

THEY BROKE UNTOUCHED BARRIERS. THEY
CREATED FOOTPRINTS WHERE THERE WERE
NONE. 18 EXTRAORDINARY WOMEN SHARE

CORPORATE DIVAS

SONIA GOLANI

A LIFETIME OF WISDOM THROUGH THEIR
PERSONAL STORIES AND OFFER A ROADMAP
FOR SUCCESS FOR ASPIRING BUSINESS LEADERS
AND ENTREPRENEURS.



PORTFOLIO
PENGUIN

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Sminu Jindal

STEELY RESOLVE, ROCKETING AMBITION

It is not only the pipes and coils that Sminu manufactures that are made of steel, but also her will and nerves. Nerves that are hard and resistant to pressure, and a will that is insuppressible in the face of the toughest of physical and professional challenges. The physical challenge of paraplegia and the professional challenge of turning around sick units not only in India but also in the US, Sminu has managed it all with great aplomb. She has successfully established herself as a leading and the only woman chief executive in the steel sector in India.

So, how did her involvement in business begin? What is it that led her to join her father's business when there was no precedent in the Jindal family of women being in business?

'Clichéd as it may sound,' she replies, 'the truth is that as far back as I can remember I always wanted to be a businesswoman.' As a child, as young as seven years, she recalls going to office with her father Prithvi Raj, the eldest son of Om Prakash Jindal, the founder of the \$12 billion Jindal Group. Prithvi Raj would ask her that didn't she get bored sitting and watching him work and she would answer that she wished to work with him one day and manage the business like him. Prithvi Raj would laugh it off as a mere childish fancy. He would, at the same time,



Sminu Jindal
Managing Director, Jindal Saw Limited

be surprised to see her single-mindedness when at home her two younger sisters and cousins would ask her to play 'doll house' with them but she would insist and make them agree to play games based on office themes where she would be the boss. Sminu confesses that it is the sense of independence and power, an opportunity to interact with a wide spectrum of people and handle challenging situations that has always fascinated her.

Sminu completed her schooling from Presentation Convent in Delhi and went on to pursue B.Com. from Delhi's premier Shri Ram College of Commerce. She was also initiated into business at the same time. Every day after college she devoted a couple of hours in office and began to understand the basics of business. Qualifying the part-time management course with a silver medal from the Fore School of Management in Delhi further sharpened her knowledge.

Prithvi Raj was convinced that Sminu's desire to be a businesswoman was not just a childish whim. He decided that she would have to come into the arena and take up complete responsibility; it could not be a part-time involvement any longer. He assigned independent charge of Swastik Foils to her. It was her acid test as Swastik Foils was a loss-making unit and it would take considerable business acumen and grit to turn it around. It is only through a chisel that a marble gets its grace and form. Sminu recognized this fact and was ready to go through the grind. This was an opportunity for her to prove her mettle.

Swastik Foils was one of the many players in the market who supplied stainless steel coils for utensil manufacturing. It had, however, not been able to find its feet in the face

of stiff competition. Under Sminu's leadership and relying on her out-of-the-box thinking, a strategic shift in product range was brought about which helped in opening up many more avenues for the company. Now they could tap into computer applications, specific application for defence, etc. and thrive on the niche market they had created for themselves.

The strategy, the hard work, the motivation that drove the sales and marketing team to achieve set targets turned the fortunes of the company within a year. Swastik Foils made a name for itself for its quality to the extent that it got an offer for a joint venture with an international leader in the field. The company since then has been renamed IUP Jindal. The people who stuck with Sminu through the rough patch and are still continuing to work with her recall those days as the best part of their career. Swastik Foils' success went on to become the first stepping stone in Sminu's successful journey.

Next, when trouble brewed at the company's plant near Nashik that produces tubes and pipes, Sminu took it upon herself to resolve the issues and keep the workers' morale high. The unit was facing a shutdown and Prithvi Raj was a bit sceptical in sending her alone to manage the volatile situation there. But she persisted. With her deft handling of the situation, results soon followed and the unit was back on track. Today it accounts for a substantial part of Jindal Saw's revenues. Sminu's business astuteness, capacity to work hard and face challenges with courage and sagacity were established beyond doubt by now with two difficult turnarounds to her credit. She was duly elevated to the position of managing director in 1998 following her appointment as a permanent director on the board earlier.

There was more joy in store for her. The professional

zenith was followed by personal bliss when she got married to Indresh Batra in 2001. Sminu had met Indresh at a common friend's birthday party and after a brief courtship of about two months, they decided to marry. Sminu and Indresh are proud parents of two boys today—Anav and Arjal, eight and four respectively. They both study at the American Embassy School in Delhi.

Soon after their wedding, Indresh and Sminu headed to the US to put things in order at Jindal Saw's unit there. The unit had been making losses and there was a strong line of thought to sell it off. Sminu was not convinced. She saw a challenge here and was determined to turn around this situation as well. However, this particular issue required greater dexterity as the locale and the culture of this unit were alien to her. The environment was also hostile and complex. Sminu remembers facing the angry employees who would shout and scream and send hate mails. But soon, with her knowledge and firm grasp of business, she was able to command people's respect. Further emboldened by Indresh's support, she managed to repeat her success. The unit recovered from losses and posted healthy profits. From the verge of being sold at a huge loss, the company was now in a commanding position. It was eventually hived off in 2006 with good profits in alignment with Jindal Saw's strategy to focus energies on the India growth story by launching new initiatives.

Having had the opportunity to live a convenient life in the US, what was it exactly that prompted her return to India?

Sminu would have been happy to continue with her life in the US but Prithvi Raj was keen that she should return to India and contribute to the business as she had done so far. Indresh too inspired her to relocate back home and additionally work in an area where she could make a

substantial difference, which was to make the environment more inclusive for people with reduced mobility.

Soon after returning Sminu went about putting those thoughts to action. She started the initiative 'Svayam' under the Sminu Jindal Charitable Trust. Svayam has since been working towards providing independence and dignity to people with reduced mobility, making various public places accessible to all, especially the elderly and the disabled. Towards this objective, Svayam has worked closely with various government agencies and corporates such as ITC Hotels, Hyatt Regency in Delhi and so on. It is also working hand in hand with the Ministry of Tourism to promote inclusive tourism. The Archaeological Survey of India and Svayam jointly received the national award from the Ministry of Tourism for making Qutub Minar the first fully accessible heritage site in India. Sminu is the chairperson of the recently launched initiative ARUNIM (the Association for Rehabilitation under National Trust Initiative in Marketing), an autonomous body under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment for the welfare of persons with multiple disabilities. ARUNIM assists them in securing livelihood through production of goods that are market driven, competitive and compatible. She is also chairperson of the Iron and Steel Committee of ASSOCHAM and in this capacity works for bringing about reforms in policy on behalf of the steel industry.

From a commanding position in India's tubular market, Jindal Saw in the last few years has diversified into newer businesses launched under its subsidiary Jindal ITF focused on infrastructure (water, waste water and solid waste management), transportation (coastal as well as inland waterways, shipping, building and operating ports and terminals, inland container freight stations, and innovative

container train services) and fabrication (high volume shipyards and rail wagons). These businesses are being managed by Indresh.

Sminu feels exhilarated with the opportunities that lie in these futuristic businesses, particularly the green businesses. Currently she is enthused with what Jindal Ecopolis promises. This Jindal ITF company is primarily focused on solving urban waste management problems. It has set up India's first commercial waste-to-power plant at Okhla in Delhi. When fully operational, it will convert approximately one-third of the daily municipal solid waste produced by Delhi into 16 megawatts of power. It will be the largest plant of its kind operational in Asia and the second largest in the world.

Similarly, Sminu sees huge opportunity and hope in the water management and shipping businesses. 'In our country only 1 one per cent of the people have access to clean drinking water. This is a commodity for future business and an area which has huge possibilities. Just one river, the Yangtze, in China contributes directly or indirectly to 40 per cent of its GDP. India has so many rivers from Ganga, Yamuna to Krishna, Godavari, etc; you can imagine what kind of potential lies in our country. India's coastline is so big, more than 7000 navigable km. There is a lot we can do. I am waiting for everything green to happen,' she says brimming with enthusiasm. Her optimism and zeal about the company's mega plans in the infrastructure sector certainly bode well for our country which is in the throes of growth but constrained by the lack of superior infrastructure.

What about diversifying into services? Is there any thought in that direction too?

'I am a hard core manufacturing person. Machines fascinate me. It may not be too much to say that I see poetry

in machines. When I am upset, you'll find me at the plant as that's where my mood lifts up,' she says and continues, 'also, most of our projects normally require long gestation periods. We are trying to complete all projects which are in the pipeline. Then we will work at turning them up into profitable businesses. So for the time being it's going to be a complete focus on manufacturing, I guess.'

Sminu belongs to one of the leading industrial families in the country. Her grandfather O.P. Jindal was a first generation entrepreneur who laid the foundation of the Jindal Group in 1984. Today, the group is being managed by his four sons, each of whom heads his own respective business. Sminu's father Prithvi Raj Jindal is the eldest and is vice chairman of Jindal Saw Limited; Sajjan Jindal, eight years younger to Prithvi, heads the JSW Group; Ratan Jindal heads Jindal Stainless Steel; and the youngest, Naveen Jindal, is the executive vice chairman and MD of Jindal Steel & Power Limited and also an MP from Kurukshetra. After O.P. Jindal's demise in 2005, the chairperson for all these companies is their mother Savitri Jindal.

What is it like being the granddaughter of a visionary and living with successful entrepreneurs as family members?

Sminu acknowledges that she has imbibed a lot from her grandfather. She reminisces how her father and chachas were quite in awe of him. Sometimes Ratan, but more often Naveen, could gather courage to discuss and argue with him but the older two would almost never do that and invariably maintain a more traditional approach of respect and regard. She would be the only other person in the family who would have the guts to have a discussion with him. OP used to affectionately call her '*kamau poot*', the son who earns.

She recounts the pearls of wisdom handed over to her by her grandfather when she was going to make a start in the business. He was very open-minded and supportive of her decision. 'He said,' recalls Sminu, "*Beta, ek to tera darwaza hamesha labour ke liye khula rehna chahiye, kabhi uske liye band nahin hona chahiye. Manager log to kaise bhi karke tere paas pahunch jaayenge par woh labour nahin pahunchega. Doosra, kabhi yeh mat bhoolna us labour ki vajah se aaj aap apni roti rozi kamaate ho. Agar aap uska dhyaan nahin rakh sakte toh aapke ghar mein lakshmi kabhi nahin aayegi*" (My dear child, firstly, your door should always remain open for your workers; it should never be closed for them. The managers will somehow reach you but those workers will not be able to. Secondly, never forget that it's because of these workers that today you are earning your livelihood. If you are not able to take care of them, then you will never get prosperity in your house).

'Taking good care of our people is the basic philosophy that runs through the entire Jindal Group,' says Sminu. 'We have schools, housing and medical facilities at each of our units. My grandfather used to say that "*Agar roti kapda aur ghar ki chinta apke labour ko nahin hogi to woh apna pura man kaam mein laga sakta hai*" (If your workers are not worried about food, clothing and shelter, then they can devote their hearts completely to work). We are proud of the fact that there is no labour union in any of the Jindal group companies. We never lay off our people. Even during the shutdown at Nashik or more recently during the recession, not a single employee was asked to leave. We believe in taking care of our people and I guess that gets returned,' concludes Sminu.

There are other members of the family too whom she admires. She respects her grandmother's generosity

and humble attitude towards one and all regardless of the person's stature. She feels amazed with her father's resilience. No adversity can shake him. He has a very calm temperament and a cool demeanour. She appreciates Indresh's ability to absorb and analyse large amounts of information and create the right focus. She also admires her chachas—Sajjan's engineering bent of mind, Ratan's financial acumen and Naveen's abilities as a great communicator. 'He excels at everything he touches,' she says.

Sminu's own management style is very hands-on. She considers herself quite 'fiery' compared to her father and one who is a tough taskmaster if the occasion demands so. She likes to go into the depth of the problem to arrive at a solution. She believes that teamwork is what takes the organization forward and likes to consult her team members on important issues. While she recognizes that more minds are better than one, she also brings in the delicate balance by ensuring that too many cooks don't spoil the broth.

Her after-work hours are completely dedicated to the family. She also loves to indulge in her hobbies of painting, singing and interior decoration as and when she can make time for them. She enjoys travelling and Venice remains her all-time favourite destination. She believes that, 'a little bit of courage, lots of love and support from family and friends and God's grace is what it takes to make life beautiful. Her single most important mantra that keeps her going is that 'where there is a will there is a way', and it is her unshaken faith in this phrase that has enabled her to succeed in difficult situations whether it was turning around the sick units or even starting Svayam. People who have worked closely with her say that she has crossed the

stage of being called a determined human being. She is a tenacious one.

Well into the conversation and spurred by her self-assured bearing, I ask her how did she develop so much confidence and cope with those days when life took an onerous turn for her about seventeen years ago?

After completing her elementary schooling in Delhi, Sminu had joined the boarding at the prestigious Maharani Gayatri Devi School in Jaipur with a view to acquire holistic quality education. It was on one of those drives back home from Jaipur to Delhi that she met with a near-fatal accident. She was fortunate to survive but sustained a severe spinal cord injury and brain haemorrhage. The spinal injury left the lower half of her body paralysed. The next few years were very difficult and traumatic for her. She was just a young child of eleven in class six. As she woke up to the reality facing her, she shuddered at the thought that it would no longer remain the playful carefree life she had known. What hurt her most was the realization that she would no longer be able to dance. She was a talented Kathak dancer and a distinction holder at Bhartiya Kala Kendra at the age of nine.

Sminu does not flinch a bit while talking to me about this agonizing phase of her life and recalls with serene equanimity that it was indeed a period of complete personal mess. It was her family that became a deep source of emotional and psychological support for her in those moments. Her parents, especially her mother Arti, instilled the confidence in her that she would be able to go to a normal school and continue the day-to-day activities. They would encourage her to do the small routine things on her own without seeking anyone's sympathy or support. She would carry her bag to school, go for tuitions outside home like her sisters did

and later joined a regular co-ed college after studying in a convent. Thus she 'was cared for but was not pampered'. This significant training at home toughened her mind and made her self-reliant so that she could face the life ahead with courage.

My interaction with Sminu left me with a beautiful feeling of having met a cheerful, spirited and an iron-willed individual whose approach in life is to focus on her abilities rather than her disability. She is true to her name—Sminu incidentally means someone who always keeps smiling. Regret, sympathy, pity are words that are banished from her dictionary. 'One moves forward or backward in life depending on how the person looks at the situation,' she says emphatically. She suggests that instead of sympathizing with people or protecting them too much, the focus should be on empowering and enabling them to live with dignity.

The Jindals are widely admired for being wealth creators and building a large business empire. They are also known for their family values, spirit of camaraderie and progressive thinking, which is reflected in Sminu's successful journey and in the status and opportunities available to other women in the family. For instance, Sminu's grandmother Savitri Jindal is a member of the Haryana Vidhan Sabha besides being chairperson of all the companies of Jindal Group. She also served as Minister of Power in the Government of Haryana. Her chachi Deepika (Ratan's wife) has pioneered the enterprise Art d'Inox which is into stainless steel tableware and home décor products. One cannot help but wonder at the paradoxical coexistence of liberal and progressive views and extreme conservatism in the same society!

The next decade will possibly accelerate the growth for the country as never before; thanks to the information boom and technological advancement that has the potential of touching lives to the last mile. If those who are fortunate can give back to the communities to which they belong just the way Sminu is attempting to transfer the best practices of the advanced world to our social environment, it can go a long way in driving an ideological change. The reward will be evident in enlightened surroundings for oneself and for our future generations.

'Instead of sympathizing with people or protecting them too much, the focus should be on empowering and enabling them to live with dignity.'
