

In the traditionally male-dominated automobile industry, the determination and tenacity of Sulajja Firodia Motwani is a story worth narrating.

In 1996, at the age of 26, when Sulajja returned to Pune armed with a management degree from the Carnegie Mellon University, USA and a stint with a financial portfolio management company in California, industry insiders scoffed at her entry into the "family business"—the notoriously sexist business of selling motorcycles.

Today, almost 20 years later, this tenacious businesswoman is having the last chuckle. She is the Vice Chairperson of Kinetic Engineering Ltd and Managing Director of Kinetic Green Energy and Power Solutions, a part of the US \$500 million Kinetic Group of Companies.

Sulajja is responsible for Kinetic Group's overall management, as well as business and technology strategies across group companies. She has earned accolades from peers and competitors, and her roster of prestigious awards include 'Face of the Millennium' and 'India's Most Powerful Woman' award by business magazines, as well as being listed on *Fortune's* '25 Business Leaders of the Next Century'.

However, the road to the top was not without its fair share of struggles and hard physical work. "I wanted to earn the respect of my co-workers and not just hold a senior position by virtue of being the boss' daughter," she explains.

To prove her point, Sulajja flung herself whole-heartedly into her work—living out of a suitcase, visiting gas stations and over 200 Kinetic dealers across India in her first years in office, besides overseeing the company's strategy, sales, marketing and finance portfolios.

"The sacrifices were enormous—I took only four days maternity leave when my son Siddhant was born," she says.

Back in the day, Kinetic was making mopeds and had a joint venture with

Honda for manufacturing scooters. Thanks in no small measure to Sulajja's efforts, the group's turnover rose to ₹1,200 crore. The Kinetic Engineering Company, the group's flagship company which sold mopeds and motorcycles, saw a dramatic rise in turnover from ₹15 crore in 1995 to ₹150 crore in 2001-02.

Unwilling to rest on her laurels and like a hardcore businesswoman, Sulajja envisaged the need for corporate change. "I realised that in order to survive we had to shave off our core business of mopeds and scooters as we couldn't compete with the larger players," she points out with emphasis. Although it was a decision fraught with emotion (since these sectors represented the fundamental essence of the company), Sulajja and her team spent the next couple of years identifying and venturing into allied and new business areas such as automotive technology, automotive systems and components, multilevel parking solutions, elevators and escalators, and green energy.

Away from the business, a strong family bond helps her through this high-pressured role as a career woman and mom to 12-year-old Siddhant—the apple of Sulajja's eye.

It's the calming influence of husband Manish Motwani who says his wife is "a hyperactive woman" that keeps her balanced, plus the support of her mother who babysits and supervises her home—whether she's at her office in Chinchwad or attending the World Economic Forum at Davos, Switzerland.

And it's not just business risks that float her boat. Holidays are spent pursuing daredevil adventure sports such as scuba and sky diving and hiking, or "any sport that is a threat to my life," as she puts it.

Skiing is another passion she indulges in, as is her daily hour at the gym every morning before heading to office.

"I'm open to challenges both personally and professionally. Complacency and routine have scant place in my vocabulary."

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In Top Gear

At the helm of a traditional engineering company, the glamorous Sulajja Firodia Motwani prepares to rev her engine and take the Kinetic Group into a high gear.

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