



Celebrating Bengal's finest tradition

by Ariful Islam Mithu

PHOTOS BY PRITO REZA

Landlords and well-off people in Sirajgang,

Pabna and Tangail regions in the past used to set out on recreational journeys for four or more days, riding on a 'Bajra'. These private boats mainly plied on the rivers Jumuna and Padma. However, the boat has disappeared from the country nearly forty years back.

Faridpur region's 'Bik' was a cargo boat with a capacity to carry 25 tonnes to 28 tonnes. A crew of seven to nine people ran the boat, which carried local materials including jute, paddy and so on. These boats have also disappeared from the country since 1985.

Again, another type of boat from Khulna area, locally known as *Padi* or *Bathnai*, was a cargo boat with a capacity to carry 140 tonnes

to 160 tonnes. These boats have not been seen in the country since 1995.

Including the above-mentioned ones, a total of 108 miniature boats, alongside several life-size ones, of more than 50 different types, with the depiction of the daily lives of the traditional boat builders, have been put on display at the Bangladesh National Museum's Nalinikanta Bhattashali gallery on March 23.

Non-government organisation Friendship in association with AB Bank has organised the month-long exhibition titled 'Traditional Boats of Bangladesh'.

Kishoreganj's Goina, Sylhet's Gosti, Mymensingh's Mayur Pankhi, Chandpur's Palki, Kushtia's Balar, Chilttagong's Shampan and Kutubdia's Balam and Tedi Balam have been put on display at the exhibition.



The exhibition has also housed materials traditionally transported by life-size boats including jute, ropes, bamboo and clay pottery, to create a sense of the daily life of the boats. The organisers are also screening documentaries for visitors to raise awareness of the impending loss of our ancient fleet.

According to the organisers, they held exhibitions nationally and internationally in the past, to create awareness of this age-old tradition and build model boats using the same craftsmen and ancient technology used for building full-scale vessels.

Their research and development section focuses on documenting techniques of building different types of boats, they added.

Boats, boat-building and traditions surrounding water-based communications have always been rich in Bangladesh and waterways and boats are an integral part of the country's communication system because of the country being the biggest deltaic plain in the world.

Bangladesh is a riverine country with nearly 700 rivers including Atrai, Bhoirab, Brahmaputra, Buriganga, Dhaleshwari, Gorai-Madhumati, Jamuna, Karnaphuli, Kopothakho, Karotoa, Meghna, Naf, Padma, Pusur, Shitalakshya, Surma and Teesta.

The organisers said that though sea vessels



from the Bay of Bengal had adopted exotic styles due to the influences of foreign traders, the wooden boats of the inland waterways had developed their own shapes and forms, free from foreign influences, into more than 50 different types.

These riverboats were built using skills and technology that have been passed down orally by boat-builders from generation to generation.

With the advent of cheap diesel engines the first revolution was the sudden motorisation of traditional boats. This enabled the crew to save costs of masts and sails. However, technological change caused the disappearance of marvellous rigging in less than five years.

These sudden changes are inescapably bringing an end to a rich, cultural heritage and technological know-how of Bangladesh. The thousands of years-old tradition, which has been passed on from generation to generation, is on the verge of being lost. This is also changing the lives and expectations of the families involved in the art and ritual of boat building.

The exhibition will remain open from 9:30am to 5:30pm till April 19. ♦