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THE SUNDAY PROFILE

## In the corner office

Last week, Alka Mittal was handed additional charge of Chairperson and Managing Director of ONGC. KARUNJIT SINGH on how Mittal made her way to the top position in one of the country's biggest PSUs — and how she has cleared the course for others to follow in her footsteps

**F**OR AN organisation where women constitute less than 8 per cent of the workforce, the New Year heralded change. Alka Mittal, 58, moved to the helm of Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC), India's largest oil and gas exploration company and among the country's biggest PSUs, taking additional charge of Chairperson and Managing Director of the company.

With her move to the corner office, Mittal has shattered the glass ceiling twice in the space of three years — in 2018, she became the first ONGC full-time woman director as Director, Human Resources.

PSU top jobs are largely a male preserve. Soma Mondal (SAIL) is currently the only other woman heading a Maharatna PSU. Of the 47 executive directors at the 10 Maharatna Central Public Sector Enterprises, only four are women. Mittal is currently the only woman executive director on the board of ONGC.

Anandhathi Bhattacharya, former chairperson of State Bank of India, the first woman to lead an Indian Fortune 500 company, welcomes Mittal's appointment as a "role model". Even after retirement, they (women CMDs) will be in a position to get on boards of other companies," Bhattacharya told *The Sunday Express*, noting that this would in turn help other women reach senior roles.

It's a responsibility Mittal is well aware of, but one she wears with ease.

"When I was interviewing women for senior roles as part of the Board of Directors, I saw that they would normally give answers to me, regardless of who was asking the questions," Mittal tells *The Sunday Express*, indicating that women feel more comfortable applying for senior positions when they see other women in such roles.

"We have to create a critical mass of women in leadership positions," she adds. A Master's in Economics from DAV College, Dehradun, Mittal has an MBA and a PhD in business and commerce with specialisation in corporate governance from Jamia Millia Islamia.

As ONGC's Head of HR, Mittal conceptualised 'People's Connect', an initiative to facilitate exchange between retiring employees and young professionals. Her colleagues say it reflects her collaborative style that extends to even competitors within the organisation.

"Alka and I were once both in contention for a senior role, but she kept giving me ideas on my strengths that I should highlight," says Somesh Ranjan, chief of CSR at ONGC.

Mittal also spearheaded the National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme, as part of which more than 5,000 apprentices are engaged across ONGC's work centres.

Ranjan talks of how Mittal dignified the whole process. "Earlier we had to sort through paper applications that we got by the sack-load."

Mittal admits facing issues as a woman early in her career, but says her seniors al-

ways recognised the value of her work. Starting out as an administrative officer in Vadodara, she saw people did not want to report issues to a woman. "I decided it was important that they feel comfortable. I would chat with them, ask them about their families till they saw me as one of their own."

On the work-home balance, Mittal says women professionals must prioritise the role that needs their attention at any given moment. "While I was posted in Assam, away from my family, my younger daughter was facing some health issues. It was a very difficult time but my family and I realised that

we could manage it. I was in charge of HR (Human Resources-Employee Relations) then and I knew that if I didn't do this role sincerely, no one would ever give this assignment to a woman. So I stayed on and completed the goals I had set for my time there." Mittal also set up several leadership pro-

grammes at ONGC to shepherd talented individuals to appropriate roles within the organisation, and pushed women employees to lean in and take on more challenging roles, including field jobs such as those at offshore rigs.

"She has paid special attention to having more women in technical and field role assignments," says Mehrgna Pegg, ONGC's Deputy General Manager, HR, who has worked with Mittal for about a decade. Pegg says Mittal's push was also keeping in mind that people with technical and field experience would always have an edge in the sector.

There are currently about 160 women at onshore and offshore installations of ONGC.

Mittal herself regularly visits the onshore and offshore facilities to touch base with employees and, according to Ranjan, unfailingly "comes back with sweets for everyone".

It was on one such visit to an offshore installation, says Pegg, that Mittal, who was wearing the same uniform as the women working there, realised that the orange overalls were evidently designed for men and were "quite uncomfortable" for women.

"She asked us to connect with the National Institute of Design to enquire about uniforms for women," says Pegg, describing Mittal as more of a leader than a boss.

Before taking over as HR Director, Mittal was ONGC's Chief of Skill Development (CSD), during which she is credited with streamlining operations across its skill development centres. Mittal has also headed the company's CSR operations, starting which it built a 300-bed hospital at Sivaspur, Assam.

Mittal also set up Ujyayita, a programme to mentor women employees for Board-level roles in the company.

With more women now in senior and middle management level roles in the company, Mittal foresees many of them in Board-level positions in the near future. "Sixty-five per cent of our women executives are from technical disciplines. I believe that in times to come, a woman director in our core area is very likely," says Mittal. "Core areas for ONGC include technical and field services, onshore and offshore exploration operations."

Mittal, who superannuates in August, has a lot on her table now. The key priority for ONGC right now is raising crude oil and natural gas production. The government has been leaning on the company to bring in foreign partners to enhance oil and gas recovery from existing fields, which have become less productive and for exploration in new fields such as ultra-deep water fields.

"We are looking at international partners who have had successes in similar exploration basins in other parts of the world. We are approaching them with an open mind," says Mittal.

Another challenge, she says, would be succession planning. "With many of our experts superannuating in the near future, we have to ensure that their wisdom is passed on to the younger generations. We have to make them future-ready to take on challenging roles."



Illustration: Sangeet Dey

## CNG, PNG price hike to affect 24 lakh consumers in Mumbai

T N RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

In the fifth hike effected in three months that 24 lakh consumers in the metropolis, the Mahanagar Gas Ltd (MGL) will go in for an increase in the prices of Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) and Piped Natural gas (PNG) with effect from midnight of Saturday.

The basic price of CNG is being increased by Rs 2.50 per kg, while the domestic PNG is being hiked by Rs 1.50 per Standard Cubic Meter (SCM) for the Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR).

Accordingly, the revised all-inclusive prices of CNG that fuels vehicles will go up from Rs 63.50/kg to Rs.66.00/kg, the domestic PNG shall shoot up from Rs 38 per SCM to Rs.39.50 per SCM.

This is the fifth hike in CNG and PNG prices carried out by the MGL since October 14. The hike will hit the domestic budgets of 16 lakh people living in the metropolis and neighbouring areas, eight lakh consumers using gas-powered vehicles will have to spend

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more because of the hike. The MGL had increased the prices PNG and CNG in the first week of October 2021, ahead of the festive season. It went in for one more hike on October 14.

On November 26 last year, the MGL increased the basic prices of CNG by Rs.3.06 per kg and domestic PNG by Rs. 2.26 per SCM for the MMR. As a consequence, the revised all-inclusive prices of CNG used by vehicles will go up from Rs. 57.54 per kg to Rs. 61.50 per kg,

while the domestic PNG will be Rs. 36.50 per SCM, in a single slab henceforth.

On December 17/18, the MGL had increased the rates of CNG by Rs 2.00 per kg and PNG by Rs 1.50 per SCM.

The MGL has sought to justify the latest hike in gas prices by saying that it had increased the prices to meet the shortfall in domestic gas allocation, it is sourcing additional market priced natural gas to cater to the increasing requirement of CNG and Domestic PNG segments. An MGL spokesperson said that on account of substantial increase in market priced natural gas price, its input gas cost has also increased substantially, and the fresh hike for consumers was expected to partly offset its costs. However, the MGL has claimed that despite the fresh hikes, the CNG offers attractive savings of around 59 per cent and 30 per cent, respectively, compared with petrol and diesel at current prices, and PNG saves around 22 percent in comparison with the prices of domestic LPG cylinders.