

ASIA

# Vedanta chief on upcoming demerger, 2.0 and women in mining

Mining Magazine spoke with Deshnee Naidoo

*Munira Rajkotwalla*



*Naidoo at a mine site. | Credits: Vedanta*

Mining discourse is often dominated by a handful of majors from Australia, North and South America. But outside this well known net, India's Vedanta Resources has quietly consolidated a vertically integrated empire that serves as the engine of the world's fastest-growing economy.

Vedanta was founded by Anil Agarwal in 1976 as a small scrap metal business. It has since then evolved into a diversified powerhouse. The company was once publicly listed on the London Stock Exchange (as a FTSE 100 constituent), but taken private in 2018. It is now owned by the Agarwal family through Volcan Investments.

Headquartered in London, the company is one of the world's largest mining and metals organisations. Its primary operations are located in India, with significant assets in South Africa and Namibia.

Vedanta owns India's biggest miners, including Hindustan Zinc (the world's largest zinc miner), Bharat Aluminium Company, Konkola Copper Mines and Sterlite Industries.

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*Mining Magazine* spoke with the chief executive of Vedanta Resources, Deshnee Naidoo, on the occasion of International Women's Day about her approach to leadership, vision for Vedanta and the complex topic of involving more women in India's mining sector.

Between 2014 and 2020, Naidoo worked as chief executive of Vedanta's Africa Base Metals and Vedanta Zinc International. She was then appointed as executive vice president of [Vale Base Metals](#), before returning to Vedanta Resources in 2025.



## My biggest non-negotiable for the new chief executives to ensure they don't lose the Vedanta DNA while becoming independent?

My biggest non-negotiable is that the Vedanta DNA must remain anchored in three core ethos: a safety-first approach to everything we do, a commitment to shared growth and nation-building, and uncompromising business performance driven by discipline and cost leadership.

Safety is fundamental. Nothing we produce is more important than the wellbeing of our people. As we transition into five independent companies, this safety-first mindset must remain uniform and deeply embedded across operations and decision-making.

The second ethos is shared growth. That vision is rooted in building businesses that contribute to national progress while creating value for communities, employees and shareholders alike. We only grow if it benefits society. Growth must be inclusive and long-term, strengthening both the company and the country.

The third ethos is performance. Our chairman, Anil Agarwal, believes that the five demerged entities have the potential to become "Five globally-leading Vedantas". Independence will give them their own playing field, with a focused management and independent capital structure, to unlock their potential. The Vedanta DNA will ensure that each new entity operates with financial discipline, competitive cost structures and a commitment to excellence.

## Q: Returning to Vedanta as the first female chief executive during this massive restructuring is a historic full-circle moment. What is the one thing you learned at your previous global mining conglomerates that you are most eager to import into Vedanta 2.0?

Disciplined execution through long-term planning — aligning a safe and sustainable operational turnaround, capital allocation, project delivery and culture transformation under a single strategic lens. Vedanta has its own robust culture of agility and quick decision-making, powered by ambitious business goals.

In global mining businesses, complexity is a given. Early in my career, I learned the importance of rigorous portfolio prioritisation, capital efficiency and ensuring that projects are not just ambitious but executed to give back to society and therefore sustainable. Whether in financial leadership roles or operational environments, the focus was always on driving performance through clarity of accountability, strengthening systems and processes and taking all stakeholders along.

Vedanta 2.0 is our evolution from a natural resources-based conglomerate to a strategic portfolio-driven business with its eye on the future. Our demerger into five independent companies gives us the opportunity to power the world of energy and technology that's taking shape. I want to bring that same execution mindset here — with sharper capital discipline, stronger systems and processes, and a relentless focus on safe performance delivery through setting the right culture while taking stakeholders along. Transformation succeeds when strategy is matched by operational rigour.



Vedanta is targeting 30% women in leadership by 2030. | Credits: Vedanta

**Q: Vedanta was the preferred bidder for eleven critical mineral blocks recently put to auction in India. How do you plan to fast-track these to meet India's urgent energy transition needs?**

Vedanta is focused on building its portfolio centred around the three pillars of global growth – energy security, emerging tech, and green economy. Critical minerals form a strategic business pillar for us, given their central role in the energy transition, electrification, battery storage, renewables, advanced manufacturing and national resource security.

We have been declared the preferred bidders for eleven critical mineral blocks through the Government of India's competitive auction process. This gives us opportunity to develop value chains in crucial resources such as nickel, cobalt, copper, graphite, tungsten, vanadium, potash and platinum-group elements, towards bolstering India's manufacturing and value-addition ecosystem.

Our focus now is on securing all necessary clearances towards opening of the mines and realising the dreams of a Viksit Bharat. To improve our exploration and project execution turnaround, we are bringing in partners that integrate advanced technology and earth-based applications to enhance exploration accuracy, target definition and resource confidence.

**Q: You've set a target for 30% women in leadership by 2030. In heavy industries like aluminium and oil, what is the most successful retention secret you've discovered to keep women from leaving mid-career?**

At Vedanta, our talent philosophy is built around merit and potential. I firmly believe that a performance track record and potential must determine growth, not gender. While we had earlier committed to achieving 30% women in leadership by 2030, our Chairman, Anil Agarwal, has since encouraged us to raise our ambition and work towards 35% representation.

careers.

In heavy industries like Aluminium and Oil & Gas, the most powerful retention lever we have found is giving women real operating responsibility in core functions. At Jharsuguda in Odisha, wherein we operate the world's largest aluminium smelter, an all-women team runs an entire aluminium production line (potline). We have also introduced all-women locomotive and power operations teams there. At Hindustan Zinc, in Rajasthan, we were India's first to deploy women engineers in underground mining, including having women-led underground mine rescue teams. We have opened up night-shift assignments backed by strengthened safety systems and infrastructure, giving them an equal playing field. These are mainstream, high-accountability roles that create credible leadership pathways.

Mid-career attrition is often driven by life-stage pressures rather than lack of ambition. We have addressed this through enhanced maternity & parenthood benefits, structured return-to-work pathways, childcare support, spouse hiring, mentoring and senior sponsorship. We have also invested in inclusive townships and ecosystem support at our locations to enable continuity for families.

Technology has already levelled the playing field by making mining operations safer, more automated and digitally controlled.

When women see operational authority, visible growth and institutional belief in their capability, they choose to stay. Retention, in our experience, follows responsibility and trust.

### **Q: How do you use empathy as a hard business tool to improve safety records and operational efficiency on the ground?**

Empathy, for us, is a leadership strength. When leaders actively listen, they unearth culture insights towards improving safety performance, higher efficiency and lower downtime. Empathy alone will not deliver results; it needs to be coupled with accountability.



Vedanta will soon demerger into five entities. | Credits: Vedanta

### Q: What is the role of women in this?

From personal experience, I have often seen women bring a high degree of empathy and care to the workplace. They tend to anticipate risks, communicate openly and build trust within teams. While empathy is not gender-specific, it often requires social conditioning to make it visible on the shopfloors. We are, therefore, consciously building this capability across our workforce, because a culture of listening and accountability makes the workplace better for everyone.

### Q: What are the unique considerations of pursuing the cause of 'women in mining' in India?

Talking about women in mining in India, the context is remarkably unique. India has a significant demographic dividend. Women form a significant part of its large, young, educated and tech-savvy talent pool that is hungry to take on the world. In addition, India is also a relatively young mining country; this allows us to design inclusive workplaces without being overly constrained by legacy. Therefore, for us, advancing women in mining in India, is a strategic business decision grounded in India's demographic strength.

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