by nineteenth and early twentieth-century feminists, anti-racists, and environmentalists, I conduct research collaborating with social movement activists to learn about and help reduce indignities that spawn such movements in the first place. Harnessing ethnographic methods, I met artists in cafes, galleries, and studios learning about their messages and the art forms that portray them. Ragini Upadhayay Grela, the first woman Commissioner of the Arts in Nepal, played a significant role in creating art with political and social themes, versus the longstanding role of art as beautifier and purveyor of mythological stories that reinforce social stratification. She will join the BSU community in April as a visiting artist, her first visit to the U.S. following 68 solo exhibitions worldwide. Self-named Artivist (art + activism) Ashmina Ranjit pioneers courageous, dramatic performance pieces foregrounding violence against women and menstrual taboos as does Sheelasha Rajbhandari, who co-founded the arts cooperative, Artree Nepal, in 2013 with her artist husband, Hit Man Gurung—their self-chosen, out of caste marriage a radical act.

Leaving Kathmandu, I traveled with prominent Mithila artist, Ajit Sah, to his hometown of Janakpur where, as an ally for women’s equality, he trains widowed, poor, Dalit women in Mithila art as a source of self-dignity and livelihoods. I interviewed the women, with the help of a translator, about how their art impacts their livelihoods, their self-concept as women, and their understanding of the value of Mithila art in the community and for the nation. On their own initiative, they began critiquing social inequalities, painting scenes of empowered girls going to school instead of forced, early marriages. I ended by introducing Ajit to directors of the Association for Dalit Women’s Advancement Nepal (ADWAN), an NGO I also work with, disrupting gender and caste discrimination, and pledged to seek funds for training additional women in both Mithila arts and gender/caste awareness with ADWAN trainers traveling to Janakpur to work with the women. Thanks to a Martin Richards Social Justice Institute grant, that project is now underway with six new women working in Ajit’s studio.

Diana J. Fox is Professor in the Department of Anthropology.

“A Life of political engagement is so much more interesting than a life of private disengagement and consumption.”

–France-Fox Piven, 2013

Diana Fox (fourth from left) with the women Mithila artists in Janakpur at the completion of the interviews and week of observations. (Photo Credit: Ashok Sah)