

CITATION FOR AWARD OF THE DEGREE OF HONORARY DOCTOR OF CIVIL LAW TO SUNIL AND RAKESH MITTAL

Mr Pro-Chancellor

In the early 1970s, India was lurching from crisis to crisis. Recurrent cycles of flood and famine were temporarily sustained by injections of cash from the developed world. Graphic images on our television screens reminded us of the human suffering; and with an expanding population, the problem seemed insurmountable. It was predicted that India would remain dependent on the West for ever.

Contrast this with India in 2012. A rapidly emerging economic power, associated with high-return investments and strong manufacturing. Nature still delivers the occasional firm blow, but the country is independent, resilient, and comfortably holds an influential position on the world stage. How could this turn-around happen so dramatically, and in such short a time? The answer, Mr Pro-Chancellor, lies not in Europe or North America, but with a small number of *Indian* entrepreneurs, and the most remarkable are Sunil and Rakesh Bharti Mittal.

Mr Pro-Chancellor, Rakesh is here today to receive the honorary degrees for himself, and his brother Sunil.

Born in the Punjab, Sunil borrowed a small sum from his father to start a business in 1976 making crankshafts for local bicycle manufacturers, before moving into the import trade with Rakesh in 1980. Spotting the potential market, the brothers then moved into the telecoms business, initially assembling push-button phones to replace the rotary dialers that were commonplace at the time. Linking up with European manufacturers, they moved into fax machines, and cordless phones, before successfully bidding for one of four mobile phone network licences in India. This shrewd move ensured the Mittals were “first to market” in a ripe environment. Through economies of scale and the “India-one” brand, they brought mobile technology to the mass market, distributing through Wal-Mart stores. The business grew exponentially before they expanded into sub-Saharan Africa. Their company now has over 190 million customers, and is the world’s fifth largest telecom company, valued at \$8.3 billion.

This degree of growth and expansion required careful attention to detail and enormous commitment, but almost as soon as the brothers started to make big money, they were drawn to re-invest in the country they loved. Initially making donations in response to natural disasters, they soon realised that, if they were to have real impact, they would need to take a more strategic approach. Thus, using their business acumen, they concentrated their

attention on education, believing that this would have a “multiplier effect” - on families, communities, and the country as a whole.

Mr Pro-Chancellor, let me give you an example of their approach. Recognising that retaining good staff was the key to stable education in a rural environment, they implemented a strategy that preferentially trained and hired local people to work in local schools that were privately run by the Bharti Foundation. The Mittal’s understanding of people meant that they knew these teachers were far less likely to move. Furthermore, by implementing twenty five “on the job” training days each year, they maintained career interest, and improved educational standards, allowing this new education system to grow.

Realising the importance of practical demonstration and engagement, they have developed an unique programme based on the Indian national curriculum, enabling equal opportunity through a staggering 250 free schools that educate over 34,000 pupils in rural India, all funded by the Bharti Foundation. Their work now integrates with the state education system, which has adopted many of the innovations first developed in the Bharti schools.

These developments dove-tail into new secondary schools, and three major Research Institutes, including the world-famous Bharti School of Telecommunications Technology and Management. In this way, their philanthropic strategy spans the whole educational sector. This promotes social mobility, whilst building a stronger India.

Together the whole operation has won several national and international awards and honours, and has placed the Mittal brothers amongst the top 25 philanthropists world-wide. It is truly remarkable that the whole story began with a US\$378 loan from their father in 1976. Perhaps we should all remember that the next time our own offspring ask for a small hand-out!

So why is it that these exceptionally talented entrepreneurs direct so much of their time and capital to charity? Well, Mr Pro-Chancellor, I think the Mittal brothers see their business developments and philanthropy as one in the same – both are building a sustainable India. The sons of a politician and senator, they were brought up with a strong sense of national pride, influenced by nationalist leaders including Ghandi, and especially Nehru, who jump-started post-independence development in India. These values underpinned their careers, intertwining private enterprise and philanthropy, to make the world a better place.

And fortunately, Mr Pro-Chancellor, Newcastle University has recently been able to contribute to their endeavour. The Bharti Foundation has just adopted the “Jolly Phonics” approach to language development in 252 schools across 6 states in India. This programme was developed by the School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences at Newcastle University, and built on our work in Delhi with the charity ARK, or “absolute return for kids”.

Mr Pro-Chancellor, Sunil and Rakesh Bharti Mittal illustrate one very simple important point: that economic growth, driven by entrepreneurial instinct, can build a better world. Their contribution has had had massive impact – and not only on the 1.2 billion people living in India, but across the world stage, where their strong social ethos influences global economic policy, and is underpinning a drive towards sustainability in the developing world. I therefore ask that you award them both Doctorates in Civil Law, *honoris causa*.

Citation by Professor Patrick Chinnery

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