



Connecting with India

*Abdulnabi Al Sho'ala in conversation with **Meera Ravi** on his tryst with the Asian superpower-in-the-making.*

The year was 1968 and a tall, bright-eyed Bahraini man walked down the streets of Bombay, his senses alert to the myriad sounds, smells and sights of this amazing city. It was Abdulnabi Al Sho'ala's first visit to a large city and the small-town boy was dazzled by the heart-stopping tempo of India's City of Dreams.

It was a fascination that never left him and today, the businessman and former Bahraini Minister of Labour says his life has been shaped by his love for India and all things Indian. So much so, that he is the founder-chairman of the Bahrain

India Society (est.2008), dedicated to bringing the two countries dearest to his heart even closer.

"It was one of those lucky twists of fate that I discovered India," Al Sho'ala remarks in his talk with Salaam Bahrain, "My stepfather needed to visit India for medical treatment and took me along with him. I think I loved India from the minute I saw the overwhelming colour and magic of Bombay's pulsing streets."

He adds, with a laugh, "In fact, shortly after my marriage, I took my wife Rabab to India. A few months later, I told

her to pack for a holiday and she was surprised to know we would be going to Bombay again! I think after her fourth Indian holiday, she reminded me gently that there were other countries too for a holiday. But India is like that – if you love the place, you need to re-connect every now and then to keep your senses alive."

Well-matched

India and Al Sho'ala suit each other – both are bold, have a vibrant personality and a knack of snatching success from

the tight-fisted clasp of Life. Take for example, the way Al Sho'ala won admission to Bombay's venerable St. Xavier's College.

"I went to St. Xavier's wearing a suit and carrying a briefcase," Al Sho'ala recalls, "There was an enormous queue at the college and I didn't realise that it was the line to apply for admissions."

He strode right up to the counter and asked to meet the principal.

"As I was dressed in a suit and was a few years older than the other students, the staff probably thought I had official business with him," said Al Sho'ala. He was led to the office of the principal, Fr Edward D'Cruz, who asked him how he could help.

"I've come here for admission," Al Sho'ala told him. A bemused Fr D'Cruz asked him if he had seen the line of students outside.

"It's 300 metres long and they've all come here for admission," he told Al Sho'ala.

"But I've come 3,000 kilometres to join your college," the young Bahraini replied.

It was an audacious optimism and it impressed Fr. D'Cruz who gave him admission and even became a valuable mentor and friend till his death in 1980.

Tempered by challenges

Despite his easygoing manner, Al Sho'ala's personality has been tempered by a very difficult early life. The fatherless young boy did everything from selling peanuts to working as an office boy and construction worker to make money for the family.

"I belong to a generation whose life was not cushioned by oil money and what's more, I came from a background where we had to work very hard for everything. In school, I sold roasted peanuts to my classmates during break, so I could earn some money. After school, I worked with a contractor for three years to earn my college fees. And when I was in India, I supplemented my savings by taking in translation work for embassies and business houses who had Arab connections," says the man



A young Abdulnabi - ambitious and hard-working from the start.

who is today a respected international businessman.

At St. Xavier's, Al Sho'ala was elected President of the Bahrain Students Association and the Arab Students Union. When Bahrain gained independence, Al Sho'ala held what he says was the first reception abroad to celebrate the occasion. To cover the cost of the function, he sold roses to other students and invitees!

Looking at young Bahrainis today, Al Sho'ala says the quality of education that they have access to has stood them and the Kingdom in good stead.

"When I was Minister, I often commented that the key to generating jobs was to fit the training to market needs – instances of graduates from

private schools and universities being unemployable were rare. It set us all thinking and we realised the need was for re-casting our educational and training systems. Today, those initiatives are paying off and Bahraini youngsters are well-educated and qualified to take the country forward."

He adds, "However, you need to complement education and training with the right attitude and the appetite for hard work begins at home. Parents need to set examples and push the younger generation. I admire the work ethic that pushes Indian youth towards achieving dizzyingly high marks at school and college. And this quest for new knowledge has made India what it is – self-sufficient in technology and science, a world I.T. leader and it has made Indians the most sought-after employees and partners in R&D and advanced knowledge industries."

PR Guru

Back in Bahrain, armed with a degree in political science, Al Sho'ala joined the foreign service but after exactly 11 months and 11 days in the job, he resigned and decided to try his luck at business. Once again, his self-confidence saw him pioneer an enterprise that was almost unheard of then in the region – public relations.

"Public relations, of course, is very reliant on having the media to spread your message. And at that time, there were no daily newspapers, no television and no culture of public relations," he recalls.

Meeting Mrs. Gandhi

"Perhaps the most memorable meeting in India – after Fr. D'Cruz – was with then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi," he says, "As with most good things in my life, it happened by chance. I was attending an international fair in New Delhi that she was inaugurating. Those were days with little security and I walked up to her and thanked her for the opportunity India was giving young

Bahrainis to study in the country. I also told her we Bahraini students would make better ambassadors for India than anyone she might appoint."

The Prime Minister smiled and invited him to meet her. Al Sho'ala did see Indira Gandhi again, with a group of Bahraini students whom he took with him to Delhi especially to meet her.

cover story



Getting set for his future leadership role, a young Al Sho'ala addresses Bahraini students in India as their Association president (circa 1970).

"India is a great teacher!"

- Marwa Al Sho'ala



When it comes to entrusting the next generation with leadership roles, Al Sho'ala couldn't have chosen better than his daughter Marwa, who is Director at Al Fanar Investment Holdings Group. Articulate and very much a hands-on businesswoman, Marwa is intent on taking the company forward into new areas such as retail and fashionwear while strengthening its spread of core

businesses that include medicare, media, manufacturing, trading and international consultancy.

"Although I have only recently started travelling regularly to India, all of us at home are very much in touch with India, thanks to Father," she observes, "We are familiar with Indian culture and cuisine and I think we all have a keener insight into what makes India tick, thanks to my father's passion for the country."

Marwa says Al Fanar's ties with India are strong and the company believes in the power of Indian expertise to fuel its growth, whether in its hospital venture, Al-Hilal Hospitals Co. B.S.C., its professional services and consultancy firm BMR Advisors, its beauty and fitness partnership with VLCC or its other non-Indian enterprises where Indian professionals work.

"I think my father has passed on his confidence in India to us all and I'm certainly looking forward to using this as a springboard to explore new opportunities and learn new life-lessons – after all, India is a great teacher!" she says.

Al Fanar's Growing Business Spectrum

- Fanar Capital B.S.C. ● Gulf Markets International W.L.L. (GMI) ● International Technical Supplies & Services W.L.L. (ITSS) ● ITSS Trading – Dubai ● Towell Smelter Services Division (TSSD) ● United Industrial Services Company L.L.C (UNISCO) ● Scantech International (SI) ● Bahrain Industrial Filters Manufacturing W.L.L. (BIFM)
- Gulf Temperature Sensors W.L.L. (GTS) ● Bahrain Alloys Manufacturing Co. W.L.L. (BAMCO)
- Tele-Gulf Directory Publications W.L.L. (TGDP) ● Primedia International Fz-LLC ● Pearl Enterprises (PE) ● Al Hilal Hospitals Co. B.S.C. (H H)
- Royal Education & Development W.L.L.(RED) ● Business Development Enterprises W.L.L. (BDE) ● Maya Colour Limited (MCL) ● Direct Middle East W.L.L. (DME) ● Al Fanar Travel Agency W.L.L. (AFT) ● Gulf Translations W.L.L. (GT)

“It is important for the GCC to cultivate India..”

– Abdulnabi Al Sho’ala

“Undoubtedly, India is a rising power in Asia and I think the GCC should recognise the need to make Indian a closer political ally. Many of us who see the potential of a stronger GCC-India partnership do also feel the need to get closer to India. We share so much – similar aspirations and familiar cultural sensibilities. Yet often, these ties of friendship and warmth are not fully addressed either by the GCC or by India.

A strong GCC-India connection is much more than just a good trade

link. It is a shield against destabilising forces in the world since India and the GCC value global and regional peace and progress.

Bahrain has a big role to play in bringing the GCC and India closer. Besides our historic ties, we can leverage the progressive vision of our forward-thinking leadership to push the India-GCC agenda.



Al Sho’ala with former Indian President Dr. Kalam.



Bahrain’s Foreign Minister Shaikh Khalid presides over the inauguration of the BIS.

Of course, our Prime Minister’s visit in 2004 opened new doors of mutual co-operation and Shaikh Khalifa takes a keen interest in India-Bahrain ties. I know the Crown Prince sets great store on Bahrain-India ties and has expressed keen-ness to promote co-operation in the areas of scientific research, medical innovation and I.T. We are looking forward to the visit of HM King Hamad to India soon to see these early initiatives translate into stronger bonds of co-operation.

and played key roles in the Bahrain Chamber of Commerce & Industry and in the Shura Council before he was given charge of Bahrain’s challenging labour portfolio as Minister of Labour in 1995, a post he held till 2002. He also served as Minister of State till 2005.

Sense of the future

Undoubtedly, the transformation of Bahrain into a modern nation was fuelled by success stories like Al Sho’ala’s. He brings to his every undertaking a clarity of purpose and a sense of the future, whether it be starting the PR industry in Bahrain or handling the labour ministry or channelling his love for India into a framework that will benefit India as well as Bahrain.

“I believe passionately that India has so much to teach the world. In a

world fragmented by polarisation and extremism, India with her numerous cultural facets living in harmony together, is a living lesson in tolerance and respect. It is this secularism that will see India rise as the next Asian super-power – and the country is already well ahead of other Asian countries on this course!” Al Sho’ala emphasises, “Countries like Bahrain, with an ancient history of friendship with India, can leverage this geo-political intimacy and be a key player in the very exciting days of progress that are ahead!”

The unabashed Indophile is excited about the potential of the BIS to play an active role in this transformation of an ancient camaraderie into a lively partnership for the 21st century.

“At BIS, we are working on a roster of activities aimed at nurturing understanding of the two countries

among decision-makers and leaders,” he says, “We shall host prominent speakers from both countries at our meetings and explore ways to strengthen ties at all levels. Our most ambitious project is still work-in-progress but it involves a 3-day showcasing of Bahrain as a business and investment destination in New Delhi towards the end of this year.”

With so many ideas fizzing in his head and a growing business empire to develop, there is obviously no shortage of energy or enthusiasm from Al Sho’ala.

“Nothing is difficult if you set your heart to it,” says the man who revolutionised PR management in the region and helped to set a new course for labour market management in Bahrain, “All that matters is that the environment should be right and the desire to see results must fuel your work. The rest is just history-in-the-making!”