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A big hitter

A love for cricket and ability to spot openings helped Dubai-based steel giant succeed in business

By **ARUNA HARJANI** in Jakarta
For *China Daily Asia Weekly*

Born into a community that thrives on trade, it seemed natural for Shyam Bhatia to base himself in Dubai, the bustling commercial hub of the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

The decision Bhatia took 52 years ago was a fortuitous combination of his community's legendary reputation for running profitable enterprises and his personal passion for cricket.

Bhatia's family traces its roots to Sindh, which is now part of Pakistan. Here his family, like other members of this closely knit trading community, operated their businesses for generations.

After the tumultuous partition of the Indian subcontinent into Pakistan and India in 1947, Bhatia's family migrated to India in the wake of other members of their community. They settled down at Ajmer, in Rajasthan state.

On Aug 8, 1965, Bhatia, who was then in his early 20s, moved to Dubai, sensing the potential for higher growth in the Middle East. He started work as a marketing executive for the New India Assurance Company.

A decade later, as the economic development of the UAE gathered pace on the back of the oil boom, Bhatia decided to start a business of his own in the building materials sector.

He founded Alam Traders in 1979 with just two people. It soon grew into one of the largest diversified building materials trading firms in the region.

In 2002, the firm decided to focus on the steel industry and rebranded itself as Alam Steel. Now one of the largest steel suppliers in the Middle East, it has been involved in such mega projects as Dubai Metro, Burj Khalifa, The Dubai Mall, and Mall of the Emirates. Alam Steel's geographic reach today stretches across the Middle East, North Africa and the Indian subcontinent.

With Alam Steel Group already established as one of the leading steel companies in the region, including diversified steel distribution and processing units, Bhatia assumed the role of chairman and handed over day-to-day operations to his son, Vikram.

However, Bhatia still attends the company's monthly board meetings. He also keeps an eye on its

financial situation, noting that: "I can see the figures from any part of the world."

Bhatia fondly remembers his family's roots and their homeland in Sindh, before partition.

"We lived in a town called Mirpur Khas. My father had a lot of land, which he managed and profited from. He wanted us all to be educated. So he went back and forth to Pakistan, managing his businesses there," Bhatia recalled.

"He continued this until we all finished our schooling and came to live for good in Ajmer, India, only in 1955. My father was a brave man to go back and forth to Pakistan in those days."

In school, Bhatia excelled in sports and was selected to play in the cricket team. Later, he went on to play at a high level.

"When I was growing up in Ajmer, I played for Rajasthan and Saurashtra (teams) in various national tournaments. In those days, no company sponsored the game and I would travel in dilapidated buses to play out of town (matches). We would hardly get 100 rupees (around \$1.50 at current exchange rates) as pocket money," Bhatia said.

After he moved to Dubai, Bhatia continued to play cricket for various expatriate teams, especially those from India. In the UAE at that time, cricket matches had little or no corporate sponsorship.

"In those days, cricket was hardly played in Dubai," Bhatia said.

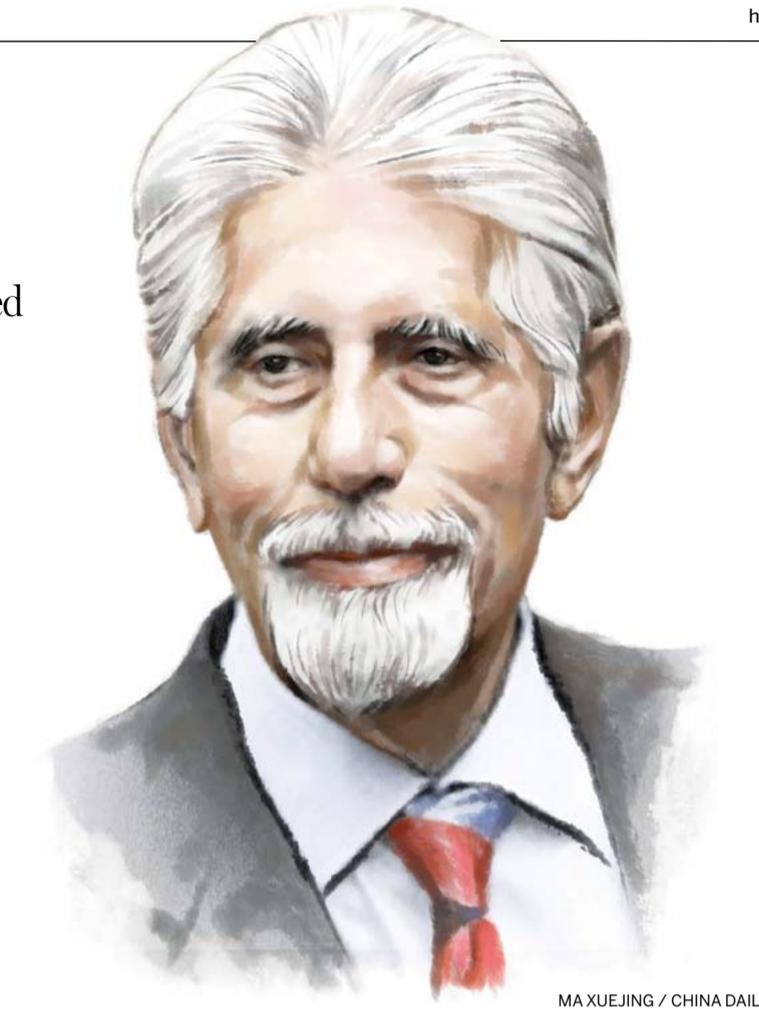
"Because I played well, I became popular among many owners of big companies in Dubai. So, whenever I wanted to meet any CEO or owner of a company it was easy. All my success in business came because I was a cricketer."

Cricket was very much a gentleman's game, and Bhatia applied the principles he imbibed on the cricket field to his corporate life.

"Discipline, team work and fairness are the key elements in cricket. I apply all of these (qualities) in my business deals," he said.

After moving to Dubai, the young Bhatia did well in his job at the insurance company. However, he yearned to start a business of his own, unlike most of his friends who were from the Sindhi community and mostly did trading and ran retail shops that sold textiles.

Due to his involvement with cricket in particular, his social network continued to expand. Bhatia met many entrepreneurs who advised



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him on the prospects in various business fields. Taking their advice to heart, he soon started a company that sold building materials.

Bhatia was convinced about Dubai's growth potential as a regional commercial hub. He realized the emirates would require more office and condominium buildings, and the materials to build them.

"Obviously, I didn't have the money at that time, so I went into a working partnership," he said.

"As one knows, there are many ups and downs in a working partnership. In 1979, I decided to open my own company, which I named Alam Traders. I started trading in building materials."

Despite his busy corporate schedule, Bhatia still found time for cricket, which he continued to play. He soon established his own team, which played at social events in the UAE.

"I had major back surgery in 1985 and I couldn't play cricket after that. I started playing tennis and then golf. I never gave up sports."

The surgery did not hinder Bhatia's love for cricket. In the following decades, as the sport became more popular in Dubai, many cricket teams came to play in the city. And Bhatia invariably hosted a luncheon for visiting players.

"I met and befriended a lot of cricketers in those days and slowly I collected memorabilia."

Later, he used that memorabilia to open the Shyam Bhatia Cricket Museum. One of the largest museums of its kind in the world, it displays a collection of cricketing literature, photos, autographed bats and balls, trophies and personal memo-

abilia from world-class cricketers of all generations.

The walls of the museum sport the printed history and statistics of the test-playing nations. These are updated every year and new "treasures" added.

The then CEO of the International Cricket Council, Haroon Lorgat, inaugurated the museum on April 18, 2010. Since then, it has been visited by legendary cricket players from around the world. Currently, the museum opens its doors for viewing by appointment, while Bhatia works on a deal with the government to open a bigger facility that can be open to the public at regular hours.

Meanwhile, this tireless cricket aficionado's own coffee-table book, *Portraits of the Game*, about the one-day cricket format, has proved popular with cricket lovers, along with its two sequels.

The limited-edition book is sought-after by collectors worldwide. Many banks and corporate institutions have bought copies to give as corporate gifts to high-net-worth clients. Proceeds from the book go to Bhatia's charity, Cricket for Care.

"A friend of mine, who is a banker, offered to give my book as a gift to his corporate clients. I told him, I don't sell my books, but then he said, no problem, the money paid for the books can be used for charitable purposes," Bhatia recalled.

He started the Cricket for Care Foundation in 2007. It put together a cricket kit that includes bats, balls and caps for distribution to disadvantaged children.

"I want to make children better human beings through the game of cricket. Sports are a good way to

Bio

Shyam Bhatia

Chairman, Alam Steel Group

Career milestones

2002-present: Chairman, Alam Steel Group

1979: Cofounder and partner, Alam Traders

1965: Marketing executive, New India Assurance Company, Dubai

Quick takes:

What advice would you give to young entrepreneurs?

Believe in hard work and be honest, always. Be an all-rounder in your field, but also ensure a work-life balance. Above all, be a good human being, then success will follow. Always help others.

Based on your personal experience, how should one face challenges at work and in life as a whole?

Challenges in life are a day-to-day process. Our pace of life always changes. Technology is moving and influencing our lives. When your business is growing, you still face the challenge of maintaining your personal and corporate health.

What are your hobbies?

Playing tennis, golf and cricket.

Can you share some of the most memorable moments in your life?

A special moment in my life was when my first child was born. Other landmarks include starting my own company, as well as the opening of my cricket museum.

Date of birth: Aug 30, 1942

instill critical developmental discipline in young kids," Bhatia said.

"So far, the kits have been sent to five states in India, (as well as) Zimbabwe, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka ... The kits have also been sent to Japan under the banner of Cricket with a Smile."

Around 10,000 kits have been distributed — costing \$2 million including transportation.

For the past 12 years, Bhatia has sponsored an annual awards event that honors the best cricket players in local league matches in Dubai.

"When I started my business, I had to weather the competition and an inundating amount of work ... It was a hard life because you have to take care of the money yourself. My time was limited," Bhatia said.

"Now I have more time for my passion and my social life. Cricket has given me a lot of support and success in my business. I want to give back to cricket. It is the best thing that happened to me in life. I owe my success to cricket."