

Straight Talk: The grand old man

Meet the oldest expat in the UAE

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In 1934, he set sail in a steamship from Karachi. Eight days later, he touched the shores of Dubai. He was then in his teens.

Today, Narayandas Narsingdas Babla is the oldest living Indian expat in the city. He turns 92 on September 14.



Image Credit: XPRESS/Pankaj Sharma

Fulfilling a dream

"My father died in Mumbai when he was just 42. I had to come to Dubai to continue his business," recalled Babla, a pillar of the Thattai Bhatia Community that traces its origins to Nagar Thatta, a coastal town near Karachi.

India's partition in 1947 saw an exodus of this mercantile community to the UAE and Bahrain. Its ancestors set foot on Arabian soil at the turn of the 18th century.

'Narimal' to his relatives and 'Naaru' to his friends, Babla said: "Life was simple but hard." At 19, he learnt the ropes of his family's export business – supplying foodgrains and sugar from India to Iran and sending pearls to India.



Image Credit: XPRESS/Pankaj Sharma

His uncle Ghanshyam, who had accompanied him to Dubai, was his initial guiding force.

Battling the odds

"There were no restaurants. We had to cook ourselves with vegetables that came from Oman, Bahrain and Iran. We fetched water from wells dug in an area called Mankhool.

The water was good only for five to eight days, after which it turned saline. Markets closed at sunset and kerosene lamps illuminated our houses at night. There were no banks and Arabs accepted only those rupee coins that contained silver," he said.

The bhatia families

Dubai started using British Indian currency after the East India Company established its presence. Babla recalled having seen pearl divers operating off Delma island. His family was one of the financiers for boat owners who hired pearl divers.

The Bhatia families started trickling in from 1964 onwards, bringing much relief to the men as they were able to do away with cooking and bid adieu to loneliness, said Babla, who managed to get a sanction from the municipality for a Hindu cremation ground near the Maktoum bridge.

Later, the community received a plot in Al Quoz for cremation purposes. Babla has the original documents showing the grant of land for building the Krishna temple near the Jumma mosque.



Image Credit: XPRESS/Pankaj Sharma

"From 50 to 60 people in Dubai in the 1930s, we have grown to over 500 families now."

The experiences and contributions of Thattai Bhatias and the non-Bhatia Sindhi community are being compiled in a book by publisher Haridas Bhatia.