

decision-maker

A career forged by

An economic storm welcomed Sanjam Sahi Gupta when she entered shipping at age 23. **Girija Shettar** hears how she helped turn round her father's company

crisis

'Women are easily accepted into the industry in lower positions [but] when it comes to rising to management levels there is a mixed reaction. There is a long way to go'

> While a business student at Mumbai's SP Jain Institute of Management & Research in the late 1990s, Sanjam Sahi Gupta toyed with the idea of a career in education, creating a chain of primary schools.

Gupta, a gentle and quietly spoken woman, was at the time seeking, simultaneously, a diploma in shipping management from the Narottam Morarjee Institute of Shipping and an MBA focusing on family-managed business. Her goal, since the age of seven, had been to join Sitara Shipping, run by her father, Capt SS Sahi.

She tells *IHS Maritime*, enigmatically, "something held me back" from changing her focus to primary schools. Instead, she stuck with her "childhood dream"

and entered shipping – just as the Asian economic crisis erupted, threatening Sitara's key trading partners. Gupta was thrust on to the front line to save her father's business.

"My father needed my support as the company had to make a lot of changes," she recalls. "We were breaking away from our NRI [non-resident Indian] investors and matters were in court. Clients were apprehensive and withdrawing support."

Forced to work within "very tough parameters", Gupta remembers meeting each client personally, to reassure them: "I felt frustrated and wished I had joined the company at its peak. But in retrospect I am



glad, because working through such tough conditions taught me much.”

She and her sister took the reins of the marketing division and the company changed its focus from perishable cargo to the niche market of over-dimensional cargo, which Gupta said paid off, as the company “is one of the key players” in that market today.

Gupta has deep admiration for her father, describing his love for the industry and drive to succeed as her inspiration. “He is a self-made man, a visionary and true entrepreneur,” she adds.

Sahi’s achievements are indeed outstanding. At 25, he became master mariner. He founded his first business, iron ore transport company Sahi Oretrans, at the age of 26, then launched the Illyas Shipping agency and crew recruitment company the following year in 1971.

A decade later, Sitara Shipping was born, offering a diverse mix of chartering, ship management and operating services, container line operations, freight forwarding, and occasional brokering.

Gupta’s early vision of working with her father became reality in 2001, when she and her sister, Sumi, became directors at Sitara. Gupta was 23 years old but empowered by her father to make business decisions independently.

Gupta tells *IHS Maritime* that the most important decisions of her life were made pre-Sitara – namely, choosing to focus on the MBA and sticking to her decision to join the company, despite the economically calamitous times.

Passionate about shipping, like her father, Gupta remembers “working until the day I delivered my son”, issuing instructions to her assistant even in the delivery room “until the doctor had to take over”.

It has now been 13 years since she joined Sitara. The company has grown almost 10% each year, including through the global economic crisis. Gupta now enjoys a strong international profile, not least because of her award-winning efforts to promote women in shipping.

In 2012, she single-handedly launched WISTA India (Women’s International Shipping & Trading Association); in March 2014, she founded WISTA Sri Lanka.

The meaning of Sanjam is ‘forbearance’, and Gupta’s successes to date clearly relied much upon this virtue. Gupta was frus-

trated by sexism in business, which motivated her to track down WISTA in her second year at Sitara.

“After a particularly frustrating day facing gender bias from a client who presumed that being a woman I was a secretary, I just Googled ‘women in shipping’, and voila, there was the WISTA site. I remember writing to them and getting their brochures.”

The time was perfect to launch WISTA India. Both Jawaharlal Nehru Port Trust and Mumbai Port Trust were chaired by women: Neera Saggi and Rani Jadhav, respectively. Both supported her initiative. But drawing India into the action was not going to be that easy, says Gupta, who recalls a “lack of response from other women”.

Then she was consumed with building the business, “and marriage and motherhood kept me on my toes”, she remembers. When the launch finally did take place 11 years later, WISTA India shone light on a group of important individuals in Indian shipping who were previously invisible, Gupta declares.

“Prior to the launch, I didn’t even know most of the women in the industry. Typically, women are on the sidelines at business events. But they are accomplished women and they inspire me to do more.”

The support of men in Indian shipping, many of whom attend WISTA events, is critical for progress, she points out. “It is only with their support and understanding that women will be given the opportunity to rise in their careers.”

She observes that Sri Lanka has more female senior management shipping executives than India. “But there are [still] barriers and mindsets that need to be changed. While women are easily accepted

> **Sanjam Sahi Gupta**

Key decision: choosing to pursue an MBA in family-managed businesses

Born: Delhi, 29 August 1978

Education:

1999-2001: SP Jain Institute of Management & Research, MBA in family-managed business; Narottam Morarjee Institute of Shipping, diploma in shipping management;

1999: graduated from the University of Mumbai, HR College of Commerce & Economics

Current position:

2001 to present, director, Sitara Shipping

Career:

July 2014: Launched WISTA Sri Lanka

April 2014: Voted Leading Woman in Shipping by the International Women’s Leadership Forum

March 2014: Award from *Sailor Today* magazine for making WISTA India the Most Promising Association of the Year

December 2012: Launched WISTA India

Family:

Husband, seven-year-old son

Greatest inspiration:

a family that “made me follow my dreams, stand up for what is right, and has always supported me”

into the industry in lower positions such as documentation and customer service, when it comes to rising to management levels there is a mixed reaction. There is a long way to go.”

Gupta is similarly dissatisfied with what she sees as the two biggest drags on shipping in her region: workforce development and regulations.

“Shipping has a stodgy image and is not considered a good career choice for most graduates or management graduates, so we don’t attract the right talent,” she explains. “We are burdened with a workforce who have entered this industry by accident and lack the right skills.”

Still, she adds: “If we can attract the right talent, we can without a doubt become a force to reckon with.”

Certain “antiquated regulations” also prove awkward, specifically the Bill of Lading Act (1856), the Lighthouse Act (1927), the Customs Act (1962), and the Major Port Trusts Act (1963). “There is an urgent need to keep up with the times,” Gupta says.

On the positive side, the industry welcomes foreign investment and there is healthy international interest, which has improved shipping capacity and efficiencies. Gupta notes that a steady drop in freight rates over the past year led to

unsatisfactory business, but India has still maintained a firm position within the global liner network, while the average capacity of vessels calling at Indian ports has trebled.

Ultimately, Gupta forecasts a revival. While the current state of Indian shipping is “not very bright”, she predicts that this will change if the new Narendra Modi government “converts its vision into action. Then I see good times ahead.” **F**

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