
MANJULA CHAWLA

Co- Founding Partner, Phoenix Legal



PHOENIX LEGAL

Manjula Chawla is a Founding Partner of Phoenix Legal. Her practice concentrates on areas of strategic corporate investments, corporate finance and restructuring, mergers & acquisitions, joint ventures, and general corporate and commercial matters. She is also involved in complex litigation and dispute resolution matters.

Among a handful of professionals who chose to become a corporate lawyer at a time it was unheard of, Manjula, has assisted many multinational companies, including Fortune 500 companies, in establishing their presence in India since the early years of liberalization.

She advises her clients on a wide range of issues including anti-corruption laws, competition law, corporate governance, exchange control laws, data privacy and protection, outsourcing, intellectual property protection, labor and employment, and real estate. She is experienced in handling litigation and arbitration matters arising out of commercial contracts on behalf of her international clients. She has structured, negotiated and drafted a wide range of business transactions for foreign investors and multinational corporations over the years.

Among other achievements, Manjula has written extensively in Indian and international journals and contributes every year to the World Bank's Doing Business in India project.

She is the winner of several awards and honors, more notable among them being the National Law Day Award – 2000 conferred on her by the then Union Law Minister for "Excellence in Corporate Law and for unique contribution in bringing foreign exchange into India" and being featured in the 100 Legal Luminaries of India, a publication of Lexis Nexis, which throws light on some of the most illustrious legal minds in India.

Describe your journey as a leading woman lawyer?

I started as a litigator as most of my peers did at that time. However, I found my right place when, soon after economic liberalization in 1991, I moved to corporate law and started advising on cross-border transactions. The journey involved a lot of hard work and dedication but for the most part, I was enjoying what I was doing. Also, there was excitement in becoming a part of the changing economic climate, and working for world famous multinational companies, which were entering India for the first time. The last few years have been spent in building Phoenix Legal, which I co-founded along with three brilliant lawyers. Next year, we will be celebrating 10 years of the firm and are in the process of putting some big plans in place to take the firm to the next level. So, the journey is still on.

Describe the challenges that you have faced as a leading woman lawyer?

Honestly, I did not face any particular challenge or discrimination, being a woman lawyer. The profession of law is demanding and I believe that the challenge to maintain a work-life balance is equally good for men as it is for women lawyers. The challenge was really the transition from court practice to corporate law practice in 1993, as it was at a time, when there were hardly any corporate lawyers around and I had literally no idea what this practise was all about.

There were no conventional briefs or cases and everything was about deals, FIPB approvals and commercial advice.

There were hardly any precedents to follow, or lawyers who could guide. I had to learn pretty much on my own. There was a complete shift in the work culture and the nature of legal advice. The clients not only needed legal advisory support but also practical solutions and I realized that I had to understand their industry and wear a business cap. I also had to learn to keep up with different time zones over faxes and telephone calls. Also came the liberalization that you cannot do all the work yourself. It was challenging to make sure that junior lawyers are also able to provide quality advice and communicate it with clarity in a timely manner, which was expected from corporate clients across the globe. A lot of time was spent in training and mentoring juniors and managing work streams.

Over the years, the corporate practice has taken in all this, but not way back in 1993.

What are the cases you would say form the silver lining of your career?

There is no one case or deal, which can be said to be a silver lining in my career. There were many cross-border deals done over a period of time, particularly from 1995 to 2001, where I became the sole point of contact for foreign clients and was managing all aspects of the transaction for them from the start to the closing. There were a string of innumerable deals in a variety of sectors such as telecom, chemicals, IT, automotive and power. A few transactions that instantly come to mind and I think added greatly to the growth in my career include acting for one of the shortlisted bidders for purchase of Government stake in VSNL, Lubrizol USA on a joint venture with Indian Oil Corporation, Pray on Rupel SA in acquisition of chemical plants in Gujarat, Johnson Controls Inc in acquiring stake in Amara Raja Batteries and joint venture with a TATA group company, Ford Motor company on demerger of Visteon, Panasonic Corporation joint ventures with Videocon, Intel on acquisition of start-ups and Air Liquide in several of its acquisitions.