

I was judged at every step in court: Zia Mody

By Fareeda Kanga | Posted 20-Apr-2014

Grace under pressure and a steely determination to succeed are qualities that have helped the feisty Zia Mody reach the pinnacle of success in the courtroom and boardroom. Her candour about her life choices leaves Fareeda Kanga inspired

It takes a different kind of woman to shatter the proverbial glass ceiling in what was, until recently, a traditionally male-dominated profession.



Zia Mody at the AZB Partners office at Nariman Point. Pics/Bipin Kokate

Zia Mody might have got the big breaks because of her surname (she is the daughter of Senior Counsel, Soli Sorabjee, former Attorney General of India and Constitutional Law Expert), but as she says, "You only get one or two chances because of your lineage. The rest depends on your capabilities and prowess."



We are sitting in the plush office of her firm, AZB Partners, overlooking the panoramic skyline of Nariman Point, which services some of the who's-who of corporate India, including the Tatas, Ambanis and Birlas, to name a few.

Today, this feisty lawyer is undoubtedly India's leading authority on corporate merger and acquisition law (M&A), whilst acting as Managing Partner of AZB Partners, where multi-million dollar M&A's are the order of the day.

"All is possible," she says, "because of the excellent partners who make AZB what it is today."

Mody has been included in the list of 25 most powerful women in India, served on The World Bank Appellate Tribunal and the London Court of International Arbitration, and won numerous prestigious awards and accolades such as Best Knowledge Manager, Most Powerful Woman, and won The Economic Times Award for the Businesswoman of the Year 2010.

Unsurprisingly, reaching this pinnacle of success was far from easy.

Cut to 1984, when Zia returned after her education at Cambridge and Harvard (and a stint at law offices in New York) to take on the rigours of the Bombay High Court as a counsel. Passionate arguments in front of judges and tackling obstinate clients was par for the course.

"Each day was a show in court. You are judged at every step and I was ready to prove that I could excel in a predominantly male-dominated profession. Every time I appeared in court, I would deliberately over-prepare to ensure I never lost sight of my goal in this very tough field," she says.

Being a woman also meant that Mody often had to juggle her personal and professional lives with care. Mody admits with surprising candour that she, in fact, "deprioritised" her husband and three girls during those early days. She remembers abandoning her chicken pox-stricken daughter's bedside for the courtroom and staying up till the wee hours of the morning, poring over her briefs. Luckily, a supportive mother-in-law and husband, Jaydev Mody (realtor and chairman of Delta Corp) helped see her through the difficult times.

In spite of her superior court-craft and understanding of the law, Mody eventually became weary of arguing, and abandoned her bands and gown for chamber practice. "The emotional highs and lows of the court were taking their toll. Also, India was opening up and foreign firms who wished to set shop here approached us for legal counsel, so it made sense to set up a corporate practice," she says.

Drawing from her stint as a counsel, Mody says she learnt many important lessons whilst arguing at the bar. They have stood her in good stead when she is neck deep in an M&A deal. "How to negotiate, which card to put down first on the table, how to sniff out the weaknesses of the other side — my experience saw me through it all," she recalls.

Critics might label Mody as over-aggressive and rumours of her being a "slave driver" abound. She is known to burn the midnight oil herself even today and expects nothing less from her staff.

She denies none of the above. "But things have changed from the old days. As we have grown, the firm has become more institutionalised. Now, by 9 pm, almost 80 per cent of the office leaves for the day."

When she can tear herself away from work, Mody tries to devote time to her work involving Baha'i faith, of which she is an active member. At other times, she enjoys her time with her husband and kids like anyone else.

The key to her successful marriage, Mody says, is the mutual respect she and her husband share. "Of course, our love for our children binds us, too," she says.

My favourite

Personal mantra: *Honesty pays. Don't worry about the client, worry about the letterhead*

Heroes of the court: *Soli Sorabjee, Fali Nariman, KK Venugopal, and Iqbal Chagla*

Hope: *Bring about changes in legislation for women*

Advice: *Hard work, a sense of self-worth and passion for what you do are the cornerstones to success*



Inside track

Born: *July 19, 1956*

Education: *Zia Mody read law at University of Cambridge and Harvard Law School, and is a member of the New York*

State Bar

First job: *Baker & McKenzie, New York*