

Sangeeta and the City

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Having to hobble around with a broken foot didn't deter Sangeeta Prasad from making it to Davos for the annual WEF meet in January. At a breakfast meeting hosted by Nestle Chairman Peter Brabeck, the CEO of Mahindra World City Developers Ltd spoke passionately on what's close to her heart these days: urbanisation and creating alternative cities.

After missing many time slots, I finally manage to meet up with the energetic lady on a Monday morning for coffee at the ubiquitous Café Coffee Day in mid-March. Her foot hasn't healed yet, but that isn't stopping her from speeding around for meetings. Later in the afternoon, she's headed to Kanchipuram town, 60 km from Chennai, to donate a bus from Mahindra to the municipality.

With some steaming cappuccino to chase away the Monday morning blues, Sangeeta recalls her morning in Davos. An early and cold January breakfast meeting on 'urbanisation' sponsored by

Nestle and attended by the Nestle Chairman, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Secretary General, the Dean, MIT, WPP's Sir Martin Sorrell, HSBC's Naina Lal Kidwai, and the Nestle global board — all in all, a high-powered gathering.

FLINTSTONE POWERPOINT

Sangeeta kicked off her Powerpoint on the theme 'Yesterday, today, tomorrow', with a childhood reminiscence — a slide of the Flintstones. "Who better than the Flintstones to remember our yesterdays, and tell us that you can coexist with nature? You can live in multi-level homes and still have nature all around," she says, emphatically. The cartoon evidently went down well, she recalls with a laugh, since it woke everybody up to the essence of her presentation on developing alternative cities.

Advocating the cause of new urban centres is what Sangeeta Prasad does passionately at various fora. And why not? Mahindra World City, an integrated industrial and residential hub that sprang up 35 km from Chennai city, is now in its tenth year, and the group is celebrating its anniversary.

It's been some journey for the City, but ten years on, what was a barren but picturesque piece of land on the banks of the vast Kolavai lake in Kancheepuram district, has transformed into a bustling industrial and residential hub where 25,000 people work, 500 children learn, and 180 families live.

MNCs such as BMW and Timken have their facilities here, while several top IT players, such as Infosys and Wipro, have set up their IT parks within MWC. Villas and apartments have sprung up, while a planned hotel, club, and a hospital are some of the offerings which are coming up, which will add value to the building's ecosystem, she says. The Mahindra group itself has established its research valley here.

Sangeeta, 43, has been four years into this journey, after her 15-year stint in Tata Steel, in diverse assignments and locations, including Jamshedpur, and later Chennai, which shaped her for her role in MWC, she says.

SOUL OF THE CITY

We order another coffee as we talk of what is in store for the next ten years for the City that Mahindra built. "The focus of the team is now creating a soul, an underlying thread which connects the different people and their realms together. While we strengthen the arms and legs, it's the soul which needs to shine. We have dedicated this decade to building that soul for the City."

It's not going to be easy, she realises. But, what gives her heart is a recent quiz contest the City organised for the thousands of young people who come to work every day at MWC. Eighty-seven teams registered, she says.

Her task is to get the companies based in the City involved, to make it a landmark, annual event, open to all. "With so many companies coming up on this stretch of highway, the social milieu of this region is changing. Soon, I feel, this side of the airport will become more cosmopolitan than Chennai. The quiz is a great binder we are looking at," she elaborates. This and various programmes will become regular features which can draw not only the people from within the City, but people from outside too. "It will be a converging opportunity for entertainment, culture and competition," she adds.

DESTINATION BUILDING

The ideas come tumbling out. "We are evaluating the idea of a cultural programme which we can stage every year, and make Mahindra City a destination," she elaborates. The Mahindras,

incidentally, already stage the Mahindra Blues festival in Mumbai and a theatre festival in Delhi, so a heritage concept is already built deep into the brand.

Sangeeta says Mahindra City has progressed well on developing the industrial and residential space, but to make people feel they belong, “It's important to add sports, culture and entertainment,” she adds.

The Mahindras have taken their ‘alternative cities’ concept elsewhere too. While one more MWC has sprung up in Jaipur, yet another is planned to the north of Chennai. “The idea in destination building is to bring people away from the congestion in the city. And why can't this city espouse culture, music, education...” she trails off.

Having spent her growing years in Kolkata and having exposure to a city steeped in culture have left a deep imprint on Sangeeta. An engineering graduate from Jadavpur University, she was taken in by Tata Steel, but joined after two years post the completion of her MBA from IIM, Lucknow.

She had a good 16-year stint in the steel major where she was put through the mill, which steeled her to handle diversity. She relocated to Chennai to head the southern region business of Tata Steel and to eventually move on to the Mahindra group.

While she's immersed in her work and ‘city building’, the diversion in her life is her 12-year-old daughter, Anusrita. “It's very important to be in touch with this generation; they're so self-assured and perceptive and she teaches me to be patient. Why, she even brought me up to speed on European football and I could carry on conversations with overseas visitors!”

It's time for Sangeeta to proceed to her next meeting 60 kms away, and she's off in an instant, hobbling nimbly to her car, crutch in one hand and mobile in another. For her, she says, the City never sleeps, and memories of her father, a huge support in her life and career, will never die.