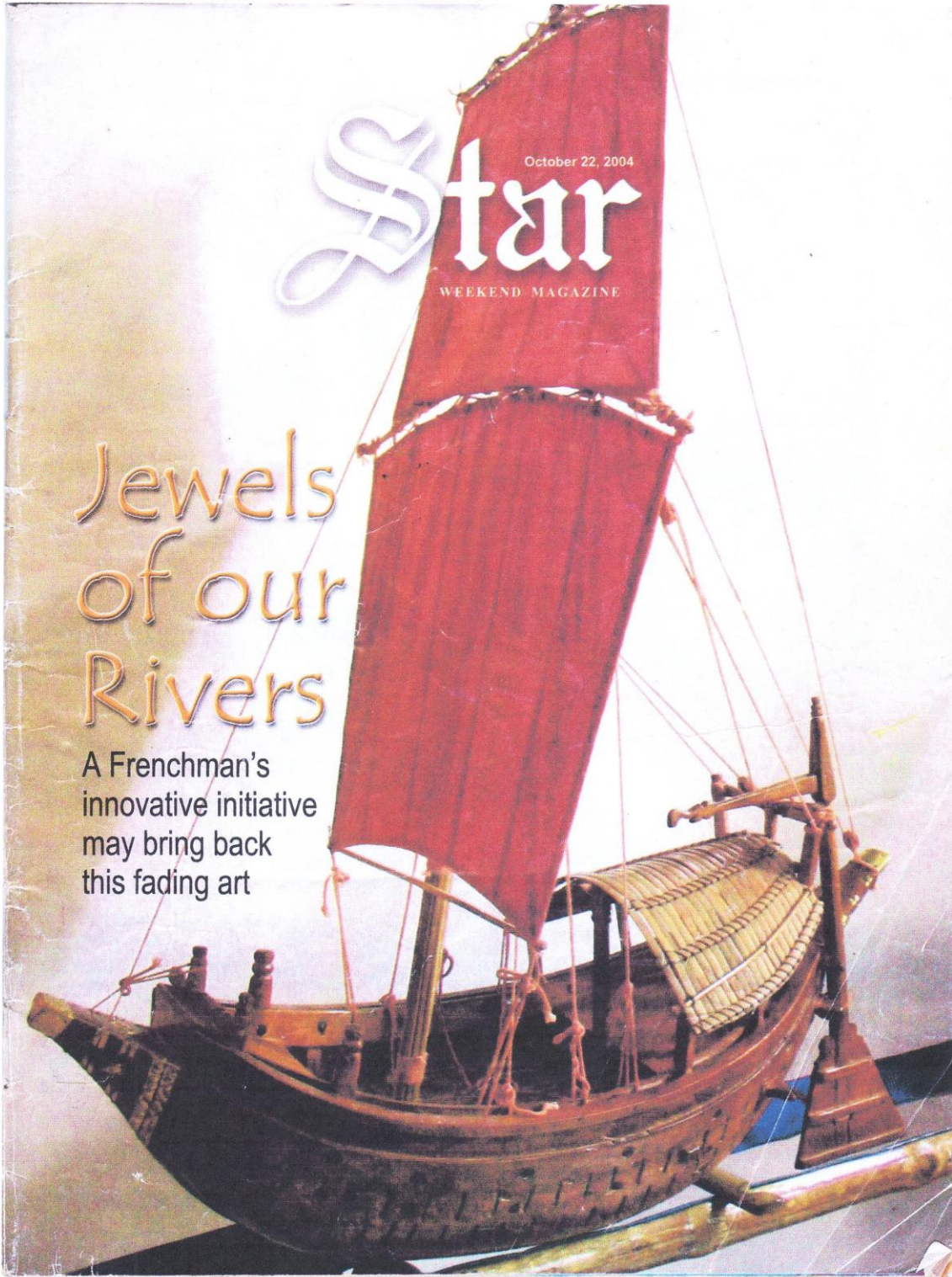


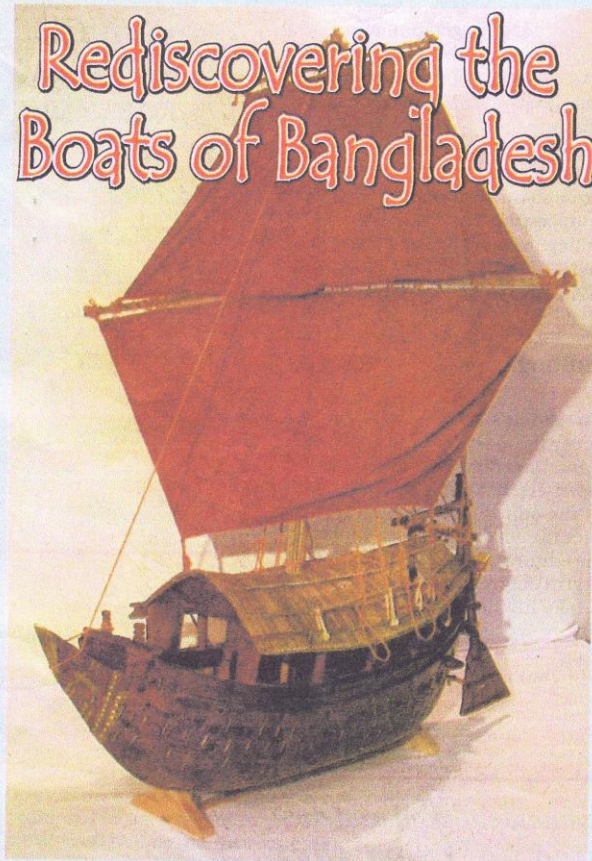
October 22, 2004
Star
WEEKEND MAGAZINE

Jewels of our Rivers

A Frenchman's
innovative initiative
may bring back
this fading art



Rediscovering the Boats of Bangladesh



Yves Marre and his wife Runa Marre together have reconstructed the history of boats of Bangladesh. This reconstruction called for not only an understanding of the speedy transformation of the marine landscape, where motored boats were taking over, but also a commitment that has necessitated a steady involvement over the last eight years. The main reward for the couple has been the realisation that they have helped uncover a treasure, which people have recognised.

Cover Photo: Zahedul I Khan
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● Letters	2
● Voicebox	4
● Chintito	5
● Newsnote	6
● A Roman Column	16
Al Qahira	
James Bond's Cairo and more	
● Perspective	18
Buy Bangladeshi	
● Musings	20
Hold Your Temper!	
● Flashback	21
Narayanganj	
An area in stagnant water	
● Exhibition	22
Neel for the Future	
● Fiction	24
● Time Out	26
● Perceptions	27
How Gory Do We Need to Get?	
● Impressions	28
The way of Life	
● International	30
An Encounter with	
Terror in Afghanistan	
● Slice of Life	32
The Man-Eaters of Today	
● Straight Talk	34
The Not-so Secret Garden	
● Trivia	35
● Education	36
● Sci-tech	38
● Dhaka Diary	40
● Health	41
● Jokes	43
● Book Review	44
● Books	45
● New Flicks	46
● Write to Mita	47
● Globetrotter	48

Rediscovering the

MUSTAFA ZAMAN

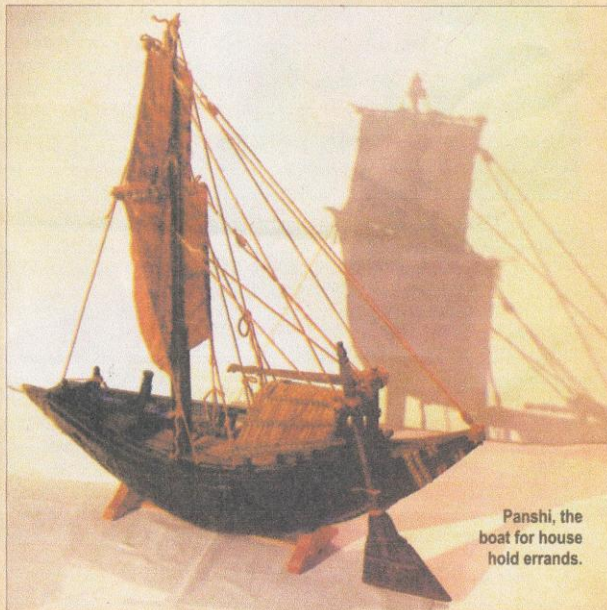
BAIDYONATH Sutradhar is a builder by lineage. His name -- Sutradhar -- stands for it. It is, in fact, the Bangla of 'carpenter'. Both his father and grandfather were boat builders. He hails from a char Kalyanpur on the river Jamuna, in the district of Pabna. For the builders, the end of monsoon usually meant the season of boat building. The *mahajans* used to come from far and wide to place their orders. The Kalyanpur *char*, after remaining submerged during the rainy season would transform into a bustling shipyard. Malar, Panshi, Dingi were the boats that Baidyonath used to build. He specialises in them and also makes all the other varieties, -- Ghugi, Balam, Ghashi, Padee and Horonga, to name a few.

A *mahajan* once asked Baidynath to build a 70 *hat* (yard) boat. He took it up as a challenge and started gathering *Shal* and *Garjan* wood with this huge project in mind. It took him 20 days to complete the boat and in the end, the cost stood at eight lakh taka.

All this seems like a fairytale now. The days of hectic schedule and building amazing new pieces are behind him. In fact, the whole culture of traditional boat-making took a blow when the engine-run boats were introduced. The *malar* boat that an enterprising couple Yves Marre and Runa Khan Marre transformed into their first tourist vessel was built by Baidynath himself. It was Haji Hazrat Ali, a *mahajan*, whose relationship with the master builder Baidyanath goes back a long way. The cargo-carrying *malar* of Ali that used to ply in the Jamuna ended up being bought by the same couple. In the words of Ali, one day in 1995, a *shaheb* (foreigner) came and started photographing the boat he owned. Later he accosted the owner with the offer of buying the boat. His name was Yves, and he was from France. Ali had no reason to sell his boat. However, Yves was a man bent on finding one that he could buy.

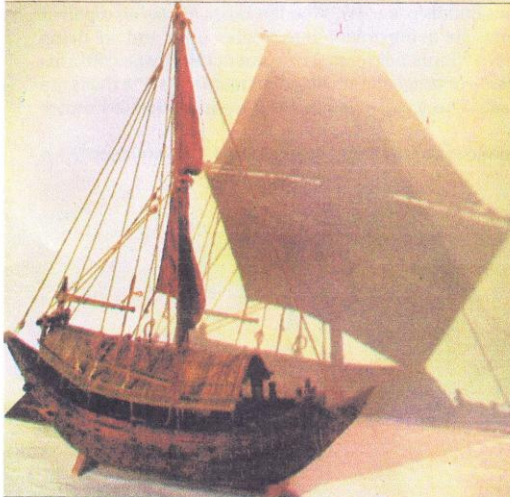
His hunt for a *malar* had started from Narayanganj. He was tipped off about a particular *malar* which had already left for Munshiganj when Yves went to look for it. He was relentless and followed its trail but ended up getting lured by another *malar* in the river Dhaleshwari near Munshiganj. Ali owned the boat. Yves, the explorer turned humanitarian activist turned conservationist, then convinced Ali to sell the boat to him. This was the first occasion that would later lead to a string of activities culminating in the show at the Bengal Shilpalaya, of small-scale boats of Bangladesh. In the exhibition, master builder

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Panshi, the boat for house hold errands.

Boats of Bangladesh



A malar, the cargo-carrying indigenous vessel.

Baidyanath was present with the other carpenters to demonstrate their craft. The man who made it happen comes from France and is ready to confer a 'gold medal' to Bangladeshis for their achievement in boat building.

Yves Marre's maiden visit to Bangladesh was back in 1994. It was a sojourn of two weeks. After that he came back one year later "sailing the riverboat that had been transformed into a Lifebuoy Friendship Floating Hospital". Yves's visit, back then, had a different purpose. "I came to Bangladesh with only one thing in mind, -- the 'floating hospital' project," clarifies Yves who has been living in Bangladesh since his second visit.

While the Floating Hospital project is thriving, Yves got involved with a different kind of work. Though not far removed from his vision that sprang from a practical understanding of the reality of Bangladesh, his new undertaking reveals a man empathetic to the culture of a populace where he is just a stranger. But this stranger has proved, to have tapped into a vast source of

Bangali history and pride. Yves and his wife Runa together have reconstructed the history of boats of Bangladesh. This reconstruction called for not only an understanding of the speedy transformation of the marine landscape, where motored boats were taking over, but also a commitment that has necessitated a steady involvement over the last eight years.

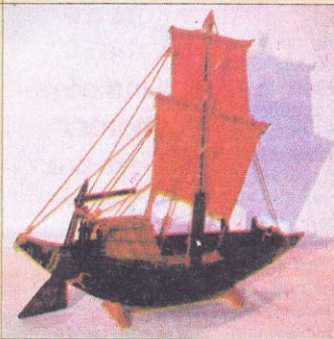
Yves goes back to the first few years of his endeavour. "The idea of boats were not in my mind at that time." When he began as a man bent on taking the clinic at the doors of the rural poor, he was



Dingi, the most ubiquitous boat in the river.

only a proponent of development, though his approach was new and in conformity with the riverine country. The preservationist in him emerged over the years, while he was at work out in the rivers.

Even at the onset, during his first entry in Bangladesh, Yves cleaved through the



Panshi

water as he took the route through the Sundarbans, the mangrove crisscrossed with rivers and creeks. "My first glance of Bangladesh was the river, it was the 14th of May 1994," Marre recalls. His entry of port was Mongla, Chittagong, but there was a cyclone in the Bay of Bengal and it hit Chittagong three days before his arrival. This spurred him to take the unusual route upon his arrival.

COVER STORY

Yves met Runa in Dhaka and she became not only his life partner but also someone who shared his vision and work. "I met Runa back in 1994, and when I came back we got married in 1996. I gave up my work in France as we decided to settle down in Bangladesh. It made us think of a source of income, and we thought of tourism using traditional boats," says Yves. It isn't solely from this that the idea of replicating the boats of Bangladesh took off. In Yves Marre's words, "It came slowly to us, on its own, by itself...." They arranged for the huge *malar* that was bought from Ali, the *mahajan*, as a tourist boat to ply from Narayanganj to the Sundarbans and even to the Bay of Bengal in winter when the sea is calm. "We rebuilt two *noukas* for tourism, -- a *malar* and a *panshi*. Not that people are availing the boats, although we remodeled them to bring them to a standard comfort and safety level. But these two boats are like museum pieces now," clarifies Runa.

IT all started back in the days when the tourist boats were being remade. "We were in Nagarbari, Pabna, in a building yard where boats were still being built as it was about seven or eight years ago. The bigger fleets of indigenous boats had not yet disappeared. We were amazed by the beauty of various boats then still plying," Yves recalls. "But after a few years, we saw them trickle down at a formidable rate. It is this that made us reach the conclusion that within two or three years there will be none," he continues. "Even in 1998 there was a kind of an equilibrium between the old boats and the newer ones. We noticed that it was not the same river, as sails were becoming a rare sight. From '98 onwards it sharply declined," adds Runa.

In 1999 at the Nagarbari boat-

building yard, there were only five boats being repaired. "Whereas in 1988 there were 20 boats in the same yard," Runa reflects. "There were not even five in the following year, hardly one or two in 2000, and now none," she maps the decline.

Marine landscape of today belies the past glory of the vessels with sails that used to swarm the rivers. That visual glory is replaced by the modern-day alternatives built to step up velocity.

The glory days of boat building is over. "Wooden boats are being repaired rather than built. Big ones are being broken into smaller units and are being used to build smaller ones," Runa discloses. The present riverscape confirms this. Other than a few *kosha* or *dingi*, the small indigenous boats, the rivers are full of steel-bodied boats. The wooden ones too have incorporated motor engines.

This is what progress does to tradition. "It happened in every country, it

The glory days of boat building is over. The present riverscape confirms this. Other than a few kosha or dingi, the small indigenous boats, the rivers are full of steel-bodied boats. The wooden ones too have incorporated motor engines. This is what progress does to tradition.



Deriving its name from the Chinese, the *sampan* has distinctive Chinese features.

happened in France long time ago. We are more aware of the loss as we have seen it before. Therefore, after being witness to the boats on the verge of extinction we thought of preserving them, even as museum pieces," proclaims Yves who has no complaint against modernisation of riverine transportation as he thinks it is less polluting.

Yves strongly feels that the past marine vessel specimens will have to be preserved. His contention has a clear ground. "Bangladesh has one of the oldest traditions in terms of naval carpentry, and it also has the largest fleets in the world. It is in Bangladesh that you will find the biggest number of different types of boats," he says. The sailors of the boats in



Boats on bails of jute, the display evokes an era when jute was one of the most precious cargo of these vessels.

Bangladesh had no awareness of this. The historical aspect is something that may escape the notice of the masses, but some people must pay attention. Yves and Runa did this in their own unique way. "As far as people are concerned, they are engaged in the battle of economic survival. Preservation is the duty of the people who have the means to do so. It is we who are responsible for maintaining the tradition," asserts Yves.

When he took it as a mission to keep the tradition of boat building alive, Yves did a little digging. "There are some texts, most of them are stories about boats of Bangladesh," he says.

There was no tradition of boat building in Bangladesh that used pre-construction drawing. In fact the tradition was stilted upon practical might, and the knowledge was handed down from one generation to the



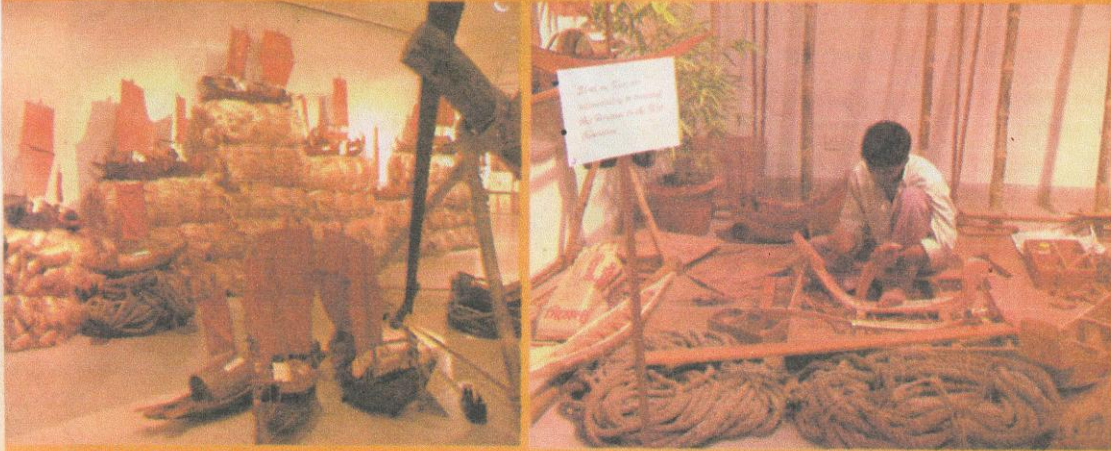
Yves and Runa Marre, the couple waking Bangladeshis out of their slumber.

next. "Before 1860 there were no trace of drawings let alone designs of the construction. In the National Marine Museum of France there are some drawings of Bangladeshi boats by a Frenchman. There must be other drawings in other places, it is also our mission to find out," Yves continues.

Although Bangladesh has a distinct marine tradition, it is also bound with that of the world. What is very interesting is that there are two different kinds of boats in Bangladesh. There are river fleets and the sea-going fleets. "The sea-going fleets had been influenced by the foreign fleets, the Chinese and Arabian fleets left an impact, but the river boats were built on indigenous knowledge alone," says Yves. It is his observation that the fleets of Bangladesh have never been mere copies of foreign ones. "They evolved on their own integrating the influences of technological advancement," he says. About the riverine boats, he contends that they remained the same. His deduction is based on the method of comparison.

"The radar of the river-plying boats can be compared to that of the Phoenicians'. I don't mean they were influenced by the Phoenicians, rather they were built in the same era proving that the

COVERSTORY



Snapshots from the exhibition: The display not only created an ambience but was also based on a concept; the demonstration of the master carpenter and his associates' of their art, was an essential part.

tradition in Bangladesh go back three or four thousand years," he adds.

Riverboats of Bangladesh have sails that cannot go against the wind. "The technology of going against the wind was known by the Arabs and the Latinos. Bangladeshis did not know this. But the technology of using the steel-staples to put the planks of the hull together is in use. It indicates that the marine history of Bangladesh goes back at least three thousand years," Yves explains.

To date the technology, the Marre couple uses is a historical method of comparison and they deduce that it was during the early days of civilisation that the people in this delta had evolved this expertise that has largely remained uninfluenced by foreign knowledge. "There was hardly any influence from abroad as far as the indigenous variety is concerned. This is why you have so much variety," declares Yves who has religiously pursued his passion -- the boat building project.

Professionally Yves is a mixture of many expertises. He is not a doctor but came up with the idea of running a floating hospital. Now he and his wife are steering their own organisation which aims to preserve the heritage of Bengal. It is not out of whim that Yves began to dream of a museum solely dedicated to the boats of Bangladesh. His love affair with the rivers goes back a long time. "I even spent three months plying through the creeks of the Amazon forests," he says. His involvement always had a purpose, he did a stint as aviator for the Flying Doctors. An adventurer at the core of his being, Yves travelled across the globe "for more than 200 times" by air and once by a barge across the Atlantic in 1993. That same man settled down in Bangladesh and is now thinking of

raising money for the boat museum.

His ideas were anchored in the reverine reality of Bangladesh from the start. "The floating hospital project is evolving and more and more patients are being treated," he says. The sole hospital that plies from Gaibandha and Chilmary will be multiplied by next year. The second one will very soon be launched and some small boats will also operate as clinics. As his hospitals have been also tied up with the river, his transformation from the purveyor of



Remnants of a boat to remind the viewers of the consequence if the tradition of boat building is not kept alive.



They were not only made to look like the originals but also made according to the traditional methods. The carpenters were trained to replicate the method they traditionally apply while building the originals.

development ideas to a preservationist seems natural.

However, the task was huge. "It was not very easy to go and find boat carpenters; they usually have their building yards along the banks of the three big rivers. At Nagarbari, on the bank of the Jamuna, we spotted a master carpenter as we were looking for the best builders who are still working," says Runa. The couple started searching for them as early as in 1996. And once they were in touch with one, it is through him that they got hold of other carpenters from other areas. Then they were stumbled upon the problem of making smaller models. "They (the carpenters) had to be trained to make smaller models. We had to make them understand that they could not use just ordinary nails for the models, the 18 inch nails that are usually used were reduced for the models," explains Runa.

The exhibition that dazzled the Dhaka cognoscenti at the Bengal Shilpalaya was not just an occasion to present mere replicas of traditional Bangladeshi boats. They were not only made to look like the originals but also made according to the traditional methods. The carpenters were trained to replicate the method they traditionally apply while building the originals. "Even in boat museums across Europe you will not find boats that replicate the process of making. Most of them are mere models that look like the original," says Yves.

Training began in 2001 and a lot of pragmatic issues needed to be solved during the building of the models. "They had to figure out what type of wood could be used, as it would be difficult to bend the planks when the scale is being drastically reduced," Runa relates. But the boats had to be made out of the usual stock of wood. The Marres did not want to go for materials that were easier to handle but were never used in building boats. All this took a lot of time. But in the end the results were astonishing.

Sitting among the models in his office, Yves reflects on his endeavour. "It is a new concept in curating, the technologies and the traditions were replicated in these boats." "With the marine museums in Europe, the model makers are never the ones who are the traditional boat makers. Usually the boats are reproduced from drawings or sketches or pictures. They look nice but unlike ours the process was never replicated," He adds. Even the sails, which many thought failed to match the variety found in reality, are made of the same cheapest cotton that has been in use for hundreds of years. The colour of the sails too had been in conformity with the tradition. "They were even dyed with the same colour, which is earth. This is the colour that a new sail traditionally used to have. The white sails and patches are the inevitable changes that take place over time," Runa clarifies.

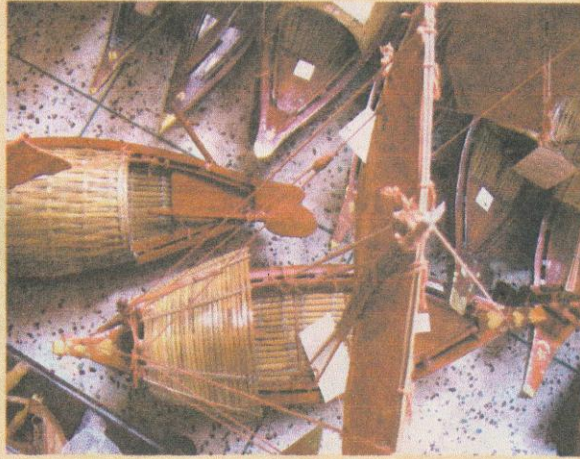
COVER STORY

YVES took one of the models to Paris and showed it to the model makers of the marine museum in Paris. They as well the curator took so much interest in it that "they came to have a look as it was a new concept." For Dhaka's viewers it was a time of reclamation; never in their wildest dreams could they realise that boats could be a source of pride. The show at the Bengal Shilpalaya has rediscovered a whole new frontier that no one knew existed. The variety and the richness of the tradition have never been considered before. It is ironic that a European had to unearth this treasure trove of a nation known for its inordinate attachment to traditional beliefs.

Twenty-five small-scale boats were built and 23 were put on display at the gallery. In Bangladesh, the names of the boats may confuse many, as one boat has many names. "It changes according to the regions, as does the rivers," Runa chips in. "The sea-going boats have foreign names. As for the river-going ones the names are always Bangladeshi. The Bangla name *dingi* is now being used around the world. The British took the name *dingi*, it is also the same in France," informs Yves.

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The week-long exhibition that kicked off on October 5 at the Bengal gallery was an exotic sight. The miniature boats were displayed on bails of jute, sacks, wooden boxes and even coiled ropes. Even the remnants of a boat at the front room was displayed as if a wayfarer on a *char* was discovering it. The show also included a master builder working on his model boat at the end of the second room



The Marre couple's carefully constructed treasure.

of the gallery. "The anchors and ropes are from our own boats, the sails used for the backdrop are also from actual boats, and the sacks and bails are a reminder of the cargo the boats usually carry," explains Yves. "We wanted the people to get a feeling of the past, the history of the boats and what these boats were really about," he says. The comment from an art connoisseur sums up their effort, "This was not an exhibition but a museum."

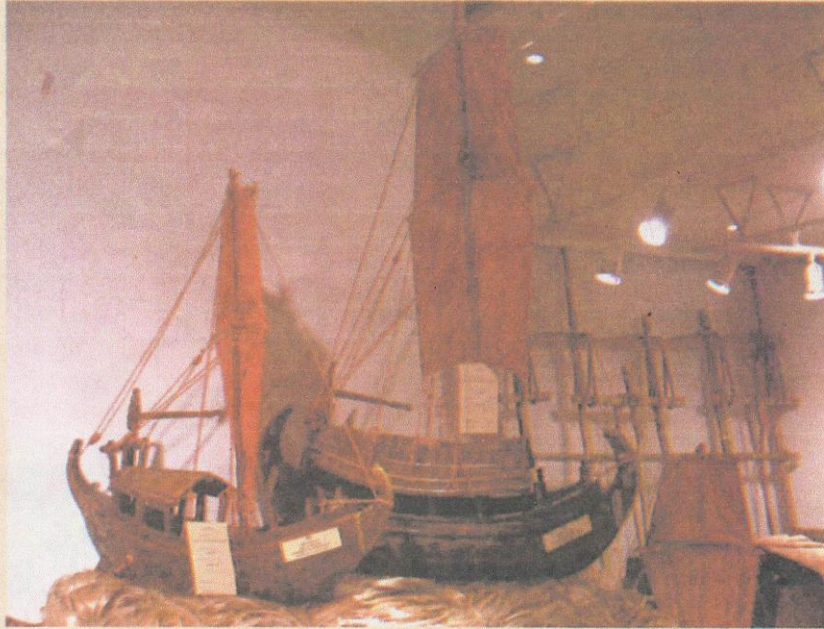
The exhibition made an effort to generate awareness on how this tradition could be preserved. To elucidate the concept of decay they presented a fossil-like boat in one end. However, at the other end there was this master carpenter and his apprentices at work, alluding to the effort that can go to revive the tradition even in different forms.

Yves has plans for the museum to have an ancillary wing to promote tourism through traditional boats. "A tourist would love to sail on a boat which has a history of several thousand years, which literally is a museum piece" he claims. This is the

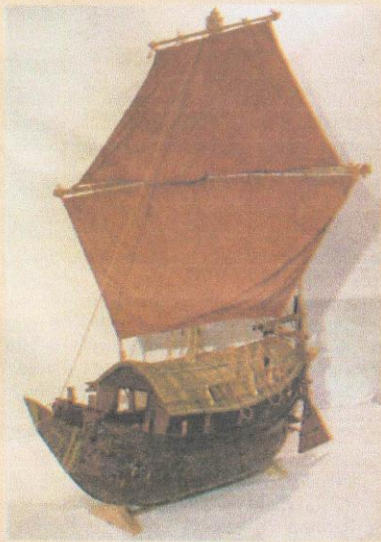
Two views of a fishing boat.



To be able manage the financial aspect of this project was a tough hurdle. A friend of the Marres, who lives in the US, had initially provided them with the funds. During the last eight years, a lot of their own money was poured in to continue the model-building efforts.



Podi boats are found in the river Rubsha in Khulna, their size ranges from 40 to 60 feet.



The cargo-carrying malars are found in the rivers near Pabna, they are usually 70 to 90 feet long.

kind of tourism that the Marre couple has initiated.

To be able manage the financial aspect of this project was a tough hurdle. A friend of the Marres, who lives in the US, had initially provided them with the funds to launch their boat-building project. During the last eight years, a lot of their own money was poured in to continue the model-building efforts. Now, at this point, after the show, which was fully sponsored by the Bengal Shilpalya, they cannot sustain the project on their own. "We have made some efforts to raise awareness in the local as well as in the international communities to lend us a hand. And we have already received some responses in terms of interest," says Yves. Several countries have shown interest in the project, but how they will help them contact the museums and organisations that would finally be their sponsors are yet to be mapped. Yves is hopeful, "The main thing is that the project took off, and we hope that it will create a snowball effect."

The main reward for the couple has been the realisation that they have helped uncover a treasure, which people have recognised. "It gives me pleasure to think that we could make them feel proud of their own ingeniousness in boat building. The exhibition also made people of all walks of life aware that it is something worth saving and that this is the time to act," Yves exclaims.

Many ambassadors and local influential personalities have come to savour the beauty of these boats and to respond to the crying need of their preservation. The Marre couple's dream project has now reached what they themselves term as a 'synergy' from where the journey to make the living boat museum a reality begins.