

BUSINESS PERSON OF THE YEAR

Innovation was his driving force



As part of a family settlement, Akij Group split into five entities in 2020. Bashir inherited mostly new businesses and then founded AkijBashir Group

MAHMUDUL HASAN

To lead a business to new heights, you need a deep-rooted philosophy of innovation and a willingness to face unforeseen challenges. This may sound like an adage, but it best describes business tycoon Sk. Bashir Uddin.

For example, when he joined the family business during his teenage years, it was more like a tough training period than a chance to mould his philosophy.

However, working under his father for 17 long years, he eventually learned how to analyse the business landscape, make precise decisions, and lead successful business expansions—qualities where the tying thread was innovation and the mentality to take on challenges.

It all began in 1988, on the day Bashir completed his matriculation exams. While his friends went to Cox's Bazar to celebrate, his father summoned him and asked him to join the family business.

He started as a stationery purchaser for the company, with a monthly salary of Tk 300. His job was to buy books,

notebooks and pens for the company.

Slowly but steadily, he climbed the corporate ladder. By the age of 32, Bashir was appointed managing director of Akij Group after the death of his father Sk. Akij Uddin.

"I was quite restless, and my father believed I needed to be disciplined," Bashir Uddin recalled in an interview with The Daily Star.

"I was treated like any other employee, with no special privileges. My father never gave me a voice in the company until I proved my capabilities and earned his trust.

"Even my salary increments followed formal procedures and I could not draw more than I was officially allowed to," he added.

Bashir worked under his father for 17 years. "I consider myself very fortunate to have had that opportunity, and I have always regarded myself as his servant number one. He was a man of excellence and precision in everything he did. A tough boss, without a doubt.

"My father constantly set challenges that seemed impossible for someone my age, but from him, I learned values,

ethics, the ability to objectively analyse any situation, and the importance of creating a culture where everyone's voice is heard and respected."

Born in the village of Navaron in Jashore in 1974, Bashir completed his schooling there before moving to Dhaka with his mother in 1977. Under his father's leadership, Bashir helped the company venture into more sophisticated industries, including textiles, food and beverages and printing.

The group also reorganised its core tobacco business. "Between 1997 and 2003, I did a complete rebranding of our tobacco division and modernised it. It required an investment of Tk 1,000 crore."

When Bashir's father passed away in 2006, the responsibility of leading a company with 55,000 employees fell squarely on Bashir's shoulders. "It was an incredibly difficult time for us."

But Bashir eventually overcame that and took on greater challenges. The major one was selling Akij's most famous and profitable tobacco business in 2018.

"Tobacco was synonymous with our brand, but our non-tobacco businesses were growing tremendously. Tobacco then became a burden on our other successes," he recalled.

He also mentioned his mother's strong disapproval of the tobacco business, a key factor in their decision to divest. "It took us about five to six years

just to find the right buyer."

In 2018, Akij Group sold its tobacco division to Japan Tobacco International for \$1.47 billion, the largest single foreign direct investment in Bangladesh's history.

"It was a very complex transaction. Japanese companies are meticulous and the due diligence process, ensuring compliance with legal and manufacturing regulations, took nearly two years."

As part of a family settlement, Akij Group split into five entities in 2020. Bashir inherited mostly new businesses and then founded AkijBashir Group.

The group, which now employs 25,000 people, focused on expansion and diversification.

Today, AkijBashir Group's portfolio includes Akij Ceramics Limited, Akij Particle Board Mills Limited, Akij Polymer Limited, Akij Steel Mills Limited, Robin Resources (Malaysia) Sdn. Bhd., Janata Sadat Jute Industries, Akij Biax Films Limited and Akij Cartons.

A part from maintaining the highest standards of quality, Bashir said he prioritised employee welfare.

His initiatives include subsidised housing for employees, schools, sports facilities, and the AkijBashir Trust, which supports education and healthcare.

He said he firmly believes that progress is a collective endeavour. "Through collaborative efforts with our employees, customers, and partners, we can cultivate a sense of community and

shared objective."

Recently, the group launched glass production at a state-of-the-art plant in Madhabpur upazila of Habiganj, positioning itself as a key player in the rapidly growing market.

According to Bashir, the AkijBashir Glass factory is a testament to the group's commitment to sustainability and eco-friendly practices.

"Up to 71 percent of our electricity consumption in that facility comes from renewable energy sources," he said. "The goal is to reach 100 percent over time."

Regarding the future of AkijBashir Group, Bashir said he wants to make it structurally solid. "I want it to be a place for talent, an entity that solves people's problems and delivers value for money."

When asked what kind of future he envisions for Bangladesh, especially in light of reform initiatives after the fall of the Awami League government, he said, "I want to see a fair country where everyone receives justice.

"Social or financial influence should not override justice—this is the kind of country I want to leave for future generations.

"In a just society, if someone loses, they will understand that they lost due to a lack of competence, not because of injustice," he said.

"There should be fairness in the distribution of wealth, in the punishment for crimes and equality under the law."

In the concluding part of the conversation, when asked about the philosophy that drives him, Bashir hesitated.

"I'm honestly not sure. What philosophy drives me? To become wealthier? No. To create more companies? No, that's not it."

He turned to a colleague who had just entered the room moments earlier and asked, "What drives me?"

"New challenges and innovation," the colleague replied.



Sk. Bashir Uddin

ENTERPRISE OF THE YEAR

Rise of the steel giant

Now, the BSRM chairman is considered among the most experienced industrialists in the country and is even hailed as a "Steel Guru" for his vast expertise in the vital sector

DWAIPAYAN BARUA

Although the steel industry is crucial for developing modern economies, Bangladesh was completely devoid of one until the year 1952.

Three or four merchant families hailing from Gujarat in India had established separate small-scale manual rod making plants in Chattogram that year, sowing the seeds for the domestic steel industry.

However, only the family of Akberali Africawala, who founded the first unit of BSRM Group, has succeeded over the years.

This is because what Akberali and his brothers set in motion back then has been continued by their children and grandchildren, with their dedication and innovative ideas transforming the Bangladesh Steel Re-Rolling Mills Ltd (BSRM) into the country's leading steelmaker.

With a passion for harnessing unexploited opportunities and relentless efforts to provide high-quality specialised steel products, Akberali's third son Alihussain Akberali has played an immense role in this regard.

Alihussain together with his son Aameir Alihussain, his cousin Zohair Taherali and nephew Abdul Qadir Zohair have cemented BSRM's position as a market leader, bringing about ground-breaking changes to the steel industry in Bangladesh.

Now, the BSRM chairman is considered among the most experienced industrialists in the country and is even hailed as a "Steel Guru" for his vast expertise in the vital sector.

Aameir Alihussain, the current managing director of BSRM, recently shared the fascinating story behind the group's long journey to success.

HISTORY

Akberali's father Alibhai Khanbhai, a clothing trader from Amreli in Gujarat, was among several Gujarati merchants who had travelled to Madagascar in Africa prior to 1900 to make a living.

Alibhai returned to his homeland in 1930 and engaged in trading hardware and silver products.

But following the partition of India in 1947, the family gradually migrated to West Pakistan and started a hardware business in Karachi.

It was through this hardware business that Akberali and his brothers started frequently visiting Dhaka to trade nails and screws.

HOW IT STARTED

"It was during one such visit that my grandfather and one or two of his brothers decided to tour Chattogram, where they fell in love with the region's greenery, weather and iron-rich water," Aameir said.

Seeing an opportunity, Akberali decided to anchor their hardware business in the country and opened an office on Jubilee Road in Chattogram in 1949.

Akberali had sensed the prospect for steel production in Bangladesh as the country was completely lagging in this regard compared to India, where the industry was already well established.

"Being of Indian origin, our family had good connections with industry people in the neighbouring nation and used those connections to their advantage," Aameir said.

Then in 1952, Akberali and his four brothers—Taherali Africawala, Abdul Hussain Africawala, Rajabali Africawala and Ghulam Hussain Africawala—established the East Bengal Re-rolling Mill in Nasirabad, Chattogram.

Following the Liberation War, their steel plant, business properties and assets were nationalised but Akberali and Taherali stayed in Bangladesh as they had a deep love for the new country.

"The government gave back our assets within two years but since there was a gap, they had to start over and the plant was renamed as Bangladesh Steel Re-rolling Mills [BSRM]," Aameir said.

NEW JOURNEY

Akberali's third and youngest son Alihussain had got a job offer from Saudi Arabia's Aramco after completing



his chartered accountancy in West Pakistan in 1972. But honouring his father's wishes, Alihussain joined the family business.

In the years that followed, Alihussain, his brothers, uncles and cousins led the plant's transition from a small manual rolling mill to one that produces global quality products.

The country's construction sector saw some pace in the 1980s, which helped the industry's rise.

"The family kept making gradual investments, modifying the plant to increase its product range. For the next 15 years, they kept innovating, researching and developing new products," Aameir added.

By 2001, Aameir joined the business after completing his graduation in economics from McGill University in Canada and an MBA from LUMS University in Lahore.

Alihussain, his son Aameir and cousin Zohair then planned for steady expansion to grab the rising market with a persistent hankering for more advanced technology.

The annual production capacity of BSRM's old re-rolling plant in Nasirabad, which was merely 36,000 tonnes in the 1980s, was gradually increased to 1.20 lakh tonnes till 2008.

That same year, the group set up a new plant at Fouzderhat with brand new automated equipment imported from Italy to produce the country's first 500-grade steel bars, bringing a dynamic change to the local market.

Aameir also said that afterwards, they went for continuous upgradation and expansion in terms of quality, efficiency, production capacity, and developing specialised and diversified products.

According to him, BSRM Group saw its real exponential growth after 2008 in line with the country's steady economic growth.

"We kept expanding production as the market kept growing," he added.

By the year 2022, with two rolling mills and four billet making plants, BSRM's combined annual production capacity of mild steel rod and billet each reached about 1.8 million tonnes.

As a part of exploring new opportunities, the company in 2018 set up a unit in Mirsharai of Chattogram to make various products, such as galvanised wire and welding electrodes.

Then came the blow of the Covid-19 pandemic, followed by the Russia-Ukraine war.

Still, the leaders remained

optimistic over the past two years and initiated the massive expansion of one of its billet plants and set up a greenfield rolling plant in Mirsharai.

BSRM has invested around Tk 2,100 crore in these two projects.

"We were hopeful about more opportunities in the coming years. Moreover, we were running at full capacity, so we can take the challenge," Aameir said.

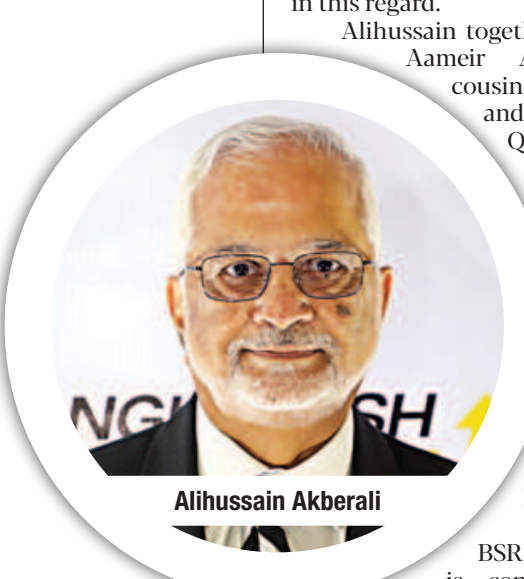
With the billet factory expansion project having ended last year, BSRM's combined billet production capacity has reached 2.4 million tonnes.

Also, the new rolling plant will add 6 lakh tonnes to its mild steel rod production capacity, with the combined capacity now at 2.4 million tonnes per annum.

However, the factory is currently in the commissioning stage.

BSRM registered net profits of Tk 589.3 crore in fiscal 2022-23, when its overall sales revenue was Tk 19,958.6 crore.

At present, the company employs more than 4,500 people and is considered a "university" for steelmaking, as many of its workers go on to hold leading positions at other steelmaking companies.



Alihussain Akberali