

LinchpinTM

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THE **TRAILBLAZER** *edition*

Featuring **Linchpins** who build
what they wish existed.



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Linchpin (noun)

/ˈlɪn(t)ʃpɪn/

A pivotal force that holds a group, enterprise, organisation, or system together.

contents

4 editor's note

the architecture of audacity **6**
Aasif Ahsan Khan and the determination to propel an industry forward

20 **the man who won't be still**
Reza "Baba" Massah and the art of finding freedom through motion

the bridge the boy built **30**
Sandeep Mehto and the long road to Bharat Calling

40 **connect with our Linchpins**

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editor's note

In ancient times, the word “trailblazer” meant something literal – the person who walked ahead with a flame, clearing a path for those who came after. It felt right for this edition of Linchpin Magazine.

Thing is, trailblazers aren’t always the loudest or the most visible. Often, they’re the ones who stayed with the problem long after others moved on. Who pushed past barriers that felled lesser mortals. They took harder roads and kept building even when there was no map to follow.

They can be really, really hard to find.

As a result, this edition took a good three months to come together, mainly because we were determined to feature bona fide trailblazers.

Each of our featured Linchpins shows us that impact doesn't always radiate from power; sometimes it begins quietly, on the fringes, because someone who believed took that first step forward.

Like [Aasif](#), who built, from a chance opportunity, an ecosystem to power the global biopharma industry.

Like [Reza](#), who brought capoeira to India and gave generations of children a new way to move, listen, and belong,

and like [Sandeep](#), who is reshaping what access and aspiration mean for India's rural learners.

Each of them has made their own light and carried it far enough for others to follow. Each has had a profound, material impact on thousands of lives.

We hope you enjoy getting to know them as much as we did.

– Karina

volume

four





the architecture of audacity

I believe it is *dhrid sankalp* — purposeful determination. Sometimes the universe conspires to test your resolve.

On July 31, 1987, on a day so wet that recruiters had almost given up on anyone turning up, a young mechanical diploma holder walked into an interview room. Airtech, a company led by Sant Advani, was hiring sales engineers. They were desperate for someone willing to take the job. He had been rejected by the giants L&T, Ion Exchange, and Mukand Iron & Steel and was desperate for a job of any kind. He wasn't their first pick. He was their only one.

Aasif Ahsan Khan

Founder. Investor.

Life Engineer.



The deal was struck. Aasif Ahsan Khan, AK as he is called by everyone, including his children, started on a salary of ₹1,000 a month.

“I saw the recruitment flyer on my college notice board by chance, by accident,” he recalls. “I was rejected everywhere, and Airtech needed a guy that day. I was the guy.”

Sant Advani, he says, taught him so much more than

how to sell. “He taught me about life. He showed me that respect and kindness cost nothing, but they can make everything.” Within three years, Aasif was working with clients like Garware Plastics, Burroughs Wellcome, and Johnson & Johnson, discovering an industry with an infant’s curious eyes. He had no pedigree. No godfather. No plan. What he did have was an instinct for opportunity and the unbridled determination to push farther than anyone expected.

first steps, false starts

By his mid-20s, he had already branched out. With partners he met along the way, Aasif co-founded Airpac Filters to manufacture HEPA filters and laminar flow benches. It was a small enterprise that won an overseas contract while it was still unknown at home.

This first project in Syria was valued at \$287,000, a staggering figure at the time. The scope of the project expanded, and the contract went up to \$337,000.

Then the rupee devalued. “You could call it a windfall,” he says. “We made more than ₹40 lakhs, which was the start of the factory and everything we now have.”

That project carried another story, one he has often retold. It still amazes him that Dr El Raie, the owner of Medico Labs, trusted him with it. “We were nobodies. There was no reason for him to choose us. His tech consultant was determined not to give us the project. But Dr El Raie walked up to me, broke a banana in half and gave it to me, saying, ‘No one in my team wants a

new company, but I feel I can trust you. Whatever you do, do it sincerely. Mabrouk!’ For every project since, a silent, heartfelt prayer has been given to him; he was the thrust that sent our rocket into orbit.”

That windfall was a catalyst, setting him on the road to manufacturing cleanroom equipment at scale and unlocking international markets. Soon after, with collaborator Hemant Anavkar, he co-founded Airpac Exports, a consultancy that sourced and shipped pharma equipment across the Middle East. Their nine months together on the Syria project forged a lifelong bond and reinforced Aasif’s instinct for collaboration. That instinct is what he and Hemant carried into Fabtech, the 26-year-old company he shrugs off the word ‘giant’ for. The early years were slow. Momentum compounded once the pivot became clear. Defining moments arrived in waves: they broke into international markets, delivered Oil-for-Food Programme projects for Iraq once thought out of reach, and standardised modular solutions to maximise impact. The north star, through it all, was to build a company that outlived its founders by professionalising, by letting go when needed, and by blending seasoned “old hats” with younger professionals on their way up.

baptism by failure

Aasif is refreshingly transparent about the triggers and the stumbles and the triumphs that have punctuated his journey. One of the most formative came at

ACHEMA 2003, the global pharma trade show in Frankfurt.

By then, Fabtech, his flagship cleanroom panel manufacturing company which his younger brother Aarif has been instrumental in shaping, was already making waves in core markets. Convinced AACHEMA would catapult them into the big leagues, he decided to showcase a life-size cleanroom mock-up at the show. Fifteen people travelled from India to Germany to install it. Three days and nights later, it still wasn't finished. "It was a disaster," he remembers. "We had no clue what we were doing."

He talks about how Shyam Khante, the global manufacturing head of Dabur Pharma (now Fresenius Kabi), was at the show. "Dabur had just finalised a project with us. I was terrified that Mr Khante would see our disaster of a mock-up and cancel the project. So I did everything I could to distract him", he says with a laugh. They even shipped a full container load of catalogues. "We thought prospects would rain. We had to dispose of ninety per cent of it — even paid wastage charges."

The lesson was painful, and it stuck. "Global trade shows are global trade shows," he says, with a wry smile. "You can't wing it." It was not the last time he would fail. But Aasif's willingness as a leader to own every failure and learn from it is refreshing. "Look," he says, paraphrasing Wayne Gretzky, "You miss 100% of the shots you don't take. The shot may not go in. You may look ridiculous. But the only real failure is not

to try.”

He remembers AICHEMA with “gratitude for tuition paid.” The fiasco taught discipline and rehearsal, and the humility to scale demonstrations to context. “I don’t see it as humiliation,” he says now. “It was feedback at an industrial scale.” The takeaway travelled home: build a process that survives pride. It also fashioned a leadership instinct: throw people into the deep end, and stand by to pull them out if needed. It became the house method: figure it out, then teach it forward.

madness, method, and PAW

Aasif says there was never a master plan. “There was no strategy. Still isn’t. Just madness minus method, big determination and the belief that there is nothing we can’t do. We should already be underground with the risks we have taken. Failure just wasn’t an option.”

But slowly, a pattern emerged. Aasif realised they had built, almost by accident, a capability matrix that became Fabtech’s passport into global pharma. They called it PAW: process, air, and water, allowing them to qualify for projects across emerging economies.

Early expansions came from instinct and opportunity and sheer audacity. Investments followed the same rhythm: TSA (later acquired by Thermax) for water, Pacifab for encapsulation, Mark Maker for granulation, among so many others.

From PAW’s spine, the group branched into capability

adjacencies: training (Pharmastate Academy), storytelling and industry signal (an early seed in Kable Digital Media, which also owns Linchpin Magazine).

the builder's creed

Internally, leadership hardened around a simple rubric, which Aasif, who has a decided quirk for acronyms, calls ABCDE: assess what truly needs strategy; build for fit, communicate, delegate, what he calls “mad delegation” with a watchful net so no one drowns, and drive efficiency by hiring people who don’t need permission to do the right thing. Then “remove the fear of failure, and see them shine”. He’s tough on the small mistakes that keep repeating. On the big, brave ones he is lenient.

“The only non-negotiable is removing fear; the rest can be taught. Pair the right person with the proper mandate, then get out of the way.”

Aasif’s uncanny ability to recognise and celebrate intellect and capability sets him apart as a leader. Free of the ego that so often defines the traditional CEO, he has built a culture that honours talent instead of competing with it.

“Good leadership is intrapreneurs taking ownership — people who streamline processes, harden systems, and make them unbreakable without constant escalation.”

It says a great deal about his leadership, and as much about his single-minded resolve to build something

that will outlast him.

from tailor's son to builder of industry

This resolve had roots long before Airtech or Airpac. Aasif, the oldest son of a tailor, grew up in a 80 sq ft room, the washroom outside, and rats nibbling his toes as he and his younger siblings slept in the verandah at night. He went to school in the morning and to the madrassa in the evening.

“But I used to talk a big talk. I used to tell my friends we had farms and horses and travelled by plane. We had nothing. But I had dreams bigger than my stomach.”

On train rides, he would stare at Mumbai's tall buildings and promise himself he would own a home there one day. That audacity, part fantasy and part survival, became the heartline of his life.

“My father used to say, niyat mein barkat hai. There is an abundance in true intent. If your intent is clear, the path will open. You must walk it with courage.”

the triggers

But even resolve stands on fuel. For Aasif, three moments lit fires that still burn.

The first came in Bangladesh in the early 1990s, where Airpac exhibited alongside industry heavyweight Klenzaid. Mr Lala, business custodian of Klenzaid,

came to see the booth, looked around, nodded and left. A gesture of generosity between leader and new entrant, Aasif thought. Later, at the airport immigration queue, Aasif walked up to say hello. “He looked me up and down and just turned away. Everyone from the industry was watching. Those 20 steps back to my place in the queue were the longest I have ever taken. Bloody eternal.”

The second came from Supersonic, a leading ultrasonic washer manufacturer. Aasif went to their Andheri office seeking collaboration. The owner dismissed him outright, mocking his youth and his turnover and even his appearance.

The third came at the Indian Overseas Bank. His Syria project needed a ₹20-lakh loan to bridge working capital. With no collateral, Mr Chibber, the manager of Indian Overseas Bank, told him bluntly, “You don’t have a pushcart of your own, and you’re dreaming of helicopters.”

Each rejection cut deep, and each one turned into fuel. “This isn’t mere audacity. I believe it is dhrid sankalp (purposeful determination). Sometimes the universe conspires to test your resolve.” For Aasif, “every humiliation, every ‘no’, and door slammed in your face is not the end, but a signal to dream bigger and persist harder.”

He frames these moments without rancour: “They were calibrations, not condemnations.” Each refined his stance: he answered resentment with resolve,

returning to first principles, “dhrid sankalp guided by niyat.”

the case for collaboration

Perhaps because rejection and humiliation marked his early years, Aasif grew into an entrepreneur who



instinctively chose to collaborate rather than compete.

It's why he consistently backs talent that is too small for private equity, and too ambitious to be ignored.

“When we were young, we had to appear older just to be taken seriously,” he says. “Today, I see young people starting up, and I want to give them respect. If I treat them the way I was treated, they'll end up against me one day. Instead, why not invest in them and enable them?”

Collaboration, in practice, means adjusting the centre of gravity. He cites a conversation with Kelvin in which a single sentence changed how a partner thought about ownership: “Make business your convertible currency; don't become its slave.” Build a company beyond you; let the collaborative front run independently while you hold a steadying role. The result is speed that doesn't tip into panic, and a resilience that carries no ego with it.

“I want the ecosystem I'm building to be considered for every project, machine, spare part, change part — anything in the ecosystem. Not to win every deal, but to have a seat at every table.”

against old school stagnation

Not everyone agrees with Aasif's collaborative ethos. The fiercest resistance comes from some of India's old-school, family-run businesses. Their constraints, he argues, are structural.

“A handful of generational businesses are thriving in our sector. There are two stumbling blocks. The father who built the business, and the chartered accountant. If they are friends, it’s a nightmare. The father says, ‘I built this, don’t mess it up.’ The CA says: ‘Don’t sell, don’t risk.’ And the next generation loses the freedom to fail.”

For Aasif, that loss of freedom is fatal. “Valuation is not just numbers. It is what difference you can make to the industry and how you can improve the world. Professionalisation is the single most critical thing. The more the Indian biopharma engineering industry remains family-run, the more it will go south.”

His critique isn’t meant as a takedown. It’s an invitation to grow. Professionalise the books. Separate valuation from audit. Let the next generation earn their failures. Where openness has met capital, he’s watched traditional firms stabilise and scale and surprise.

a vision for biopharma

Aasif calls himself a Life Engineer, a reminder that his work touches life-saving drugs and access in places the world forgets. He says preparedness begins upstream, with forecast and anticipation and deployment at the edge of detection. The pandemic was a teacher here: The pandemic proved that modular, locally deployable capacity isn’t a nice-to-have. It is national infrastructure. “If you’re starting

when the problem is visible, you're already late."

He is relentless in his push for a stronger, more unified Indian biopharma engineering sector. "We have made India the pharmacy of the world," he argues. "But after that, it is European machinery that caters to high capacities. Unless we shed fragmentation and pool our strengths, we remain small players in a big game." For him, the point isn't only survival. It is ensuring the Indian industry's place in the future.

He is vocal within the Indian Pharmaceutical Machinery Manufacturers' Association, often criticising its exhibition-only focus. "Fight for subsidies and PLIs," he urges. "Encourage R&D. There is talent available. What we lack is capital and courage."

The comparison with China is pointed: "The Chinese government removed the fear of failure. We have no such support. We must consolidate, collaborate to create value, and be taken seriously."

what makes a venture investable?

Investment potential, for Aasif, has less to do with a single moment than with listening in 360°. The order of listening matters: first to the founder, then the team, then what the industry says, and finally what clients say. Praise that arrives in your absence is the truest signal.

Numbers are noted but never worshipped. And sometimes, despite every headwind, gut feel tips the scale. He has backed ventures when they were

headed south, even when legal cases made them unbankable on paper. “If the founder’s integrity and intent are intact, the story can still turn. Sincerity to the mission despite failures is the real diligence.”

Aasif is tenaciously vocal about removing the stigma of failure: “We need a forgiving ecosystem. One that doesn’t punish entrepreneurs for stumbling, but frees them to try again. Each failure carries the seed of a future breakthrough.”

ecosystems not empires

He started life in an 80 sq ft room and ended up a founder of factories and a funder of futures, and Aasif’s journey has been improbable and audacious. He walked in with nothing and built something that has endured: “a collaborative ecosystem where everyone wins.”.



the man who won't be still

One day, when I'm old and
crossing the street, someone will
stop and say, 'That's Baba.' That
will be enough.

Five hundred years ago, enslaved Africans in Brazil found a language of freedom in disguise. They masked their defiance as dance and their resistance as rhythm. In the cadence of drums and the grace of motion, they reclaimed what had been taken from them, the right to move freely, to live with dignity and to fight without hatred.

This language came to be known as Capoeira: martial art, music, theatre of survival.



Reza Baba Massah
Centre for Capoeira, India

Centuries later, that same rhythm crossed oceans and found another unlikely custodian, a man who, without quite meaning to, would bring Capoeira to India and give it a new home.

Reza Massah, “Baba” as he is known to the thousands of students who have learned to balance,

fall, and rise with him, did not set out to blaze a trail. But he was destined to build one nonetheless. A trail that took him from the quiet isolation of a boarding school to airports and kitchens, right back to schools where children and parents and teachers alike are convinced, he's the Pied Piper come to life. His life has been a literal study in motion.

origins in motion

Reza's story begins at five. He remembers the journey vividly, the plane ride from Iran to India, the promise of a new language, the certainty that he would return home once he learned it. "I thought I'd learn English in a day and come back," he laughs. "I didn't know I'd be staying for years."

The boarding school he was sent to was a world without familiar words. Loneliness became his first teacher, and movement his first form of expression. "If I sat still, I would start to think, and it would make me very sad," he says. "So I ran, boxed, swam, did gymnastics, anything that kept me moving." Sports became a sanctuary. His pocket money was spent not on treats or books but on sports gear. "I didn't know what I was preparing for," he says. "I just knew that when I moved, I felt free."

At fifteen, he was already in the gym, drawn to the culture of discipline and strength. "All the Iranians in Hyderabad were bodybuilders," he recalls. "We grew up in the Rambo years. Muscles were how you

showed you belonged.” But even then, there was something different in the way he approached it. For him, strength was not vanity, but defiance. “I’ve never seen my parents exercise,” he says. “So maybe that was my rebellion, to move when no one else did.”

a restless apprenticeship

The years that followed read like a manual in improvisation. At sixteen, Reza’s father handed him a driver’s licence and little else. “He said, ‘This is all I can give you. Start your life.’”

So he did. Bellboy. Driver. Line cook. Valet. He worked nights to pay for flying lessons in Australia, chopping vegetables by the hour and dreaming of the clouds. He earned his pilot’s licence and realised, too late, that the sky could feel smaller than it looked. “You’re sitting there eight hours staring at blue,” he says. “It’s calm, but it’s not alive.”

The dream shifted. Air gave way to earth, flight to flavour. He opened cafés and food stalls, crepes, coffee, ice cream, and handmade smoothies, a kind of kinetic entrepreneurship that echoed the energy he carried since childhood. “Food is movement too,” he says. “You stand, you stir, you serve, you connect.” It was during these years that another rhythm entered his life, this time through sound.

the day movement found meaning

It was during his years in Israel, where he ran cafés

serving crepes and coffee, that he first heard the rhythm that would change his life. One day, he followed the sound of drums into an academy across from his café. Inside, three concentric circles of people clapped, sang, and moved in kinetic abandon, their faces lit up with fierce joy. The air was thick with sweat, the mirrors fogged with breath. “I remember thinking, who put music into yoga?”

It was his first encounter with capoeira.

Within days, he began training with the group next door, paying for classes not with money but with coffee and crepes from his café. “It was fair trade, their movement for my food,” he smiles. “And it’s



how my real education began.” He discovered that in capoeira, discipline and freedom could coexist and that rhythm, community, and courage could transform the body into a story.

When he returned to India in 2005, he carried with him no business plan, only instruments, conviction, and a few recordings. He began teaching in open parks and under apartment buildings. Sometimes his bike refused to start; sometimes his classes were empty. But he never missed a day. “Even when there were three students,” he says, “I felt like I was creating something new.”

By the time Capoeira India found its first home in Bandra, word had spread. Music, movement, and laughter filled the old bungalow that he and Aparna, his partner and collaborator in work and life, rented. It was a space with no air-conditioning or mirrors, and no proper bathroom, but energy that refused to be contained. MTV and Channel V called him the “crazy cool” teacher who moved like music. The real transformation began when the children found their Baba.

“What was hard for adults came so naturally to kids,” he says. “They don’t question their bodies. They just move.” The classes grew. Parents came to watch. One of them, a famous filmmaker, wrote an article about how Baba taught not just capoeira but also curiosity.

Soon, word travelled to schools. The first to open its doors was Billabong International. Out of three

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BUZZ
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**18 BODY BEAUTIFUL
ROOTS FROM
INDIA**

Amol Gupta wrote *Amni* for a hugely successful Indian education series

BRAZIL
Capoeira: An energetic combination of martial arts and dance

WORLD
Sportsfest and marathon

[illegible]

26

static.”

rhythm nation

The experiment soon became a movement across Mumbai’s schools and studios. Aparna joined him full-time to grow the company while he focused on moving people. By 2010, Capoeira India was running multiple centres and workshops. But growth never changed Baba’s core conviction, that movement could be a form of healing.

movement as medicine

“In a country where so many children grow up afraid, afraid to speak, afraid to fail, afraid to fall, movement is medicine,” he says. “It teaches control without aggression, strength without violence.” He calls capoeira “the missing link”: a way to make confidence physical, to teach safety through rhythm rather than fear.

Parents noticed the difference. Doctors and teachers wrote to him describing how the children who trained with him became calmer, sharper, and more focused. “One parent told me,” he recalls, ‘Your one-hour class gives the same release as a four-hour trek.’ That’s when I knew this was real.”

Through the years, the circle kept widening. Former students became instructors; schools added capoeira to their curriculum; and Baba, always in motion,

became mentor to a generation. His classes remained hands-on and human. He still rode a scooter to class, carrying his berimbau and a small music player.

“Some days the rain would soak everything, my CDs, my clothes, my bike, but it never felt like hardship,” he says. “It felt like purpose.”

axé Baba

Now in his fifties, Baba still teaches nine classes a day. His students are children, professionals, actors, and athletes, people who may never meet in any other setting. “Capoeira equalises,” he says. “Everyone learns to fall and to get back up. Everyone learns to listen.”



He is still building, still dreaming. His next goal is an academy, a space that brings together masters worldwide, where children can train, learn, and lead. “If we can put a capoeirista in every home,” he says with a smile, “we can build a generation that knows how to move in every sense of the word.”

Ask him what legacy means, and he pauses. “My legacy is people,” he says. “The students who found their voice, the teachers who built their confidence, the ones who stayed when it was hard. I’m just planting seeds. One day, when I’m old and crossing the street, someone will stop and say, ‘That’s Baba.’ That will be enough.”

He calls capoeira an unfinished journey. A rhythm that keeps finding new shape, a movement that mirrors life. “Every new curve, every new challenge,” he says, “is just another rhythm.”

For him, movement is the language that taught him resilience and showed him he belonged. In teaching others to move, Reza “Baba” Massah has built something that stands still only long enough to inspire the next step forward.





the bridge the boy built

But it was conscience, really. We had to become small again to stay honest.

In the villages of Madhya Pradesh, comparison can feel like inheritance. Some families leave, some stay; some have toilets, others fetch water from the well. A child learns early what people mean when they ask, "Will he make something of himself?"

Sandeep Mehto remembers those questions more than the answers. He grew up in Kesla in a joint family. His father had eight siblings, some of whom left home in search of urban pastures. The home he grew up in fed travelling relatives and silently carried their judgment at the lack of urban amenities. "I have

always been a sensitive guy and it felt like an unfair comparison," he says. That quiet accounting of worth would one day shape everything he built.

the question of enough

At five, he joined the new English-medium school started by Power Grid Corporation in India. Later, his father made a decision that changed the arc of his life: to send him to a boarding school in Bhopal. "We didn't have the money," Sandeep says. "But he still spent forty thousand rupees. That was courage." When the family business collapsed, the fees stopped. He studied for his board exams from home, barely passed, and carried the kind of self-doubt that clings quietly to bright children who are told they have failed. He took mathematics because that was what "smart" students did. He tried for engineering, lost a year, did everything he could to re-enter college, and topped his class. "There was freedom in anonymity," he says. "In higher education, nobody knew my story. That made me strong."

Then came the loss that re-centred him: on Diwali, during his final year, his father died of a heart attack. The house was filled with mourners speaking of the man Sandeep had often judged harshly. "I realised that what my relatives called his weakness — helping others before himself — was the same thing I admired in my teachers later. That realisation stayed."



Sandeep Mehto

Bharat Calling

learning the language of privilege

After engineering, Sandeep prepared for entrance exams and discovered the Tata Institute of Social Sciences. He applied for three programmes and was accepted into Social Entrepreneurship — the course that changed how he saw both opportunity and inequality.

In TISS classrooms, he studied ideas that gave names to things he had lived without naming: financial, social, and cultural capital. "I understood why I could reach higher education when others couldn't," he says. "My family wasn't rich, but we valued education. That was social capital."

He began to see privilege differently — not as guilt but as awareness. "Every person is privileged in some way," he says. "For me, it was education and the ability to tell my story. Acknowledging that itself became privilege."

That realisation would form the heart of Bharat Calling, the initiative he founded to help rural students access higher education — not through charity but through consciousness. "I could have channelled my frustration by chasing success abroad," he says. "Instead, I found another way to use that energy."

the first call

The idea began as a small pilot with 20 students. "We were just twenty-two, twenty-three," he laughs. "But 20 of them got into good colleges. That gave us the courage to continue."

The early years were a blur of hope and improvisation. Sandeep and his friends guided students through entrance forms, fee payments, and long train journeys to distant colleges. They discovered that most barriers weren't academic — they were emotional. "Many students had never even entered a college campus. It

looked too big, too alien."

He remembers one girl who cooked at weddings to support her family. She joined a music programme, became a teacher, and now works in Visakhapatnam. "Every child is good at something," he says. "Our job is to notice it before the world tells them otherwise."

What began as informal mentoring became a model: assessment tests, home visits, career report cards, and follow-up support. Bharat Calling helped hundreds of students cross thresholds that once looked impossible. More than 450 graduated from top colleges across India and are now in the workforce. But for Sandeep, the real work was quieter — convincing families, not funding fees. "Money is easy to find," he says. "Conviction is hard."



the privilege to listen

Sandeep calls his approach "soft-side work". He resists the language of targets and impact graphs. "If you approach a child with purity," he says, "they give you a part of their life."

During one school visit, a teacher watched students write their hearts out on assessment forms. "They had never spoken so openly before," she told him. For Sandeep, that trust is the success metric. "We never do one-time awareness sessions. If you start something, you stay until they're ready. Otherwise, it feels like a crime."

He works mainly with students finishing twelfth grade — the fragile bridge between childhood and choice. "It's the moment when everything can go either way," he says. Bharat Calling now conducts IQ and aptitude tests, maps interests, and helps students and parents make informed decisions.

The financial gap is often bridged by goodwill: alumni, teachers, and strangers who call after reading his posts. "A student once told me he'd lived twelve years believing he could never afford college," Sandeep recalls. "The next day, someone paid his entire fee. The hardest part isn't money. It's helping them believe they deserve it."

calibrating conscience

Success, as it often does, brought distortion. Funding

poured in, expectations grew, and the work began to drift from its intent. "We had to scale, report numbers, raise grants," Sandeep says. "I became a human-resources manager instead of a teacher."

He launched a rural fellowship and sent volunteers into villages, but over time realised that the fellows were benefitting more than the children. "We were updating résumés, not transforming lives."

The decision to stop was difficult but deliberate. "Because we paused around the time Covid was raging, everyone assumed that was the reason," he says. "But it was conscience, really. We had to become small again to stay honest."

For six years, he withdrew, reexamined his motivations, and re-started quietly — working again with a few schools and a few dozen students, the way it had begun. "Now there's no pressure," he says. "No donors, no scale targets. Just work that feels true."

the circle returns

The second life of Bharat Calling looks different. Funding now comes not from institutions but from the students it once helped. "Sixty per cent of them contribute back," Sandeep says. "Some earn thirty, some fifty thousand rupees. I even borrow from them sometimes."

Among them is Kishan, one of Bharat Calling's early students from a small village near Hoshangabad. Kishan had once imagined a life in uniform — the

army or the police — until a summer camp with Bharat Calling expanded his sense of what was possible. "I didn't even know English then," he recalls. "Sandeep bhaiya helped us see that there are other ways to serve — through development, through education."

Kishan went on to study forestry and environmental science, followed by a master's in sustainable natural resources at TISS. For the past seven years, he has worked on agriculture and water programmes in rural Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. Today, he also supports Bharat Calling financially. "If one person from our area moves forward," he says, "it motivates many others. I contribute what I can because someone once did that for me."

For Sandeep, this reciprocity is more potent than any grant. "I never wanted to build an NGO," he says. "I wanted to build a circle — where people help each other when it's their turn."

Teachers see the difference. Bharadwaj Sir, a senior teacher at Government Kesla Higher Secondary School told Linchpin, "If people like Sandeep stop working, an entire community suffers. Children who once had nothing are now clearing national exams."

Kaushalya, now a music teacher in Kendriya Vidyalaya Visakhapatnam, still calls him Bhaiya. "Because of him, I sat in an AC compartment for the first time," she says. "He told me I could study music when I didn't even know it was a subject." She went on to complete her PhD and qualifies as one of Bharat Calling's quiet

triumphs — proof that exposure can be destiny.

the inheritance of courage

Sandeep often thinks of his father when people call him selfless. "I'll never match his purity," he says. "Professional training takes some of that away." Yet, the echo is unmistakable. His father once stopped on a road to help a stranger get medical treatment; years later, that man wept as he told the story. "That's when I understood," Sandeep says softly, "that a life can be much bigger than a family."

He no longer measures success by numbers. "If the child is happy, that's enough," he says. "Why force them into a world they don't want?" The work now is relational — not persuasion but patience. "We don't let parents become villains," he adds. "We tell students, you make the decision. That keeps peace in the home and responsibility with the child."

When asked what advice he'd give his younger self, he pauses. "Don't give all twenty-four hours to anything," he says finally. "And don't undervalue yourself just because you don't have money yet."

As for others hoping to do similar work, his counsel is both simple and profound: start small, start nearby, and study. "Theory gives you clarity," he says. "It polishes you. Without it, passion alone burns out."

He dreams not of expansion but of endurance — a Bharat Calling that remains personal enough to remember every name, yet wide enough to remind

every child that worth is not inherited.

"I don't know how to convert this passion into a framework," he says. "Maybe it isn't meant to fit one."

In that uncertainty lies his conviction.

Because for Sandeep Mehto, the journey from student to teacher has never been about creating an organisation. It has been about creating a conscience — and teaching others how to listen when it calls.



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Aasif Ahsan Khan

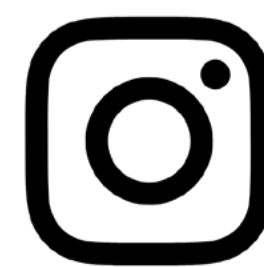
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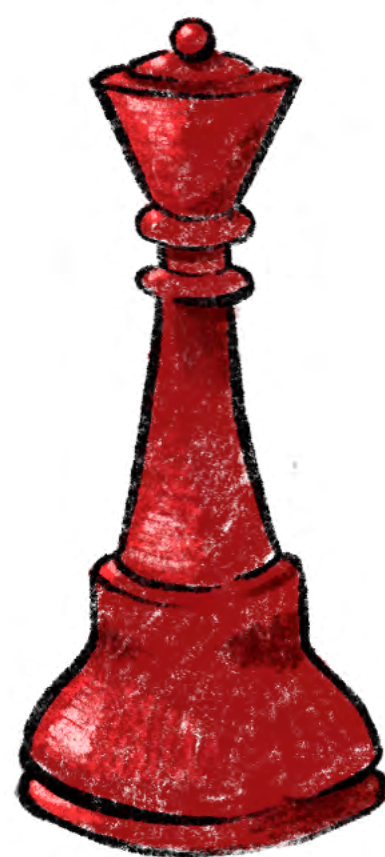
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