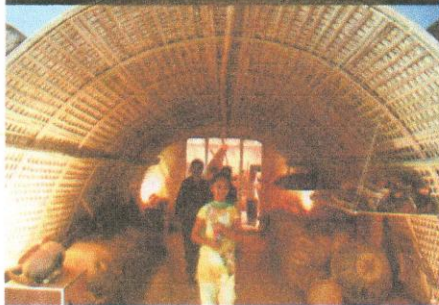


Heritage



Renewing an Ancient Tradition

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Entrance to the exhibition.



For centuries, wooden boats with large colourful sails have adorned the hundreds of rivers, tributaries and distributaries of Bangladesh, a country which is reputed to have the largest fluvial fleet in the world. Over the past few decades, however, wooden boats which make up an integral part of Bangladeshi culture have slowly been replaced by diesel powered steel vessels, which are less costly and overcome the navigational problems boatmen are faced with, when they encounter strong winds and high tides. This change has left the art of building boats, knowledge and skills, which have been passed on from generation to generation redundant, and *shrutar* or boat builders unemployed. Fearing the loss of an age-old tradition, Runa Khan Marre the executive director of the Friendship Association, with the help of her husband, Frenchman Yves Marre, has taken the initiative to save the last of the boats and the artistry of their craftsmen, and to raise awareness, both national and international about this issue.

Runa first discovered her passion for boats in 1994, the year she met her husband. Yves Marre had sailed to Bangladesh from France on a 38-metre barge, which was to be used for humanitarian purposes. He was staying with her parents when they first met and his interest in river vessels

turned out to be contagious. Their first joint project was the restoration of a 30-metre sailing boat called the malar, which they bought in 1996. It

took almost a year for local craftsmen to restore to its original form. The couple used this boat to set up the Contic River Cruise, in order to pay back the cost of restoration. This cruise now attracts influential foreign clients who make significant contributions to Bangladesh's tourist industry.

as a mini workshop for craftsmen, to demonstrate how the boats are built. These crafts men, Abdul Halim, a former fisherman and Manik Shutrathdor whose ancestors have all been boat builders for centuries have lost their livelihood since wooden boats are no longer in demand. Both Halim and Shutrathdor believe that there is no future for them in the boat building industry. "We are no longer teaching our skills to our children. We are sending



Craftsmen at work in a corner of the room.



Boats from different parts of Bangladesh on display.

Determined to preserve this heritage, Runa searched all over Bangladesh for skilled craftsmen and carpenters and hired them to build exact to-scale models of 50 types of boats from different districts of Bangladesh and to renovate life size boats including the palowari, the shampan and patham. The Friendship Association has organised exhibitions of these boats at the National Museum and the Bengal Gallery in 2005 and 2006. Four exhibitions have also been held in Europe and preparations are being made for a 3 month long exhibition in Luxembourg. A month long exhibition sponsored by AB Bank, which will end on April 1 is currently being held at the National Museum in Dhaka.

The entrance of the exhibition has been designed to resemble the inside of a boat, with an arched roof made of bamboo and piles of jute, rope and handicrafts on either side. Once drawn in by the soft inviting yellow lights, one can behold 57 miniature boats on display, on bamboo shelves, bundles of jute, coils of rope and even cargo boxes. These boats include the *basari* from Rajshahi, used for fishing, the *baidar nouka* from Pabna, which serves as a house beder, the *choronga* from Kishoreganj used as a cargo vessel, the *bajra* or house, a recreational boat from shirajganj used by the *zamindars* (landlords) and many more. Each boat has been built with attention to detail and the minute designs on them are eye catching. The exhibition also displays exquisite life size models of the *horonga* from Sylhet and the *Shampan* from Chittagong along with a few others. A corner of the room is being used

them to school to learn a new trade. There is no hope for them in this profession," says Halim. When asked about the lifespan of these wooden boats, Halim says "The boats used to be sturdier and more durable in the past when we used wood from the shaal trees, which would not get damaged by the water, but because shaal wood is hard to find these days, the boats need to be serviced and repainted every 3 years to keep them running. This becomes expensive."

The exhibitions have attracted attention from influential people in the country and a local businessman has agreed to finance part of Runa's next project, the Living Museum of Traditional Country Boats of Bengal, which will be open to the public in a few months. Under Runa's supervision, carpenters, blacksmiths, rope makers and sail makers from Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers as well as an island on the Bay of Bengal, have been working with ethnologists and marine architects using museum records and oral history to revive the forgotten techniques used to build wooden boats. At the living museum, locals and tourists will not only be able to watch these boats being restored and constructed from scratch, they will also be able to sail in them.

For a country that depends heavily on boats for trade and transport, boat building has been a source of livelihood for many. This project will not only help uphold an age long tradition, but ensure employment and hope for a better future for the craftsmen and artisans of Bangladesh who can preserve our cultural heritage for years to come. ■