

The boat sister

Runa Khan Marre has won the Rolex Enterprise Award this year for her initiative in conserving the traditional craft of boat-building in Bengal. But Tahmina Shafique finds out there is much to her than helping the local craftsmen

AT THE remote coastal areas and shoals she is known as the 'Noida Apsara'—boat sister, roughly translated—the woman who has helped restore the rich heritage of boat building, an age-old livelihood, Noida Apsara has also made health care accessible with her floating hospital.

At forty-eight, she is energetic, laconic and passionate. Back at the shoals, she laughs and works with the boat builders as though she were one of them. One cannot help but wonder if she is indeed the Noida Apsara at the ambassadorial parties in Dhaka in her high heels and evergreen charm.

If Runa Khan Marre were to write a biography, it would have much more than her recent title of being the first Bangladeshi to win the prestigious Rolex Enterprise Award this year or restoring the heritage of boat building in Bangladesh, it would also be the tale of a woman of many avatars—home-making, fashion designing, teaching, writing, working as a columnist and about 'friendship', the floating hospital.

Determined and unconventional are perhaps just a couple of words to describe Runa. She always picked the unlikely jobs. 'People thought I was not fit for the kind of work I did, with my high heels and deodorant,' she says at her Dhaka-based non-governmental organisation Friendship.

'I always did things the unconventional way and that certainly raised a whole lot of questions and disapproval from many people, but I guess what kept me going all the time was determination and confidence in whatever step I took.'

Having married at the age of eighteen, Runa found herself somehow trapped in the role of housekeeping and looking after her two children. 'There was so much I wanted to discover and do, but my marriage kept getting bitter,' she remembers. It was during this time, that she wrote some

of the best books for children, that have now been included as part of the school curriculum in many schools including Vajrapurissa Noon and Agrani Girls School. 'I also taught special needs students as a young girl, so I also built a special curriculum for them.'

After publishing ten books including a revised version of children's fairytales, she shifted to fashion designing in 1990. 'I was living in a joint family with no room for being able to write, so I shifted to something I could do at home and fashion designing was just that. With the success of the outlet and her clothing lines being displayed in Europe, it was evident that she could achieve greater heights, had she continued with it.'

One fine morning I woke up and realised, I did not want to spend the rest of my life designing women's clothes. I wanted reach out to the people, somehow, she adds with a hint of nostalgia. 'I closed down the boutique the next day. The decision was filled by my divorce.'

Being a single mother with two children, I had to earn a living. I started as a consultant for Akitel, and surprisingly I did very well! I know it sounds strange, but my divorce following the bitter marriage did not hold me back. It rather opened new frontiers.

'There was a time I felt there is something seriously wrong with me,' she says. 'I did not face problems being single and as I continued working and came up with unique ideas, people thought I was turning into a man!' she chuckles.

The year 1994, not only brought a new dimension to her life but also romance. 'I discovered a new world and a new form of happiness,' she says, beaming affectionately. 'Yves Marre was staying with my parents in Dhaka after sailing from France to Bangladesh on a 380-tonne river barge to be

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The floating hospital

'LIFEBUOY Friendship Hospital' is a source of hope for the thousands of islanders who live without electricity, healthcare or any other modern amenities. 'These people are the poorest, the most inaccessible and the most neglected,' says Runa Khan Marre.

In 1994, when Yves Marre (now Runa's husband) came to Bangladesh with a river barge, a 380-tonne oil tanker to have it converted into a floating hospital, Runa decided to reach out to these people.

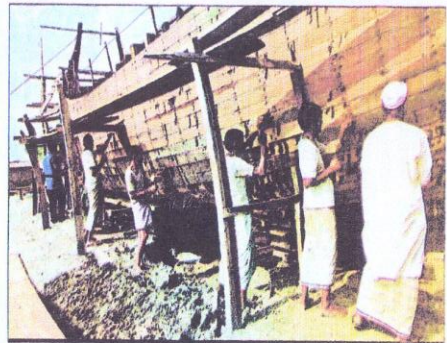
'When we started our search for donors, many rejected. However, it was Lifebuoy out of all the host of donors, who agreed to give us the opportunity to start something challenging and new,' she remembers. 'The superstructure was then built, the reformation made and the dream of the floating hospital to reach these shoals finally came true,' she smiles.

The floating hospital sails up to the shoals especially in the north of the country. 'The floating hospital sails to the shoals in remote areas of Gubbindia and Kurigram where healthcare is essential,' remarks Runa.

'Today Friendship Lifebuoy hospital has 36 satellite programs in 32 islands in the northern areas of Bangladesh. Last month around 11,500 people were treated there,' adds Runa.

Through the satellite programme, Friendship brings local and international professionals for health and rural social education.

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ANSHU BHOWMIK

The boat sister

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used for humanitarian purposes. He wanted someone to make use of it and it was then that I got to know him.'

'He wanted the barge to be converted into a floating hospital. That was how the seed of the organisation "Friendship" was put in place,' she remembers. Since 1998, the organisation has addressed need-based health and development issues to help the marginalised segments.

'His passion for the river and boats turned out to be so contagious,' she tells me as her eyes sparkle with warmth and passion. 'And it did not take me long either to become addicted.'

As the romance grew, things started getting better. And a happy marriage followed. It was because of him that Runa experienced the life at the shoals and found her niche in preserving the boats in Bangladesh.

One of their first joint achievements was the restoration of a *Malar*, a 30-metre sailing boat they bought in 1996, which took local craftsmen over a year to bring back to life. 'My husband's technical expertise, coupled with my own ability "to get things done", helped us establish a bond of mutual trust with the marginalised chair people,' she explains.

'The realisation of the fact that this rich heritage was dying struck me. It's a pity that in less than two decades, the traditional boats started to disappear. The cost of modernisation is the loss of the traditional fleet together with the skills needed to build and maintain wooden boats. The number of craftsmen is also dwindling,' she tells me with a hint of concern. 'Their techniques have been passed down from generation to generation for over 3,000 years. So is it not our responsibility to restore such a craft?'

What struck Runa more than anything else was the life at the shoals. 'I guess the impact is more, when you see the sufferings of these people for the first time in your life. I cannot explain how terribly they live there—it is a picture of poverty at its worst. It broke my heart,' she says, overcome with emotion.

As much as it hurt Runa, it also built within her strong sense of determination and confidence. It was with this determination that she started her work

'That's when the "Friendship Lifebuoy" floating hospital became a greater challenge. And it is due to the support and determination of many people, that we are treating around 11,500 people of the shoals, every month,' she says proudly.

About the boats, we realised we needed to save the knowledge and techniques of the traditional boat builders. So we gathered boat builders from across the country and offered them to make scale models in exchange of a token money.'

It certainly was not an easy task to convince them and begin something like this. 'These were men who had been building 90-foot (28-metre) boats and we were asking them to come and make models! But they agreed soon.

'They all stayed at my garage and made these models. Touched by their compassion and effort, a close friend gave them the money to begin with their work. It's now been six years since we initiated preservations of this old Bengali craft.

There are now hundreds of these replicas, reproducing 27 different types of boats which are built using the same techniques and materials as those for full-sized boats. They provide an accurate record from which carpenters are able to build life-size boats. 'So in a way, we provided employment to carpenters, blacksmiths, rope makers and unskilled people as well as those who now work for the Living Museum which will open to the public by mid-2007.'

'Abul Khair Litu has given us the land for this museum, including an exhibition area, a model-building workshop, shop and research centre.' It was this endeavour that earned her the Rolex Enterprise Award.

As her assistant rushes her for her next meeting to draw up the plans for a second floating hospital, she says, 'I try to live my life according to my belief, whether I finally succeed or not is irrelevant. As long as I can make a difference and leave something behind for this country, my purpose is served.'

'I love this country and its people. My strength comes from my husband's love, my father's trust, my children, my roots, the smiles of the people of the shoals, and the dedication and commitment of the people of our organisation.'

The floating hospital

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which provide paramedical care, special treatment for women and children, child nutrition and identify needs for secondary care interventions. 'Under this particular programme, we also run 10 schools for the children on 10 shoals in prefabricated buildings, for which we have trained local island based teachers.'

Over a week, the hospital performs approximately 40 operations including cataract, cleft lips and hernia. 'The ship is well equipped with the latest X-ray machines, separate dedicated units for ENT, dental and gynaecological and general health.

'International specialists from the Swedish Doctor Bank, Humaniterra from France and Dutch medical groups fly in to train the local doctors and carry on

with operations,' she explains. 'They help our doctors give secondary level surgical interventions to the people of these remote areas.'

The success of the hospital has been remarkable. Friendship has recently launched the first river ambulance. It has been designed by the famous naval architect in the world today, Marc Van Peteghem,' says Runa enthusiastically.

The success, inevitably, encouraged Runa and her team more than ever. 'Friendship, with the association of Emirates Airlines Foundation is constructing a second floating hospital, which is expected to begin its operation from mid 2007.'

'The happiness that I get out of seeing a smile is just priceless. I am glad that through our effort we have been able to make a difference to the lives of people.'