

Sangeeta Prasad is now CEO, Mahindra Lifespace Developers Ltd (MLDL), the parent company of Mahindra World City (MWC), a post she assumed on April 1, 2018. She is responsible for all of the company's strategic and business aspects and is a member of the Mahindra Group's executive board. From the time this interview was published in April 2012, Mahindra World City Chennai, of which she was then the CEO, has made great strides.

Together, the Mahindra World Cities in Chennai and Jaipur (established 2006) have created direct employment for 50,000 persons and generated exports of ₹72,546 crore (as of end FY-18), with cumulative investments of ₹8,902 crore till date. Some 145 global and domestic companies – including BMW, BASF, Infosys, JCB, TVS, Fujitec, Deutsche Bank, Genpact and Wipro – have chosen Mahindra World City in Chennai and/or Jaipur for industrial infrastructure that facilitates accelerated business growth.

In 2017, MLDL launched its industrial clusters brand, ORIGINS by MWC. The company has established partnerships to fuel growth – the first such project in north Chennai is being developed in a joint venture with Sumitomo Corporation. MLDL has partnered with the International Finance Corporation to develop multiple industrial parks across India. The second project, near Ahmedabad, is being developed in partnership with IFC. Sangeeta certainly has her plate full!



Sangeeta Prasad



Sangeeta and the City

VINAY KAMATH

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 a 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 the Mahindra Group 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 does passionately at various fora. And why not? Mahindra World City, an integrated industrial and residential hub that sprang up 35 km from Chennai, is now in its tenth year, and the group is celebrating its anniversary. It's been some journey for the City, but 10 years on, what was a barren but picturesque piece of land on the banks of the vast Kolavai lake, in Kanchipuram 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, including Infosys and Wipro, have set up their IT parks within MWC. Villas and apartments have sprung up, while a hotel, club and a hospital, that are coming up, will add value to the 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 at 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 10 years for the City that Mahindra built. "The focus of the team now is to create a soul, an underlying thread that connects the different people and their realms together. While we strengthen the arms and legs, it's the soul that 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,



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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 that draw not only people from within the City, but those 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 host the Mahindra Blues festival in Mumbai and a theatre festival in Delhi, so a heritage concept is already built deep into the brand.



The focus of the team now is to create a soul, an underlying thread that connects different people together

Sangeeta says Mahindra City has progressed well in developing the industrial and residential space, but to make people feel they belong, “it’s important to add sports, culture and entertainment”.

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 up years in Kolkata, her exposure to a city steeped in culture has left a deep imprint on Sangeeta. An engineering graduate from Jadavpur University, she was recruited by Tata Steel, but joined only after two years, once she completed her MBA from IIM Lucknow.

She had a good 16-year stint with 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 eventually moved on to the Mahindra Group.

While she’s immersed in her work and ‘city building’, the other focus

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 so I could carry on conversations with overseas visitors!”

It’s time for Sangeeta to proceed to her next meeting 60 km 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.

