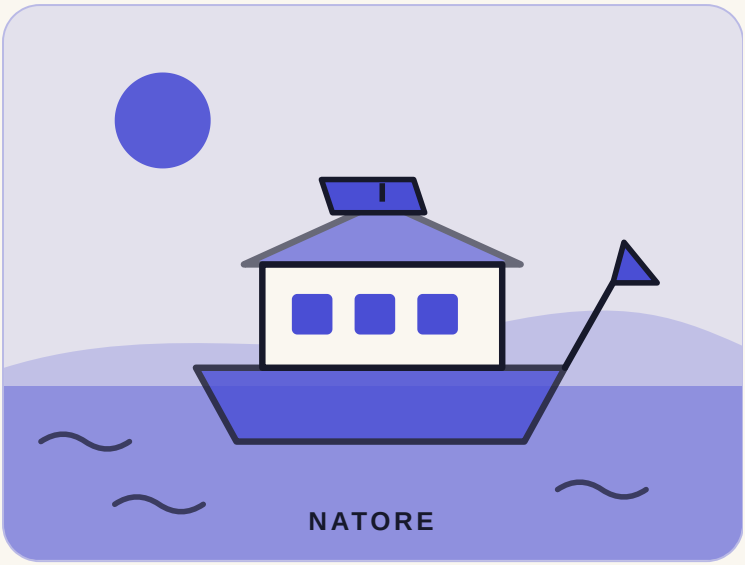

BANGLADESH

The architect who put schools on boats

When floods cut off the villages, a Bangladeshi architect built schools that float and sail to the children.

WHERE	Natore, northwest Bangladesh
WHO	Mohammed Rezwan, an architect who built floating schools
WHEN	1998 to 2018

4 min read

CHAPTER ONE

The story

Mohammed Rezwan grew up in a low, flat part of Bangladesh. Every year, the monsoon rains brought floods. Roads went under water. Villages were cut off.

As a child, he found it hard to get to school in the floods. His family had a small boat that took him. Many of his friends and relatives could not get to school. Some dropped out for good.

A different question

Rezwan became an architect, a person who designs buildings. He wanted to build schools and hospitals in his home area. But buildings there often sat under water in the monsoon.

So he asked a new question. What if the school came to the children? In 1998, he began on his own, with about $500 and one computer. It took him four years to build the first school boat.

> **If the children can't go to school for lack of transportation, then the schools should go to them.**
>
> MOHAMMED REZWAN, QUOTED BY NPR

1998	2002	23
year he began, with about $500	year the first school boat sailed	school boats in 2018

School at the riverbank

Local builders make the boats from his design, with local materials. Each boat has one classroom and a blackboard. The computer runs on solar panels, which turn sunlight into power.

Each morning, a boat goes along the river and picks up the children. When the class is on board, it pulls over to the bank. Then school starts. Later, the boat brings the children home.

The boats teach the same subjects as schools on land. Rezwan says there is another gain. Many parents worry about girls who walk far to school. When school comes to their door, more girls can go.

His group also runs floating clinics and a floating library. All the services are free. In 2005, a charity started by Bill and Melinda Gates gave the group a $1 million prize.

On one boat, 8-year-old Nila Khatun leads her class in the six times table. Her mother says Nila might not be in school without the boat. No one in the family has gone to college. Her mother says Nila will be a doctor.

How it unfolded

- **1998** He starts a small group with about $500.
- **2002** The first school boat sails.
- **2005** The group wins a $1 million prize.
- **2018** It runs 23 school boats (NPR).

CHAPTER TWO

What makes it special

Most schools wait for children to arrive. These ones go and fetch them.

An architect solved a school problem with a boat, not a building.

OUR TAKE

He did not fight the flood. He built a school that floats on it.

CHAPTER THREE

What we can learn

1 **Change what you think is fixed**

He could not build on land that floods. So he asked how a school could move.

Try this: Take one problem you are stuck on. Rewrite it by changing one thing you thought was fixed.

2 Start with very little

He began in 1998 with about $500 and one computer.

Try this: Do the smallest version of your idea this week.

3 Use what is near you

Local builders make the boats from his design, with local materials.

Try this: Ask one neighbour or colleague what they already know how to make.

4 Fix the real barrier

Parents kept girls home because the long walk felt unsafe. School at the door fixed that.

Try this: Ask three people what stops them. Then fix that one thing.

ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

If the child can't reach the school, send the school.

Sources

NPR
'Floating Schools' Make Sure Kids Get To Class When The Water Rises (2018)

NBC News (from The Washington Post)
For flood-prone Bangladesh, a floating future (2007)

The Seattle Globalist
Boats bring school to Bangladesh families hit by regular flooding (2018)

Fact-check note: The three sources agree on the main story and differ on details. The Washington Post (2007) says Rezwan began his group in 1998 with one boat; the Seattle Globalist (2018) says he began in 1998 with about $500 and one computer, and that the first boat took four years and sailed in 2002; NPR also gives 2002 for the first school. The story follows the Seattle Globalist and NPR. The fleet is 45 vessels, including library boats (Washington Post, 2007), or 23 school boats (NPR and Seattle Globalist, 2018); the story gives only the 2018 figure for school boats. A boat holds about 30 children (NPR, 2018) or about 60 (Washington Post, 2007); the story gives no number. The Washington Post places the project in the northeast; NPR places it in the northwest, on the Atrai river, and the story says Natore, northwest Bangladesh (the Washington Post photo caption also names Natore district); the pin shows the town of Natore, not a boat route. Rezwan's quote is from NPR; the Seattle Globalist records a slightly different wording of the same idea. The $1 million prize in 2005 is in NPR and the Washington Post. Wikipedia's page on floating schools gives larger numbers (more than 100 boats, 100,000 students) that it marks as needing citations, so the story does not use them. Nila's mother's hope that she will be a doctor is her own statement to NPR. Figures are from 2007 and 2018 and may have changed. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.