

# TradeMaker

US\$ 3 | ₹ 150 | VOL 02 | EDITION 04 | APRIL 2021





# All-women team commanding ships was always my aim

– Harjeet Joshi

India and women...there's something about them. Be it sports, academics, corporate world, cinema...the list can go on! Indian women are making a mark and winning accolades, not only in India but overseas too. For now, let's focus on the maritime sphere, seafaring to be precise.

For the first time in global history, MT Swarna Krishna, a cargo ship commanded by a female captain with only lady officers, set sail on 7 March 2021. Union Minister of State (I/C) for Ports, Shipping and Waterways, Mansukh Mandaviya, virtually flagged her off. Swarna Krishna is a tanker, belonging to The Shipping Corporation of India (SCI).

It's not only about a female captain commanding the Swarna Krishna with its all-women officers' team; there's another woman-force driving this global milestone — she's none other than the CMD of SCI, Harjeet Joshi.

In an exclusive interview with TradeMaker magazine, CMD Joshi interacts with its chief editor and shares details about this momentous occasion.

Excerpts...

**Please provide a narrative and details preceding this historical occasion.**

I assumed the CMD's charge in December 2019 while the World Maritime Day theme was 'Empowering

Women in Maritime Community'. That's quite a coincidence. This theme itself had been instrumental in conceptualizing the idea of an entire women team sailing. My appointment had made a bit of





Mrs Joshi along with Rajesh Sood, Director (T&OS); Atul Ubale, Director (B&T); and officers on Swarna Krishna's bridge

noise considering that I was the first woman to head the 'Navratna' company; and also, the only woman chairperson amongst all central public sector enterprises (CPSEs) then.

The Directorate General (DG) of Shipping, the national regulatory authority which certifies aspiring seafarers, mooted the concept of an entire women officers' seafaring team which hadn't happened so far, and the Director General was hopeful that this long desired yet remote dream can be fulfilled by SCI. This confidence of the regulator was enough to get me down to working on it as a project that was to fructify considering all nuances, intricacies and complexities involved, both procedural and logistical. The COVID-19 crisis, however, played truant and our well-intended objective lingered due to the unfortunate developments in 2020 that brought major economies to a grinding halt.

In view of the grim environment of the Pandemic and with the International Women's Day (IWD) drawing close, we were quite charged to execute something that would hit the headlines and make global news to bring some cheer and positivity, while showcasing the prowess of India as a maritime nation. The ongoing diamond jubilee celebrations of SCI which were launched on 2 October 2020, SCI's Foundation Day, made this event more momentous. Interestingly, the 'UN Women' announced its theme for IWD 2021 viz. 'Women in Leadership: Achieving an equal future in a

*COVID-19 World', making the event quite significant and meaningful.*

The ground reality is that despite shipping being perceived as a male-dominated industry, SCI, a *Navratna* public sector, has a deep-rooted culture of diversity and inclusion, and we employ more than the global average of 2% women seafarers. However, despite the capacity and the capability residing in the company — this 'all-women officers' team' was never conceptualized, though I always considered it as doable. In fact, the circumnavigation project by the Indian Navy's 'all-girls' team in 2018 around Cape Horn in South America, the roughest patch of the sea in the world, was also a precedent that I drew my inspiration from.

While there have been all-women sailings, it has probably never happened on a cargo vessel where all the officers were of a single nationality commanding and managing a vessel of its national flag, having been trained and certified under the same flag! The process entailed planning for the vessel as well as the officers to match the dates of IWD 2021, and positioning all officers of varying ranks having different capabilities for the intended voyage; some of them were on leave and some of them already sailing on different vessels. These officers were posted in a phased manner over two months prior to the planned sailing date so that they were adequately familiar with operation of the vessel's



Cargo loading in progress for the historical voyage

shipboard equipment and systems. This familiarity had to be ensured for seamless execution of the voyage that would carry 50,000 metric tonnes of crude oil from JNPT to Vadinar. There was a close and continuous interaction to facilitate their reporting at short notice for those on leave, which was a major challenge, considering the limited availability of certified lady officers. There was also a requirement to transfer some of them from vessels they were already serving on.

The challenges of the COVID-19 protocol that had to be followed for 'sign-on' of these officers at JNPT and the port standard operating procedures (SOPs) were exacting and formidable, given that all these lady officers resided in different parts of India and there was also a challenge of their 'sign-off' from other vessels calling at different Indian ports.

The entire event was periodically reported to me with respect to the arrangements which were closely monitored by one of the directors who was assigned the prestigious project. The project was meticulously planned, and complex procedures and intricacies dovetailed to guarantee a triumphant operation. Thus, the historic event was a gradual culmination of continuous, relentless effort, and pursuit of a goal of not one but many in SCI. I'm grateful to the entire SCI team, fleet personnel, tanker, protocol, and hospitality departments, who relentlessly worked in such a

cohesive and well-coordinated manner that though this was one of the most challenging events it went off without any glitch due to the micro-level planning and monitoring; and I owe my gratitude to all the stakeholders who believed in us. Again, this historic event belongs to the Nation and we owe this success to the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, Government of India for their unstinted support and the continued guidance of DG Shipping, who having seeded the idea with such conviction made us dream about it, and the generous support from JNPT who offered their infrastructure and facilities for conducting the event, with all the COVID protocols strictly adhered to, without which this event couldn't have been what it was.

### **Please provide your thoughts in relation to this all-women officers' concept, as a woman.**

While the event is being seen as a woman-oriented event, being a woman myself, I tend to differ on the way it's being seen and perceived as when I come to work, I don't see myself as a woman coming to work. I am an equal if not a better professional who brings value and contributes positively to the organization. When a woman works seriously and is passionate about her profession she should be respected and recognized as a professional and not by her gender. I think this barrier or ceiling ought to be broken and



that would automatically shatter the glass ceiling and only then shall diversity and inclusivity grow. While shipping has been typecast as a male-dominated field and the mindset is what makes it so, it's important for women to also facilitate in changing this mindset by being equal in all they do. Women are to be treated on an equal footing without any concessions whatsoever; which alone can build up their confidence and enable them to perform against all odds. While the biological differences can't be overlooked, women are strong both biologically as well as mentally. Our Supreme Court ruled in favour of women being given permanent commission in the army. That was a triumphant moment. They have also assumed combat roles in the air force; then why not encourage and promote them in the merchant navy too. When conservative professional fields have already integrated them into the routine workforce then it's indeed the need of the hour that we value professionalism regardless of the gender and respect them and take due note of the diverse capabilities that women have in plenty and the positive contribution that they can make in the maritime industry.

Women have immense potential and grit to do something they set their mind on, they only need an opportunity, a platform to showcase their talent and capabilities. As a woman I feel extremely elated that I could fulfil this aspiration of many hearts and give them wings and wind to their sails — with the all-women officers sailing being the grand success that it was, breaking all myths that hitherto may have existed. It is another progressive stride that has been taken by the female gender to be recognized and taken seriously for their professional worth. I personally don't shy away from challenges and this was an opportunity I wasn't going to let pass without giving it a try. I was ready



Mrs Joshi onboard Swarna Krishna along with Capt Gadpande

to brace the storm and take the risk which makes me much the Braveheart that seafarers are all about and bonds me with them.

It's said that you attract what you are. So, if women play the gender card — it's most likely going to 'come back' to them, some time or the other. I don't play that card and wouldn't advise any lady professional to play it either. Slowly, the acceptance shall come when we deal as professionals.

### **And your thoughts as the CMD of SCI in relation to this momentous event?**

As the first woman CMD of SCI, I feel I have done my duty. Among the many initiatives taken, the 'all-women officers sailing' was one 'strong and fond' goal that I was inclined, more than obliged, to push and bring a shift in the vision of seafaring as a male-dominated profession to an inclusive one.

As a leader, it is my duty to promote equality and provide equal opportunities. It is also necessary that while SCI was recognized by NUSI in May 2020 for employing the highest number of women seafarers on merchant navy ships in India, we did something pathbreaking to showcase the talent and capability not only to the nation but to the world. The recognition by The Nautical Institute London, South West Branch — for effective crew management during the COVID crisis in August 2020, also made me realize that if outstanding work is done it catches people's attention, and that gave me confidence to take on some more risk. As the head of the SCI Family, it's my duty to see that SCI grows from strength to strength and breaks records — its own as well as of the best in the industry, on a daily basis if possible.

Women do look up to me for support, and if I don't bring about the change in perception and mindset, then who will? As I don't see a woman successor anywhere in the lineage for quite some time, launching them, giving them due visibility (wherever deserved) and empowering them with confidence assumes special significance. We have come a long way and are now truly an inclusive and integrated mix promoting gender equality and the ratio of women seafarers is almost double than that of the global average of 2%. Ashore too, women employees constitute about 21% of the workforce in SCI, highest amongst most other PSUs. The entire community needs to be more

accepting towards professional women to achieve the long-term sustainability of an integrated and diverse mix. I look forward to adding to these numbers — both ashore and to the fleet.

### **For the benefit of our readers, please throw light regarding the male ratings onboard**

**Swarna Krishna.**

Swarna Krishna is manned by all women officers and female trainees as per the 'safe manning guidelines. Ratings are essentially skilled seafarers who carry out support work for officers to ensure safe operation and maintenance of the ship. There are 13 male ratings onboard the Swarna Krishna, under the overall control and management of the lady officers, which needs to be doubly appreciated. Since there is a negligible number of women ratings available, we couldn't have women ratings to complement.

### **For several years, men have ruled the oceans. What, according to you, took so long for women to break this barrier?**

Globally, shipping is one of those very few industries which has the lowest number of women workforce. A traditional mindset of the male-dominated industry, general lack of awareness, paltry number of female seafarers — are facts which are indicative that very little has been done to encourage women for taking seafaring careers. The nature of the job entails manual hardships too, apart from the mental strength that is an essential prerequisite for aspiring seafarers who have to stay away from the shore and families for prolonged periods, which works as an inhibiting factor to most, more so in case of women who are opting for such a career from among several choices. Again, society always perceived women as the one who nurtures the family; an idea which got further reinforced over time, though there has been a marked change in this perception. The capability of women in the past got overshadowed by the typical mindset which kept women away from pursuing seafaring as a career option. Having said this, I must point out that this (mindset) has changed and evolved over the years.

It might be interesting to note that SCI was the first Indian shipping company to start recruiting women seafarers, way back in 1996. The Maritime Training Institute (MTI) of SCI offers 50% concession in fees and relaxation in age by two years to aspiring women

cadets, apart from a safe working environment. While posting women seafarers on vessels, it's ensured that there is another woman onboard — be it a fellow seafarer or a supernumerary (wife/family member of a male officer onboard).

Efforts over the years are now bearing fruit as more women are taking up this profession and also delivering exceptional performance. It's a matter of pride for us that women seafarers, who were trained and nurtured by SCI, have won various international awards and accolades for their bravery and contribution.

It can be concluded that although it took a while for women to break barriers, the historic occasion of all-women officers sailing on Swarna Krishna shall serve as a myth-buster and make the general public aware of the thriving and prosperous career option available for girls. It'll also boost the confidence of the maritime fraternity.

### **Please tell us about the all-women officers' maiden voyage.**

Swarna Krishna is a foreign-going vessel which is presently trading on the Indian coast as per the charterer's requirements. The officers' have foreign-going (FG) Indian certificate of competency (COC), and hence the vessel can trade in foreign waters too.

Swarna Krishna is a Long Range (LR1) oil tanker having capacity of 73,000 dwt. Initially, 50,000 MT of Mumbai High crude oil was discharged at Vadinar SBM. Essentially, the activities required to be performed at any foreign port were performed during this voyage too and the voyage from JNPT to Vadinar was as intricate as any foreign voyage involving challenges of closely monitoring all the technical parameters during passage and for safe discharge of the cargo, and the extensive crude oil washing (COW) that had to be carried out after discharge to avoid cargo claims. It shall not be out of place to mention that the voyage undertaken by the all-women officers' team was the second after the vessel had come out from drydock, which had its own challenges — managed effectively by the ladies onboard. The women officers' voyage didn't end with this maiden trip. They continue to sail fulfilling their contract — having completed four voyages in all and the fifth one is due from Mumbai

to Vadinar shortly...the loading operations are on as we interact.

This should also boost confidence that the celebrated voyage wasn't only to earmark 'IWD 2021', it's now a normal manning procedure for SCI.

### What's the future of an all-women complement onboard SCI ships?

SCI has been continuously engaging women seafarers on its vessels for the past several years and they have

been performing with all diligence, meticulousness, and adhering to safety norms. I don't see why SCI would not endeavour to have more ships manned by women. However, SCI espouses the values of diversity and inclusion, which would mean an integrated workforce. The determinants for safe and efficient manning of the ship, based on the commercial schedule and fulfilling of matrix requirement of vessels, would continue to be the prime motivating factor.

TM

### The Dream Team

#### Deck

- Capt Suneha Gadpande, Master of the Vessel.
- Capt Aswathi Pillai, Additional Master. She signed off after the first voyage.
- Usha Yadav, Chief Officer.
- Karpagaveni Selvakumar, 2<sup>nd</sup> Officer.
- Anshu Priya, 3<sup>rd</sup> Officer.
- Snehlata Kumari, Junior Officer.
- Anushka Saxena, Cadet.
- Dhruvi Pandya, Cadet.

#### Engine

- Divya Jain, Chief Engineer.
- Supriya Dhoke, Additional Chief Engineer.
- Nitu Singh, 3<sup>rd</sup> Engineer.
- Dishani Gahlot, 4<sup>th</sup> Engineer.
- Khushbu Manik, Junior Electrical Officer.
- Shrishti Verma, Junior Engineer.



Mrs Joshi along with the 'dream team' on Swarna Krishna's bridge