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### Stone Age

*MS International leads natural stone revolution in U.S.*

BY MARTIN DESMARAIS

ORANGE, Calif. — For more than 30 years, Manu Shah has quietly built a giant in American industry, though it might have helped that he was doing it with nature's most reliable building material — stone.

Shah's MS International Inc. is the largest distributor of natural stone in the United States. The company, which is headquartered in Orange, Calif., has over 20 million square feet of natural stone at seven distribution centers in New Jersey, Georgia, Texas, Illinois, Massachusetts, Arizona and India.

MS International's stone products include granite, slate, marble, travertine, sandstone, limestone and other natural stone products imported from over 33 countries on five continents. In addition to its India presence, MS International has purchasing offices in Brazil, Turkey and China. All told, the company's umbrella encompasses over 400 employees, 250 suppliers and 3,000 customers around the world.

Shah and his wife Rika started MS International in 1975 in Ft. Wayne, Ind., to establish an import business so Shah's brother could ship stone from his granite quarry in India to the United States. However, the business quickly grew and Shah saw firsthand the potential of the natural stone industry in the United States. According to him, his company has grown for 32 years straight since it was started.

At the same time, MS International has had a hand at changing the stone landscape in the United States.

In 1982, MS International put Indian black granite on the map when the company was selected to provide the stone for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. The famous monument to the United States' fallen soldiers in the Vietnam War helped cement black granite in the public consciousness and sent MS International on a spree of monument work. The company has also provided the stone for The Space Mirror Memorial at the Kennedy Space Center, which honors the 24 astronauts who have given their lives in space exploration. All told, Shah estimates his company has provided the stone for about 50 memorials.

Shah, who came to the United States from India in 1967 to attend Purdue University where he received a master's degree in mechanical engineering, initially worked as a project engineer at International Harvester Company while running MS International on the side. But the demand for black granite for memorials caused him to leave International Harvester and focus on MS International.

In 1984, he moved the company's operations to California. Three years later MS International opened up its own 6,000-square-foot warehouse.

However, as black granite became known as "the color of death," because of its association with memorials, Shah began to push for other uses for the stone, particularly in the kitchen. He increased his marketing in this regard and also started to bring in different kinds of stone products — including Italian stone, Indian slate and travertine from Mexico.

"By 1987 it started clicking," Shah said. "Black granite slowly disassociated just from memorials — from dead people to living people."



Manu Shah started MS International Inc. in 1975. The company is the de facto U.S. source for natural stone with over 20 million square feet at seven centers worldwide. Photo courtesy of MS International Inc.

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The marble and granite that is now so typically seen in U.S. houses today was not always there and MS International's efforts in this regard have helped to spread the use of a building element that has been prolific the world over.

Shah estimates that only about 2 percent of U.S. homes had stone in 1987, but approximately 8 percent have it today.

He said stone is not really a tough sell because stone has classic colors, which despite trends and styles, is always in vogue. "Mother Nature gives a very classic color that people just don't want to change," he said.

Stone is also a good investment. "It gives a homeowner a longer-lasting value to their home," Shah added.

An expanding customer base led to more expansion for MS International. In 1994, the company started its expansion across the United States with a location in Chicago followed by six more over the next decade. In 2004, the company moved to a 13-acre site in Orange.

Shah takes great pride in playing a part in the proliferation of stone. "The use of the decorative power of stone is worldwide," he said. "Now it is in homes everywhere."

But there is another element to MS International's success that gives Shah a great sense of accomplishment for spending most of his professional career in the stone business — a strong connection to the earth and finding a purposeful use to a natural resource.

"I have a very big passion for natural stone," he said.

Though nature was a part of Shah's upbringing — having lived in a small rural city outside of Bombay — he admits that his passion for working with natural resources came after starting his stone business. Shah speaks with an obvious respect when talking about dealing in stone and bringing something that is 100 million to 800 million years old to people for use in their everyday lives.

"It doesn't matter which country a stone comes from, Mother Nature made it — it is so old," he said. "But [natural] stone has stood the test of time for millions of years."

"You put a stone in your home and you can look, touch and feel how Mother Nature was millions of years ago," he added.

He calls natural stone "man's best friend." Pointing out that it has been used by man throughout history for tools, to start fires, for shelter and as the building blocks for structures of all kinds.

Shah is also proud of the natural stone industry's ability to adapt to today's technology to improve the finished product, but to also contribute to the rural workforce — since most quarries are in rural areas — in a time when most are following work from rural to urban settings. According to him, MS International is responsible for 40,000 jobs in India and 100,000 jobs worldwide.

In June, Shah was named Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year in the distribution category in Orange County, but despite being gracious of the honor bestowed on him Shah simply looks at his success with MS International as necessary to serving as an ambassador for natural stone.

His wife has always served with him in this role and now Shah also has the aid of his two sons, Raj and Rup, who both serve as executive vice presidents of MS International.

"We really believe natural stone should be both accessible and affordable to the consumer," Shah said. "Our goal is to find stone from far countries, but make it affordable to the average consumers."

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