

# Sulajja Firodia Motwani lives life on the edge

By Fareeda Kanga | Posted 17-Aug-2014

*In the traditionally male-dominated automobile industry, it took the calibre of a young woman, Sulajja Firodia Motwani, to shatter the proverbial glass ceiling and take the Kinetic Engineering Group into cruise control. In a tête-à-tête with Fareeda Kanga, the businesswoman shares why she lives life on the edge and how she still needs to realise her full potential*

## Sulajja Firodia Motwani, Vice-Chairperson, Kinetic Group

Dressed in a black formal shirt and a slate grey skirt teamed with heels and minimal accessories, Sulajja Firodia Motwani cuts a striking picture. As we meet her one Saturday afternoon at a five-star hotel in Worli, her svelte figure belies her age and her no-nonsense disposition states that she is here to talk business. Patience clearly isn't one of her virtues — halfway through our interview, she chides our photographer, who is taking her pictures, to finish the job at hand soon. "Hurry up!" she says.



Sulajja Firodia Motwani counts corporate doyens such as Ratan Tata and Narayan Murthy and world leaders such as Bill Clinton and Bill Gates as her role models. Pics/Shadab Khan

Perhaps, it's such an impatience to excel and be on top of every challenge undertaken, that has won this enterprising Vice Chairperson of the Kinetic Group of Companies, worth \$500 million, accolades from peers and competitors. She has not only been proclaimed as India Today magazine's Face of the Millennium and made it to Fortune's list of 25 Business Leaders of the Next Century but also honoured with India's Most Powerful Woman award by Business Today.

### In top gear

She started revving her way to the pinnacle of corporate success in 1996 when she returned from the United States with an MBA from Carnegie Mellon University followed by a stint with a financial portfolio management company, BARRA International, in Berkeley California.

"I embraced the challenges thrown my way as Kinetic was always in my blood," says the scion of the Firodia family, whose grandfather HK Firodia founded the Kinetic Engineering company.



In spite of this being the family business for two generations, the business czar preferred to learn the ropes the hard way by joining the sales team.

"I flung myself whole-heartedly in work. Besides overseeing the company's strategy, sales, marketing and finance portfolios, I lived out of a suitcase. I visited gas stations and over 200 Kinetic dealers across India during the first few years in office," Motwani reminisces.

Being the boss's daughter (her father Padmashree Arun Firodia is the founder and current chairman of the Firodia group) gave her a readymade platform to execute her ideas and strategies. But she had to earn the respect of colleagues and factory workers and started working at the grass-root level to see how the business operates and strike a chord with dealers and distributors.

"The sacrifices were enormous. We travelled through dusty, tiny towns in rural Maharashtra meeting dealers and distributors. It was tough as I was constantly ill with a sore throat or upset stomach but I just dug my heels in and continued," recalls the mother of one.

The self-confessed workaholic was so keen to finish the work at hand that she hardly took any time off during her pregnancy. "I took just four days maternity leave when my son Siddhant was born," Motwani smiles proudly.

In the '90s, Kinetic was making mopeds and had a joint venture with Honda to manufacture scooters. Under Motwani's tenure, the group's turnover rose to R1,200 crore. Also, the Kinetic Engineering company (the group's flagship company which sold mopeds and motorcycles) saw a dramatic rise in turnover from Rs 15 crore in 1995 to Rs 150 crore in 2001-2. But rather than basking in the glory, the businesswoman decided to tread new grounds.

### A new beginning

"Change is the only constant and I realised in order to survive we had to hive off our core business of mopeds and scooters as we couldn't compete with the bigger players. We did a Joint Venture (JV) with Mahindras in 2008 and sold our stake in this JV in February 2014," she explains matter of factly. Although it was an emotional decision as these sectors represented the essence of the company, over a period of time Motwani and her team ventured into allied and new business areas such as automotive technology, automotive systems and components, multi-level parking solutions, elevators and escalators, and green energy.

The entrepreneur, who counts corporate doyens such as Ratan Tata and Narayan Murthy (quiet performers with strong values, as she calls them) and world leaders such as Bill Clinton and Bill Gates as her role models, is confident that her foray into these growing sectors will reap rewards.

### Adventure seeker

It's easy to presume that it must be all work and no play for Motwani. But just like her corporate career where she thrives on taking risks, the professional loves to indulge in some adventure sports to unwind.

Right from sky diving to scuba diving and mountain biking, the daredevil corporate prefers "any sport that is a threat to her life" and claims it's the adrenaline rush that gets her recharged. Skiing is another passion that she indulges in with her husband Manish and son Siddhant. The health freak also ensures that she visits the gym regularly.

One might assume that after spearheading a company and taking it to the pinnacle of success, the 43-year-old would like to take it easy for some time. But she says with steely determination, "I've still not reached my full potential. I feel I've begun my second innings now and am bullish about the future."

Judging from her never-say-die spirit and determination that shouldn't be hard, we say.

### My Favourites

**Movie:** *Life is Beautiful* and *The Shawshank Redemption*

**Book:** *Ayn Rand's Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, *Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird*, *James Joyce's Ulysses*, *William Faulkner's The Sound and The Fury* and *Stieg Larsson's Millennium Trilogy*

**Sport:** *All adventure sports including scuba diving, skiing and skydiving and also long-distance running*

**Destination:** *I enjoy exploring new destinations and going back to the ones I've! But my all-time favourite city is San Francisco*

### Inside Track

**Born:** *August 26, 1970*

**Education:** *MBA from Carnegie Mellon University*

**Personal mantra:** *Every accomplishment starts with the decision to try!*

**Best advice:** *Don't ever give up on something you think about more than once a day!*