

## *An Indian Naval Officer Remembers*



**Commander Shadi  
Lal Bhatla**

Shadi is an electrical and electronic engineer. He is a Chartered Engineer (London), Member Institute of Marine Engineers (UK), Fellow Institute of Marine Engineers, (India), Member Institute Of Electrical & Telecommunication Engineers and has a Post-Graduate Diploma in Business Management. A pioneer submariner, he retired from the Indian Navy in 1983, after which he worked for Mazagon Dock Limited, a defence shipyard, as a Deputy General Manager until 1992. He then joined Crown Corporation Private Limited, Mumbai, (a Government of India Recognized Export House), as a General Manager, and is currently its Managing Director.

*Editor's note: This is one of several stories related to the life of the Bhatla family before and after the Partition of India in 1947. The first story, about life in pre-Partition Pakistan, [is available here](#). The story of the family's forced move from Pakistan to India is [available here](#). The third story, about the family's struggle to recover from Partition is [available here](#). The fourth story about the return of prosperity is [available here](#).*

After my parents shifted from Rae Kot to Nigana village in Rohtak district in 1948, I had no books and no money. With some difficulty, I joined school at Kahnaur about 2 miles from Nigana. I went to school only three months to appear for my Matric (Standard 10) examination. I also picked up a few books left behind in empty houses by Muslim families in Nigana who had fled to Pakistan. I passed the Matric (Standard 10) examination in 1948. I was first in the class in my school.

Then I shifted to Rohtak city, but did not join any college. I urgently needed to earn some money. So, I became a helper to a doctor on Station Road. I stayed with my cousin Sunderlal, who had already joined and became a student at the Government College. We stayed together in one hired room and ate at a dhaba on Station Road. Every morning, at 6:00 am, I went running on Court Road up to the refugee camp and back. I had been fond of running in my school days, and I kept it up here.

During my morning run, I used to see an army car standing near a bungalow. The bungalow had a board that read "Captain Dario Singh, Recruiting Officer". The Captain used to drive daily to the Recruiting Office. I used to follow him running. One day I mustered courage and asked him if I could join the army. He promptly referred me to another army man who was a medical officer. He asked me to report to him on the following Monday.

On the appointed date, I went to the Recruiting Office, along with Kharaiti Mal, son of Buraram Saunsi, who was the *Numberdar* of Nigana village. Kharaiti, who was older than I was and had already appeared for his Standard 12 examination, also wanted to join the army.

The medical officer measured our height, weight, and chest size. He also tested out stamina and strength by making run, along with some other boys waiting there, who also wanted to join the army. Both of us were declared medically fit. After a week, Kharaiti Mal was recruited into the Signal branch of the army. I was told I was still too young to join the army.

What a disappointment! But, I did not give up.

On my daily runs, I started going to the recruiting office regularly, and saw many men being recruited. One day I asked if I could join any other wing of the armed forces. I was told that after a few weeks there would be a written test for entry to the Navy, and I was eligible to take the test. I was very happy when I heard this. To get ready for the test, I started going to the library of Government College (where I was not a student) to read English-language newspapers. This would increase my general knowledge, which I thought would be a part of the test.

Soon, I appeared for the written test, which included questions on mathematics, English, and General Knowledge. I solved the mathematics questions in Urdu, and answered all other questions in English. When I submitted my answer papers, I was asked to wait for some time. After an hour or so, I was called to the office of the Recruiting Officer, who had my papers in front of him. He told me my Maths answers were correct, but I had to write them in English, not Urdu. I did this and returned home.

I continued to visit recruiting office regularly. One day I learnt that I had been selected!

I was told that I would have to move to Vizag (now Visakhapatnam). I was asked to bring a consent letter from my parents, as I was underage – just 15 years old. After a few days, I was given a blanket, a letter, Rs 16, and a railway ticket to Vizag. A soldier from the recruiting office would accompany me to Vizag.

When I told my parents that I would have to move to Vizag, they were very upset. The word soon spread to my maternal uncle. All the senior family members gathered in my house and tried to persuade me not to join the army or the navy. Various arguments went on for two days. I was firm in my mind and I told my mother that I must go. Some of my relatives were arguing that it was not normal for our family members to join the army. They were so much against it that they mentioned many other options, such as working in the mango gardens and agriculture fields.

I heard their advice, but did not heed it. Instead, I left for Rohtak where I paid up my room rent etc., and returned home, ready to leave. I informed my mother that I would be leaving in a day or two. She then made some homemade sweets, which I packed in my small tin box, which also held my clothes and other belongings. I also informed my other relatives about my decision. Shri Bhagwan Das, my maternal uncle, volunteered to accompany me to Rohtak. When I left my house, my mother was crying. At this sight, I felt very uncomfortable.

Finally, I, along with my uncle, left my home, carrying my tin box on my head. We walked to a village called Kalanour, and caught the bus to Rohtak. We headed straight to the recruiting office, where I met the soldier who would be my escort to Vizag. My uncle bid good-bye to me at the railway stations, and my escort and I took the train to Delhi.

We spent one night at Delhi. During the stop, I visited my older cousin Mr. Bahadur Chand, who lived with Mr G.D. Sharma. Mr Sharma had been my English teacher in Pakistan. Both of them were very happy about my joining the Navy, and came to the railway station to see me off the next day when I took the train to Vizag. (On completing my Standard 8 vernacular final, I studied only English – no other subject – for one year, after which I joined the Hindu High School in Meghiana city in Standard 9. This was the only way I could join an English school for further studies. Our village Kot Khan had a school up to Standard 5 only. Then we had to shift to a middle school where we could study up to Standard 8. These schools used only Urdu as the medium of instruction, but knowledge of English was necessary to join an English medium high school. All Bhatla family children were following this method of joining the English school in Meghiana city. After high school, they would join a government college for Standard 11 and 12 in Meghiana. For further studies, they would shift to Lahore, where S D College and Government College were located.)

I reached Vizag on July 29, 1949. I entered the heavily fenced naval area and presented my letter of recruitment. The very next day I, along with some other boys who had come from different places, was given my uniform and other Navy items. This was a unique and unusual experience for me. The sight of the heavily guarded camp frightened me, and I started crying. However, I soon took charge of myself and started following the routine of training as a naval boy cadet.

At that time, the Navy was still called the Royal Indian Navy. It became Indian Navy only in 1950, when India became a Republic. The camp had a number of British navy officers. The officer in charge was Lt. Cdr. Sopher, RN. We had some senior Indian sailors looking after the initial training.

I settled down in about two months. Every two weeks we were asked to write a letter to our parents. I used to write regularly and described my life at the training camp – always telling them that I was very happy, even though I cried almost every night for first few weeks. Initially I used to send postcards. Later on, the Navy gave us inland letters free for writing letters home.

I always wrote letters in Urdu to my parents, though they could not read Urdu. Somebody had to read my letters to them. I used to be very anxious about my family but I never got many letters from them. My father knew only the Devanagiri, which I was not familiar with, and my mother knew only broken Hindi. So, they could not write to me. On rare, urgent occasions, they used to ask our neighbour, Narendra Sharma, to write on their behalf and post the letter to me.

In Vizag, there was a cinema hall in the town. There was also a cinema hall in the Naval establishment, which showed a film on Sundays. I hardly saw any films because I could not afford them. [I saw my first movie in Meghiana city, in 1945, where I had gone there to appear for my Class 8th vernacular final examination. One of my classmates, Munchanda, and I went came out of the examination hall and heard blaring music. We noticed that it was coming from a cinema hall not far from our examination centre. The hall was showing a picture called *Heer Ranjha*. We bought our tickets, each paying with a 4-anna (Rs 0.25) coin, and entered the cinema hall. We were directed to sit right on front seats. We turned back and saw vacant seats, which were more expensive. We both jumped the barrier and sat at the back. At this, the gatekeeper came and pushed us out of the cinema hall. On our arguing and showing our tickets to him, he again allowed us to sit inside on front seats.]

In Vizag, our recreation room had one radio set with a polished wooden case. We would use it to hear news only. There was also a record player, which could be used by hand winding on special occasions.

At that time, the food served to us was normally vegetarian. On Fridays, fish was served with lunch, and on Sundays, chicken was served at lunchtime. Standard breakfast was Dal Chana and bread with a glass of milk. At home, we were vegetarian.

Every evening I used to play hockey and run around the field after the game. Soon there was an athletic competition at the training camp. There were about one hundred boys under training, along with training staff of about thirty persons. All of them participated in the competition. I took part in the one-mile race, and came first. This was the beginning of my becoming known to all senior officers. I soon became in-charge of my class. Nevertheless, at Vizag I had very few friends; one of them was Darshan Lal.

The camp's library had a chart that showed that the pay on 'entry to boy cadet' was Rs 12 per month, which was what I earned. However, the pay for 'entry to artificer apprentice' was shown as Rs. 42 per month. I became inquisitive and started asking my training staff as to how I could become an apprentice. I badly wanted the higher salary – not just for myself but also to support my family.

I approached one education officer who used to teach us general knowledge as part of our training. I asked him how I could become an artificer apprentice. He told me that there would soon be an entry examination for apprentices. I could apply to take this examination if I was eligible.

Towards the end of 1949, there was an examination for apprentices. I was declared eligible for it. After the examination, I came home on short annual leave. By this time my parents has shifted back to Rae Kot from Nigana. After I had been home for a week, a telegram was received by my mother. No one at home could read it.

When I came home, I read the telegram. It said that I had passed the test for apprentice. Further, my leave was cancelled and I was required to report to INS Shivaji, Lonavla as soon as possible. This upset my family members and they advised me not to go back. However, I prevailed upon my parents, and left for Vizag, where I collected my baggage and joined Shivaji on schedule. I became an artificer apprentice, and started my technical training as an electrical artificer.

Initially at Vizag, I used to send Rs. 10 per month to my parents by money order. I increased it whenever I got additional money by way of goodwill for my performance in athletics. Later, I started sending Rs. 30-35 from INS Shivaji. The post office was located within the Naval Area, and used to charge very little for this – about 10-25 *paisas*. (There were 64 paisas in a rupee). Generally, I used to send about 90% of my earnings to my family. My two younger brothers, Raj and Krishan, were at school. They both were very intelligent and hardworking, and always topped their classes. I was very keen to support them in their studies. During my leave, at home, I always made a point to meet the school headmaster, Mr Gurnam Singh, with whom I became quite friendly. He was very helpful to my younger brothers. Raj later became an engineer, and retired as Deputy General Manager of Engineers India Limited. Krishan became a professor, and retired as Dr. K.L. Bhatla Vice Principal of Hansraj College, Delhi University.

It used to take three days to reach home from Vizag; later on, it became two days. There was no electricity in Rae Kot. One family on our street owned a battery-operated radio. Since I was very fond of listening to the news broadcast, I would get ready in the morning, and go stand on the road near the neighbour's window to hear the 8.00 am news from All-India Radio. We used firewood for our cooking. My family was normally vegetarian, and I liked to eat the dal and *bhindi* (lady's finger) that my mother used to cook.

The Lonavla establishment was much bigger than Vizag, and there were many batches and classes of artificers of different technical trades. Most of the senior officers were from the Royal Navy, and there were a few Indian officers. I joined a division called Hemgard, consisting of about 20 boys. Our divisional officer was Lt Spraggs, RN, who was an engineer. We attended theoretical classes and had practical training in the engineering factory and various well-equipped workshops. Cdr Jenkins, RN, was the officer in charge of workshop training. The senior education officer was Cdr Homes, RN. The commanding officer was Captain Daya Shanker, Indian Navy, who was a very capable engineer. My assistant divisional officer was Lt. N.D. Tiwari, Indian Navy, a graduate of Banaras Hindu University.



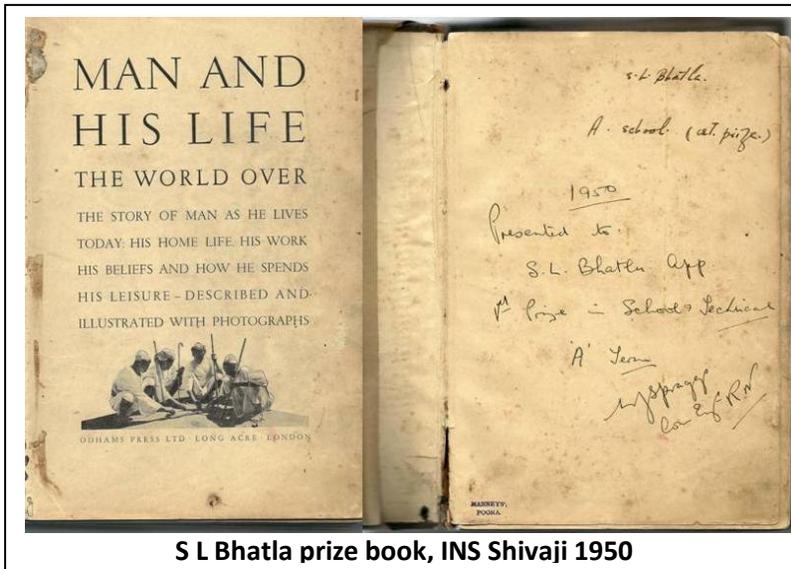
**S L Bhatla prize cup, best athlete,  
INS Shivaji, 1951-52**

I participated regularly in sports and athletics. In 1950 I, took part in a one-mile race and came first. I became best athlete in 1951 and 1952 when I took part in four different athletics events, including long distance races. I became well known due to my athletics performance. Some English officers, including my divisional officer, would give me a Rs 100 note after my winning an athletic event.

I attended many training camps in athletics at Mumbai. I was the only one Navy athlete trained by Mr. Ullalrao and Mr. Jalpardiwala, well-known coaches who were both former national champions. They used to meet me every morning in the Cricket Club of India and would advise on various

techniques during running, overtaking, passing the baton and finishing the race. They always took me in their Fiat car to various competitions. I was trained along with Marry D'Souza, a 100-meter runner, and Emil Furtado, an 800-meter runner. One of the training camps was held with Mr. Jesse Owens, an American who had 4 Olympic Gold medals. This camp was held in Vallabhbai Patel Stadium near Race Course.

At Shivaji, I stood first in my first terminal exam, which was held after six months of training. I was awarded the first prize, which was a book called *Man and His Life The World Over*.



**S L Bhatla prize book, INS Shivaji 1950**

On January 26, 1950, when India became a Republic, the Royal Indian Navy flag was lowered and Indian Navy flag was hoisted. There was a special ceremony with a Navy band playing a popular national song *Sare Jahan Se Accha*. The Royal Navy Officers left much later in batches. In fact, some senior officers stayed back for an extended period after Republic Day. Some Royal Navy Officers stayed for years on the key posts like ship repair, workshops or fleet commander, etc. When they left, they were given a very good send off with the normal ceremonial

*badakhana* (feast), in which all the persons in INS Shivaji participated. I found the English officers seemed to be fair and good people.



**S L Bhatla with friends in Trafalgar Square, London 1959 during Christmas break**

I passed out from Shivaji after three years of technical training and then joined INS Valsura, an electrical college of the Indian Navy, for the final fourth year. I qualified as an electrical and electronic artificer, and became a Petty Officer after four years training. My first appointment then was on board INS Delhi, the flagship of the Indian Navy, at that time. I served on INS Ganga, a fast frigate, as my second appointment and INS Mysore after getting my commission.

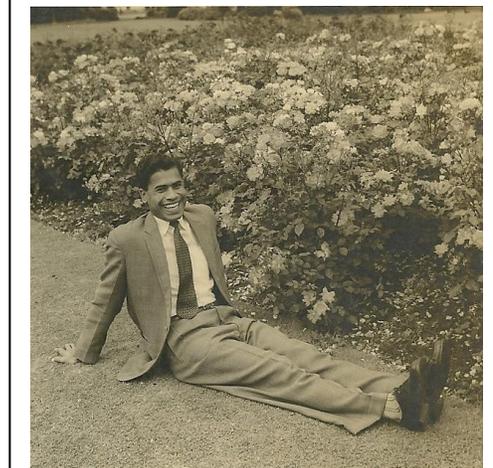
My training officers at Shivaji had recommended me as suitable to become an officer. I was encouraged and advised to take various exams to become a commissioned officer. However, I was unable to make much progress because I was always involved in naval athletic competitions.

In 1959, the Navy sent me on deputation to the U.K. for an advanced electrical course and as a standby crewmember for India's only aircraft carrier INS Vikrant.

I mostly stayed ashore as the ship was commissioned only in 1961. Initially we felt some discrimination; In UK, however later on we made good friends and did not feel much discrimination. I used to

eat mostly English food but sometimes I tried to cook Indian food at landlady's kitchen.

In the U.K., I made several friends since I stayed there for over two years. At first, I was in Gosport studying at Royal Navy Electrical Engineering College HMS Collingwood Fehram. At Gosport, I made good friends with Mr. Sidlayland and family. He was a county rugby player and was well informed about India. He always praised Pandit Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi. His wife Cynthia worked as a librarian in Collingwood where I was studying. I used to borrow books from the library where I first met her. Sidlayland became a Labour Party county councillor and always helped us to find a suitable accommodation for new comers from India. Sidlayland liked social work and eventually became Mayor of Gosport.



**S L Bhatla in a London park 1961**

I also made good friends with another family who were my neighbours. They were Ian Hughes and his wife Morag. I often tried to cook some Indian food in their kitchen. I am still in touch with these two families and they visited us in India too.

Then I shifted to Belfast working at the Horland and Wolf Shipyard, where the aircraft carrier was being built for the Indian Navy. I lived in a hired flat near Queens University, Belfast. Here people were friendlier and we could easily make friends.

Our entertainment was learning English dancing and visiting beer bars during weekends. I also took part in some sports events – athletics and basketball. We spent some weekends in Isle of Wight, playing golf etc.

While I was in the U.K., I was promoted to Chief Petty Officer, and became overall in-charge of maintenance and upkeep of electronic equipment onboard Vikrant. I worked along with the Royal Navy team overseeing the outfitting of our carrier. This was a huge learning experience for me with training at various equipment manufacturers and the installation of the same onboard the ship.



**Dinner party at S L Bhatla's flat Belfast**

From the U.K., we had the facility of sending our mail through diplomatic bag from the office of Indian High Commission in London and we were able to get some letters through the same channel.

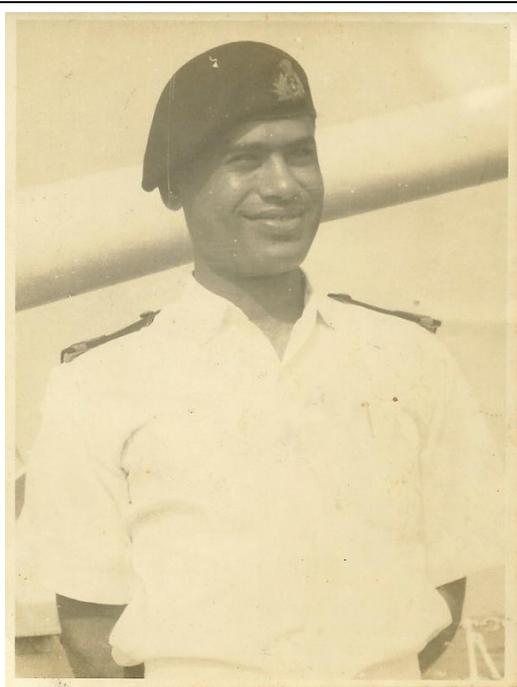
I returned to India with INS Vikrant towards the end of 1961. I took leave and went home. Our village Rae Kot was centrally located and was a busy place as the people from all the small villages around it bought their daily needs from Rae Kot. My parents became well known because the postman used to visit our house once a month regularly and deliver the money. Nobody knew how much money he was

handing over to my parents. They only knew that some money was coming from me, and thought my parents were well off. I personally was fond of cooking and I used to try to cook some vegetables, which I used to eat in the Navy. Once in a way I also started cooking chicken at home.



**Landlady saying farewell to S L Bhatla  
aboard INS Vikrant, Belfast 1961**

surrender on an island of Diu. Our ship prepared a small group to go from the ship to the island. When their boat came close the shore, there was some firing from the island. The boat was quickly called back, and there was heavy gunfire from one of our ships. After this, our group landed ashore, captured the island, and hoisted the National Flag. Soon, India had full control over all of Goa.



**S L Bhatla, on becoming a commissioned  
officer. 1962**

My younger sister's wedding date was in December, and I was supposed to play a major role in the ensuring that the wedding ceremonies went off well. I had brought a cutlery set, a radio, and a few other gifts from the U.K. for my sister. However, before the wedding took place, my leave was cancelled, and I was asked to report back to my ship. I had to miss my only sister's wedding – the first wedding in our family.

When we sailed off to sea, we learnt that we were going to take part in the action to liberate Goa. Along with some other ships, we were positioned somewhere near Daman and Diu. Then, it was officially declared that India would liberate Goa. There was hectic activity of planes flying from the INS Vikrant, and the ship was always dark and ready for operation.

After a few days, we could see from the ship that Portuguese forces had hoisted the white flag of

At this time, I was thinking of leaving the Navy to join the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC) at Bombay. However, my officer in-charge Cdr. P.K. Sinha advised me not to leave the Navy. Instead, he said, I should take the next examination for becoming a commissioned officer. I passed this this test soon after India's Goa action, and became a commissioned officer on September 30, 1962.

### **Epilogue**

I was lucky to travel to the U.K. at an early age and study there. This exposure changed my outlook. My financial condition improved, which helped my family back home. As a result, my brothers could pursue their studies better. Eventually my parents were happy and lucky to have all three sons of nearly same status educationally and financially. My only sister was also married to a hard working family and was happy. This was a plus point of our family. I did sacrifice but I got tremendous satisfaction from helping my parents – my father was a saintly man and my mother a dominating leader.

When I look back, I served in three capital ships of the Indian Navy and became a pioneer submariner. I also served on first the Indian Submarine as an Electrical Officer. I rose to become a Commander. When I retired from the Navy, I had the opportunity to work in a leading shipyard on the production of India's

first indigenous submarine. I was specially trained in Tudor Batteries, Sweden and was responsible for ensuring that the quality of indigenously produced submarine batteries met Indian naval standards.

My life has remained full of challenges, and with God's grace, I have been blessed with good health.

I must always thank my mentors in the Navy – Lt. Spraggs, RN, Cmde L.D. Tiwari, Rear Admiral Kripal Singh, Admiral O.S. Dasan, and Cmde K.S. Subramanian and many other Officers and friends. ❖

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