





Sunil B. Mittal

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Founder and Chairman
Bharti Enterprises

With a magnetic smile, an exemplary work ethic, and an ability to inspire others to rally around his vision, Sunil Mittal easily could have followed in his father's footsteps and earned a name for himself as a politician. Instead, he chose to focus his talents on changing the world as an entrepreneur.



From top:

Children at one of the schools run by the Bharti Foundation; Mittal in his office; Bharti's New Delhi headquarters.



TIMELINE

- 1957 Born, Ludhiana, Punjab, India
- 1976 Earns BA, Economics and Political Science, Panjab University
- 1976 Founds Bharti Enterprises
- 1982 Becomes largest importer of generators in India
- 1985 Launches Bharti Telecom
- 1992 Launches Bharti Cellular
- 1999 Completes OPM Program
- 2002 Bharti Airtel lists on Indian bourses through IPO
- 2004 Airtel becomes India's largest mobile operator
- 2006 Launches Satya Bharti School Program to educate India's rural underprivileged children
- 2010 Acquires mobile operations of Zain in 15 African countries
- 2012 Launches India's first 4G service
- 2013 Elected Vice Chair, International Chamber of Commerce
- 2014 Bharti's Airtel launches 4G in Africa



“Phones were not allowed to be imported, but electronic parts were permitted. So we bought phones in Taiwan, disassembled them, put them in different cases, imported them as parts, and put them together. That is how India’s first push-button telephone was born.”

Growing up in Ludhiana, a large city north of Delhi, Mittal was the middle of three sons. He enjoyed cricket more than books, and after graduating from Panjab University at the age of 19, he and a friend set up a small bicycle-parts manufacturing business. Gradually he expanded the operations, moving from bicycle parts to wool blankets to stainless steel surgical equipment. “My mind was always in business development, sales, and closing deals,” says Mittal, who eventually moved to Bombay, where “in a six-hour day you could finish what would take a month in Ludhiana.”

With the resources of a big city now available, Mittal began to focus on importing goods. “There were three fat books of Indian import policies, and I knew them backwards and forwards,” recalls Mittal, sitting in his office at the New Delhi headquarters of Bharti Enterprises, the multinational conglomerate he has built over the past 40 years.

By the age of 24, Mittal was India’s largest importer of portable generators. In 1982, however, the government banned importation of “gen sets,” a move that would have ruined a less ambitious entrepreneur. Mittal easily parlayed his knowledge and drive into his next opportunity. On a business trip to Taipei, he had seen electronic push-button phones and soon began introducing them in India, which eventually led to his rise in the telecommunications business.

“There is an old maxim: First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then they lose,” says Mittal. While others ignored him, Mittal installed fiber-optic cables throughout India. By the time anyone noticed, it was too late. Bharti’s flagship Airtel is now the third-largest telecommunications company in the world.

Today, Bharti Enterprises is one of India’s most successful companies, with more than 30,000 employees. In addition to Airtel, its diverse concerns include realty, financial services, and an agri- and food business. One of the keys to Bharti’s growth is Mittal’s remarkable talent for partnering with others, including IBM, Ericsson, and Del Monte. He is also known for his creative problem solving. Instead of working against his rivals and duplicating efforts, he creates win-win opportunities. For example, he teamed up with other telecom providers to build shared mobile towers. As Akhil Gupta (AMP 163, 2002), a colleague since 1994 puts it, “Sunil gets to the bottom of the problem without going around in circles.”

Mittal and his wife of 33 years, Nyna, are the proud parents of three grown children and have been thrilled to welcome their two grandchildren over the last few years. While none of his offspring is part of Bharti Enterprises, Mittal works closely with his two brothers. Rajan Mittal, who followed his brother’s lead and attended HBS’s OPM Program, serves as vice chairman of the company, and Rakesh Mittal oversees various emerging businesses as well as the Bharti Foundation. A brainchild of Sunil Mittal, the foundation works to improve rural education and has launched 254 schools throughout the country, serving 70,000 underprivileged children, who otherwise would not have access to education. “These children are going to change the lives of many,” says Mittal.

Sunil Bharti Mittal’s life story is partially based on an ability to find new ways when encountering an obstacle and on realizing dreams that others see as farfetched. One of his current dreams is to see a student from the Bharti Foundation attend Harvard. Looking at the determined and hopeful faces of these promising children, it seems like it is only a matter of time.