



Bangladeshi fleet drops anchor in French museums

Runa Khan Marre's dream of saving Bangladesh's intricate boat-building tradition was partly inspired by her husband, Frenchman Yves Marre, who in 1994 sailed a 38-metre river barge from France to Bangladesh so that it could be used for humanitarian purposes. Her efforts to reproduce the many types of craft once used on Bangladesh's busy waterways are now attracting widespread interest in France and other European countries.

Runa Khan Marre, who was selected as an Associate Laureate in 2006 for her project to preserve her nation's ancient, boat-building heritage, lent two full-scale sailing craft and 50 small-scale replicas to France's Musée national de la Marine (National Maritime Museum) between January and November 2008.

The museum has several major exhibition areas across France and the boats were displayed at two of them, the Palais de Chaillot in Paris and the Château de Brest in Brittany. Many thousands of people visited the exhibition, and museums in Luxembourg, Sweden, The Netherlands and the United Kingdom have expressed interest in hosting the extensive display in 2009.



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Khan Marre, who prepared the exhibition with her husband, Frenchman Yves Marre, explains that the Musée national de la Marine was interested in exhibiting the boats because they are faithful reconstructions of real boats. "The replicas are made by the same traditional craftsmen who construct the full-scale boats for sailing on Bangladeshi waterways," she says. "These are not model boats. They are created as

closely [to the originals] and authentically as is possible. The original full-scale boats brought livelihood and pride to generations of sailors in my country."

The replicas, each measuring between 40cm and a metre in length, illustrate 42 different types of boats that were, until the 20th century, an important means of transport in Bangladesh. Two carpenters also travelled from Bangladesh to Paris for the exhibition.

The Associate Laureate adds that the exhibition in Europe – “Voiles anciennes du Bangladesh” (Ancient Sails of Bangladesh) – is a welcome opportunity to promote awareness of Bangladesh’s rich maritime tradition, as a political and financial crisis in her country forced her in 2007 to put on hold her plans to open the Living Museum of the Wooden Boats of Bengal. “Local funding dried up because of the political crisis during which many business people were jailed,” she says. But, with the December 2008 elections now over, Khan Marre is confident that the building in which the living museum will be located can now be renovated.



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The Living Museum is one of five sectors of activity supported by Friendship International, a non-governmental organization founded by Khan Marre and her husband. The NGO helps about 53,000 people a month, mainly in Bangladesh but also in Pakistan, and is directed at the very poorest sector of the population. The other areas of activity are health (through supporting, for example, mobile hospitals on boats), education (establishing schools in villages), relief and reconstruction and sustainable income generation.

Khan Marre says the most difficult project to raise funds for is the museum. “No one wants to give money for a cultural project, it’s uphill work, though I can get funds for humanitarian work,” she explains. “The funds from my Rolex Award have been very useful to maintain the boats and the replicas, so that everything will be ready when the building [that will house the museum] has been renovated.”

Francesco Raeli and Edmund Doogue

In 2008, the French capital also played host to [Kikuo Morimoto](#) and [Alexandra Lavrillier](#) as they presented their work to the public.