

OSAMU SUZUKI 1930-2024

# Visionary auto tycoon who made winning bet on India

REUTERS

Tokyo, 27 December

Osamu Suzuki, an ingenious pennypincher who led Japan's Suzuki Motor for more than four decades and played a key role in turning India into a flourishing auto market, has died aged 94. He died on Christmas Day of lymphoma, said the company, which he steered ambitiously, during his time as either chief executive or chairman, out of its primary market of minivehicles.

The inexpensive, boxy, 660 cc cars specific to Japan benefited from generous tax breaks, but demanded a stringent reining-in of costs that proved to be a key part of the automaker's DNA.

Even so, Suzuki's thriftiness was legendary: he would order factory ceilings lowered to save on air-conditioning and fly economy class on airplanes even at an advanced age.

"Forever," or "until the day I die," were signature humorous responses with which he parried queries about how long he would stay at the company, on which he retained a tight grip into his 70s and 80s.

"If I were to listen to everybody, it would make things too slow," Suzuki said of his leadership philosophy in "I'm a Small-Business Boss," a Japanese-language memoir published in 2009.

"Never stop, or else you lose."

Born Osamu Matsuda, Suzuki took his wife's family name through adoption in a practice common among Japanese families lacking a male heir. The former banker joined the company founded

by her grandfather in 1958 and worked upwards through the ranks to become president two decades later. In the 1970s, he saved the company from the brink of collapse by convincing Toyota Motor to supply engines that met new emissions regulations, but which Suzuki Motor had yet to develop.

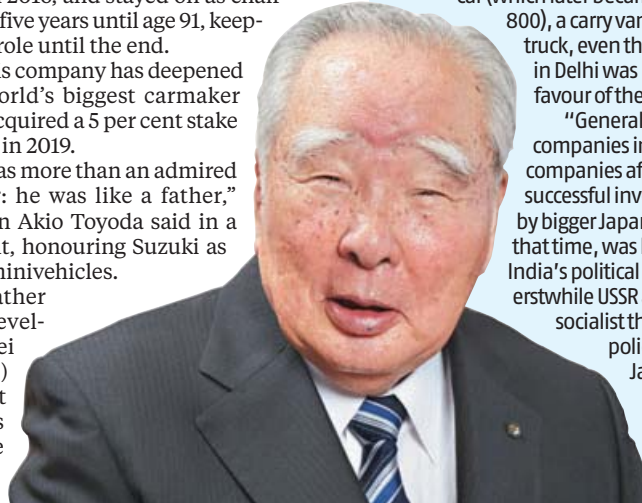
More success followed with the 1979 launch of the Alto minivehicle, which became a massive hit, boosting the automaker's bargaining power when it tied up with General Motors in 1981.

Suzuki, who often cited golf and work as the keys to his health, finally passed the baton as CEO to his son Toshihiro in 2016, and stayed on as chairman for another five years until age 91, keeping an advisory role until the end.

Since 2016, his company has deepened ties with the world's biggest carmaker Toyota, which acquired a 5 per cent stake in Suzuki Motor in 2019.

"To me, he was more than an admired business leader: he was like a father," Toyota chairman Akio Toyoda said in a Friday statement, honouring Suzuki as a trailblazer of minivehicles.

"He was a father figure who developed Japan's kei car (minivehicle) and nurtured it into Japan's people's car," he added.



## Closer than a brother, changed my life: Bhargava

DEEPAK PATEL

New Delhi, 27 December

In April 1982, when Osamu Suzuki, then President of Suzuki Motor Corporation (SMC), signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Maruti Udyog Limited to manufacture an 800 cc car (which later became the iconic Maruti 800), a carry van, and a pick-up truck, even the Japanese Embassy in Delhi was reportedly not in favour of the deal.

"Generally, Japanese companies invested in foreign companies after they saw successful investments being made by bigger Japanese firms. SMC, at that time, was hardly a leader. India's political closeness to the erstwhile USSR and the strong socialist thinking in industrial policy were contrary to Japanese beliefs," said Maruti Suzuki India Limited (MSIL) chairman R C Bhargava in his

2010 book 'The Maruti Story', which he wrote along with senior journalist Seetha.

Bhargava, then an IAS officer working at Maruti, had met Suzuki for the first time just a month before the MoU was signed.

"Normally, the Japanese conduct their own market survey before making any major investment decision. No such exercise had been undertaken by SMC. The giants of the Japanese automobile industry, like Toyota, Nissan, Mitsubishi and Honda, were not in India. Being a minority partner in a government company was itself seen as a recipe for disaster," Bhargava added. The embassy of Japan in India was "understood to disfavour" the project. "Suzuki took the decision to enter India in less than two months after the first meeting — surely an all-time record. Not surprisingly, the reaction in Japan was less than positive. Business circles were sure the venture would fail and SMC would withdraw in a few years," Bhargava said.

However, about a year and a half later, the Maruti 800 was launched, changing the automobile landscape of India forever. The car was an instant hit.

In the first year of production, about 850 units of the Maruti 800 were sold when the overall

passenger vehicle sales in the country stood at about 40,000 units.

Last financial year, MSIL produced 2.135 million vehicles and earned revenue of ₹1.35 billion. Today, MSIL is India's largest carmaker with more than 40 per cent market share by volume. Suzuki was awarded Padma Bhushan in 2007 by the Indian government for his contribution to developing the country's economy through the automobile sector.

Bhargava said: "I have lost someone who was closer than a brother. He changed my life and showed how nationality is no barrier to people building unbreakable bonds of trust in each other. He was my teacher, mentor and a person who stood by me even in my darkest days. If I played a role in the success of Maruti, it was because I was his student and he taught me how best to grow a firm and make it competitive."

"Without his vision and foresight, his willingness to take a risk that no one else was willing to take, his deep and abiding love for India, and his immense capabilities as a teacher, I believe the Indian automobile industry could not have become the powerhouse that it has become. Millions of us in this country are living better lives because of Osamu San," he added.