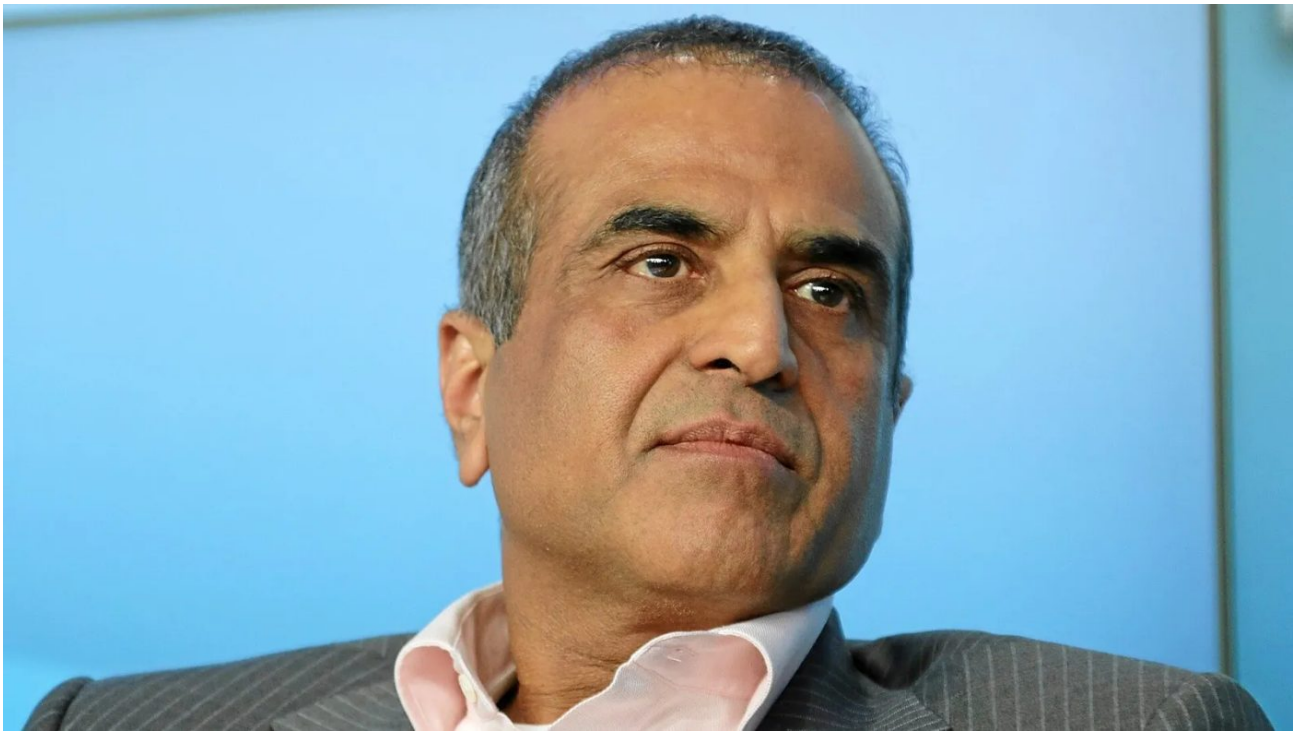
BUSINESS LEADERS

Sunil Bharti Mittal: from bicycle parts in Ludhiana to Airtel

Mittal started out with a loan of ₹20,000 from his father and went on to build Bharti Airtel, one of the world's largest telecom operators.

By Economic.Express Desk · 16 September 2025 · 2 min read



Sunil Bharti Mittal, founder and chairman of Bharti Enterprises. (Photo: World Economic Forum / Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 2.0)

In 60 seconds

1. Started a bicycle-parts business in Ludhiana in 1976 with ₹20,000 from his father.
2. Won a mobile licence for Delhi in the 1990s; Airtel launched in 1995.
3. Expanded into Africa with the 2010 purchase of Zain's African operations.
4. Received the Padma Bhushan in 2007.

Sunil Bharti Mittal was 18 when he started his first business in 1976: making bicycle parts in Ludhiana with ₹20,000 borrowed from his father. It was the first of many pivots for an entrepreneur who would later help connect hundreds of millions of Indians.

Spotting the next opportunity

Mittal moved from bicycle parts to importing portable generators from Japan, and then into telephones. His company made push-button phones under the Beetel brand in the 1980s, when India's telephone network was just beginning to modernise.

The mobile bet

When India opened its mobile market in the 1990s, Mittal's Bharti group won a licence to offer mobile services in Delhi. Airtel launched in 1995. Mittal then expanded circle by circle, eventually covering the whole country and becoming one of India's leading telecom operators.

> *Mittal's career is a lesson in moving early: each new business was a step ahead of where the market was going.*

Going global

In 2010 Bharti Airtel bought the African operations of Kuwait's Zain in a deal worth about $10.7 billion, giving it a presence across many African countries. The group has also invested in satellite communications through OneWeb and in 2024 became the largest shareholder in the UK's BT Group by acquiring a 24.5% stake.

A fiercely competitive market

Airtel has had to survive intense competition at home, especially after Reliance Jio's launch in 2016 sparked a price war. It responded with heavy investment in its network and in 5G services.

Mittal chairs Bharti Enterprises and Bharti Airtel and received the Padma Bhushan in 2007. His journey from a small workshop in Ludhiana to a global telecom group shows how persistence and timing can build an Indian multinational.