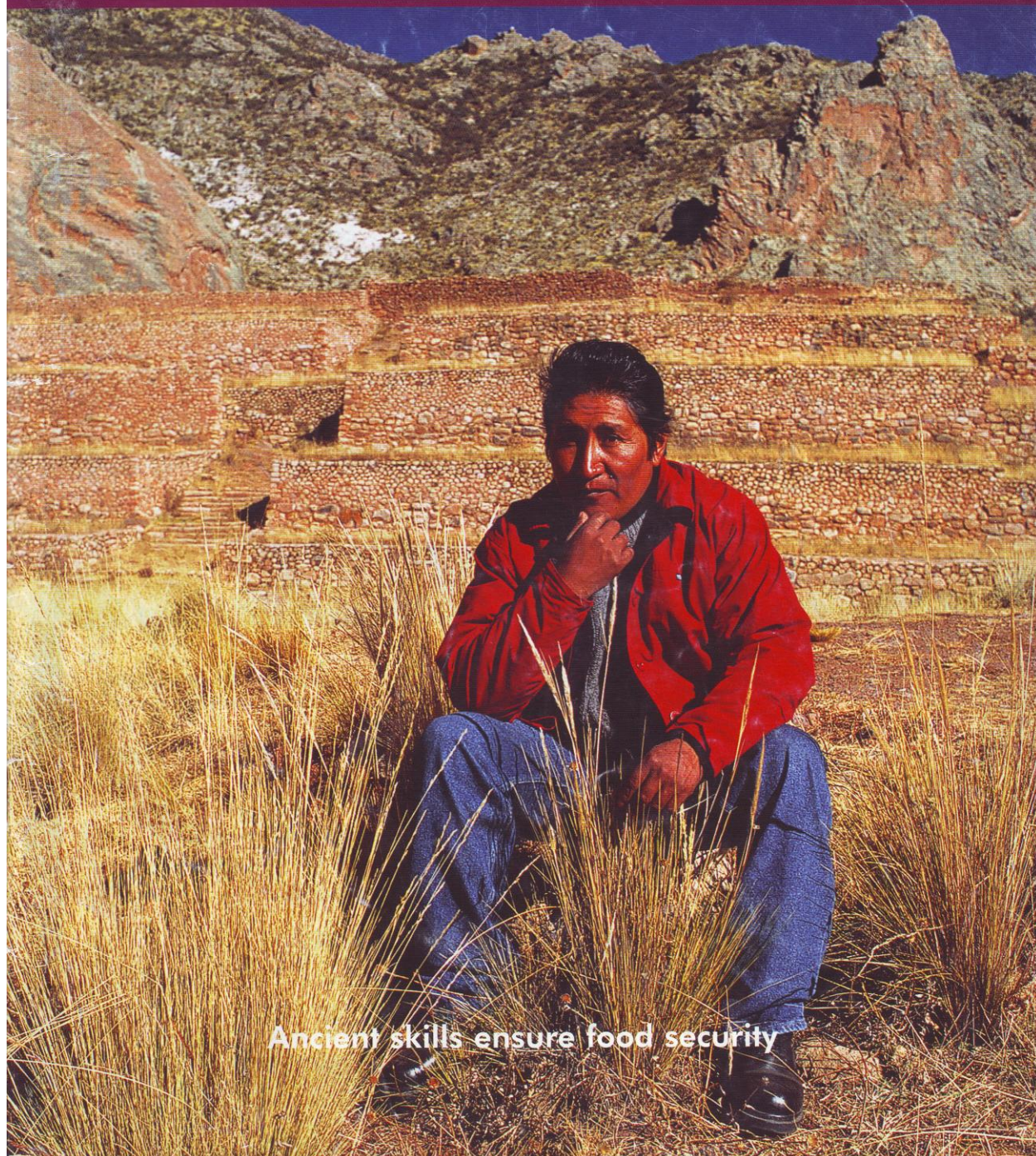


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# Appropriate Technology

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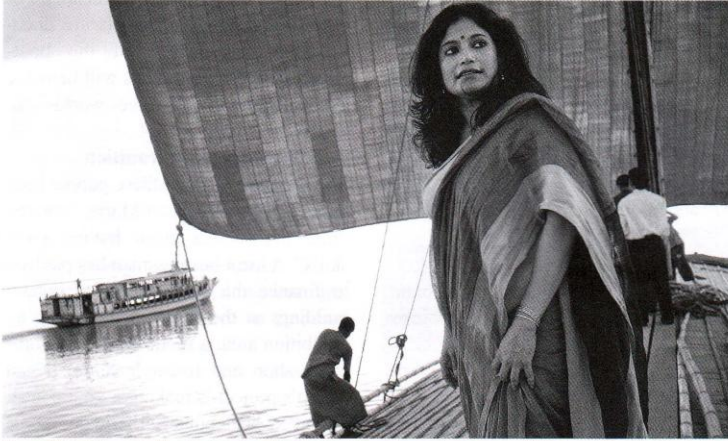


Ancient skills ensure food security



# Boat building tradition preserved

In recent decades the boat-building tradition of Bangladesh, which dates back several thousand years, has practically disappeared as all but the smallest boats have been superseded by noisy, diesel-powered, steel-plated vessels. Now Runa Khan Marre is restoring traditional, wooden boats and preserving the skills needed to construct them at a 'living museum', bringing glory – and tourists – to her country's waterways.



Runa Khan Marre on the last malar afloat, a traditional wooden cargo sailing boat, the first that she restored with local craftsmen in 1996.

*Credit: Rolex Awards/Heine Pedersen*

Until 20 years ago visitors to Bangladesh could witness a spectacle from another era, as hundreds of thousands of wooden sailing boats transported people and goods along the country's network of rivers. Since the mid-1980s, however, Bangladesh's riverscapes have changed beyond recognition: diesel-powered steel vessels have replaced nearly all traditional boats.

But 47-year-old Runa Khan Marre is determined that the Bangladeshi tradition of boat-making will not be lost. She and her husband, Frenchman Yves Marre, have ensured that Bangladeshis and tourists will soon be able to watch over 40 different types of traditional wooden river and sea craft being both restored and built from scratch by skilled craftsmen – and sail in them – at a 'living museum' on the banks of the River Dhaleswari, 20 kilometres north of the capital, Dhaka. With her Rolex Award, Runa Khan Marre will finalise preparation of the museum, pay for more boats to be restored, give employment to many craftsmen and bring pride and tourism revenues to her nation.

## The threat to ancient boats and traditional skills

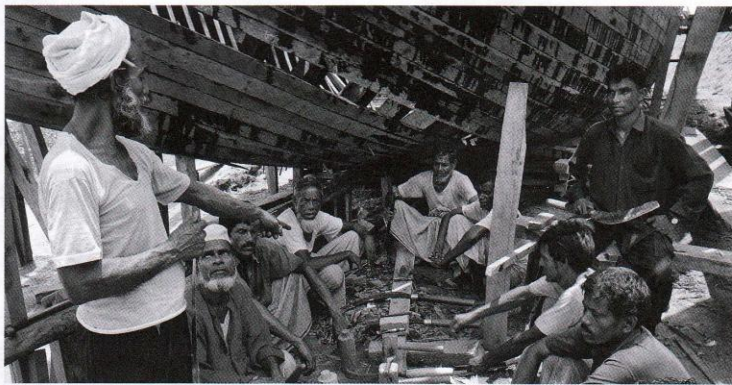
Bangladesh has 600 named rivers, totalling 24,000 kilometres in length, in an area a quarter the size of France; three major rivers, the Padma (Ganga), Jamuna (Brahmaputra) and Meghna, form the world's biggest delta. With between 750,000 and a million boats plying its waterways, Bangladesh is believed to have the world's biggest fluvial fleet. On average the nation's

147,570 square-kilometre land mass lies five metres above sea level, and during the monsoon period up to 60 per cent of the country is flooded. It is thus not surprising that powered boats, whose hulls cost a fifth the price of wooden ones, have been so successful, especially given that diesel engines overcome the navigational problems faced by traditional vessels with sails unable to stand up to strong winds. But the cost of modernisation is the loss of the traditional fleet together with the skills needed to build and maintain wooden boats: most of the craftsmen are now aged over 50 in a country where life expectancy is 62. Their remarkable techniques, passed down verbally from generation to generation, date back more than 3,000 years to the Phoenicians.

## A successful partnership

Leading a project to preserve boat-building is an unlikely occupation for a woman from an aristocratic Muslim background. But, early in her adult life, Khan Marre demonstrated her resourcefulness by setting up a fashion house and a security firm. Then, after overseeing the implementation of a major educational programme, she established, in 1998, the Friendship Association to provide health care in a floating hospital, flood relief and educational assistance to the impoverished inhabitants of the islands of the Brahmaputra River.

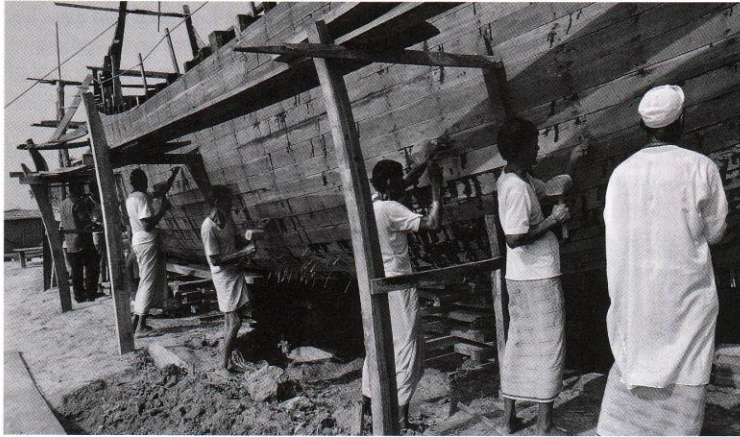
She was already known for her ability to implement challenging projects when, in 1994, she met Yves Marre, who was staying with her parents in



To ensure his skills and knowledge are passed on, each master carpenter at Khan Marre's Living Museum supervises a team of workers and apprentices.

*Credit: Rolex Awards/Heine Pedersen*





At the Living Museum, carpenters from the Bay of Bengal area build from scratch a sea-faring shampan, one of the over 40 types of traditional Bangladeshi boats that will be preserved.

*Credit: Rolex Awards/Heine Pedersen*

Dhaka after sailing, from France to Bangladesh, a 38-metre river barge to be used for humanitarian purposes. He brought more than romance into her life as his passion for boats proved to be contagious. "I discovered a new world," Khan Marre recalls, "and within months I was hooked." 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. She explains that her husband's technical expertise, coupled with her own ability 'to get things done', helped them establish a bond of mutual trust with the marginalised riverine people traditionally involved in boat-building.

#### Small beginnings

The couple then set up Contic River Cruise, which runs up-market river excursions on the malar. Established initially to repay the money they had borrowed for the restoration, the business now attracts influential foreign clients vital to Bangladesh's fledgling tourist industry. In 1999, determined to prevent boat-building skills from disappearing, Khan Marre searched Bangladesh for master ships carpenters, commissioning them to build scale models, each about 65 centimetres long, of boats from across the country. These replicas - there are now hundreds of them, reproducing 27 different types of boat - are built using the same techniques and materials as those for full-

size boats. They provide an accurate record from which carpenters are able to build life-size boats.

#### The birth of an idea

"Once we saw the first models, and the success they enjoyed, we realised we had to do more," Khan Marre recalls - and the idea of a living museum was born. Since 2004, carpenters, blacksmiths, ropemakers and sailmakers have been working at the Living Museum of Traditional Country Boats of Bengal, which opens to the public in April 2007. Carpenters from the Brahmaputra River have restored one of only two remaining 15-metre-long palowary boats, which have stapled hulls, while their counterparts from the Meghna River have

constructed from scratch what is now the world's only patham, a fine example of a smooth-skinned boat. A team of carpenters from an island in the Bay of Bengal are building a seafaring shampan using techniques forgotten in Bangladesh, but revived with the help of Western marine architects and ethnologists, as well as museum documents and oral history. For each vessel, naval architects are documenting every stage of the boat-building, and their records will be made available to marine archives worldwide.

#### Building a place for tradition

The project has given these people back their dignity, says Khan Marre, "and the pride that comes from having great skills". A local businessman has pledged to finance the construction of several buildings at the museum, including an exhibition area, a model-building workshop, shop and research centre. Khan Marre's project is making a vital contribution to her country's heritage. Annie Montigny, of the Muséum national d'Histoire Naturelle, in Paris, says that of all of Bangladesh's cultural heritage, "these river boats deserve, more than anything else at present, urgent attention and development. The skills of the boat-building artisans are disappearing, and must be saved."

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Khan Marre (left) observes carpenters adopt traditional techniques to turn one of only two remaining staple-hulled palowari boats on its side by using bamboo scaffolding as a winch.

*Credit: Rolex Awards/Heine Pedersen*