

## ADCLOD Podcast Series with Social Impact Founders

*Dr. Bhushan Punani, Blind People's Association (BPA)*

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**Neharika Vohra:** Hello, good afternoon, Dr. Punani. Welcome to the ADCLOD podcast series with social impact founders, an initiative by the Ashank Desai Centre for Leadership and Organisational Development at IIM Ahmedabad, where we document and celebrate the leadership journeys of India's homegrown social entrepreneurs who have built impactful institutions from the ground up.

In today's episode, we have the privilege of speaking with Dr. Bhushan Punani, a distinguished alumnus of IIM Ahmedabad, Class of 1979, of whom his own director at IIM said, at the time, that he was taking a leap in the dark. While his batchmates headed into corporate careers, Dr. Punani chose to join the Blind People's Association in Ahmedabad — then a small blind school with barely 90 staff members. Over the next four and a half decades, Dr. Punani transformed BPA into one of India's largest and most comprehensive disability development organisations, with 17 campuses across Gujarat and Rajasthan, 18 vision centres, an eye hospital, an assistive technology museum, and services reaching tens of thousands of persons with disabilities every year.

Dr. Punani holds a PhD and an LLB from Gujarat University, and trained in vocational rehabilitation at Haifa University in Israel. He has received the Helen Keller Award, the IIM Ahmedabad Distinguished Alumnus Award, and the National Leadership Singhanian Award. He currently serves as Vice President of the International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment globally, and is a member of the Election Commission of India's Advisory Committee on Accessible Elections.

Dr. Punani, welcome to our podcast. It is indeed a pleasure to have you here.

**Bhushan Punani:** Thank you very much, Neharika ma'am. My pleasure indeed.

**Neharika Vohra:** It's an honour to talk to you. So, Dr. Punani, let's get right into the conversation. We'd like to first get a picture from you of what BPA looks like today — we heard that you joined when it had 90 staff members and a very small presence. We'd like to hear about its scale, the range of disabilities you serve, your campuses, the nature of your team, and how the organisation is funded today.

**Bhushan Punani:** I'm very privileged to share that the Blind People's Association — I'll call it BPA — is the largest NGO in the disability sector in India today. While our name is Blind People's Association, we work across all categories of disability, 21 as per the new law, and across every dimension of disability development.

We're very fortunate to now have 18 campuses, including three eye hospitals, plus another 18 vision centres scattered across Gujarat and Rajasthan, and 33 daycare centres. We're now also taking on a few organisations across Gujarat, in every district, under the banner of the National Association for the Blind, so we have a district branch network too. This organisation runs a network of eye-care institutions, orthopaedic hospitals, schools, inclusive education and support services, daycare centres, vision centres — essentially anything that's needed for people with disabilities. It's a very simple, down-to-earth organisation, and I'd say one of the most transparent in the country — in fact, we've run seminars for other NGOs on how to achieve 100% statutory compliance. And we're still a fast-expanding organisation, because we want to reach more and more people with disabilities — not just across Gujarat and Rajasthan, though that remains our core *karambhoomi*, our home ground — but, in terms of consultancy, counselling, assessment, programme management, technical support, and capacity-building, we now work across much of India, parts of South Asia, and parts of Africa too. And under the banner of ICEVI, which you mentioned, we promote education in many parts of the world.

**Neharika Vohra:** Very interesting — there's clearly a long arc from where you started to where you've reached today. What's the staff size today, and how large is the organisation in terms of people involved, and where do you get your funding from?

**Bhushan Punani:** Actually, we have four categories of staff. The first is our grant-aided staff — projects funded under the Government of Gujarat's grant-in-aid scheme. Then we have staff employed directly for our own programmes. We also now have a large number of volunteers, and a good number of visiting faculty for our professional programmes. Put together, our own staff, including grant-aided staff, comes to around 400, scattered across Gujarat and Rajasthan. Beyond that, we have a very large number of volunteers — mostly retired people, or people not otherwise employed, but highly experienced, who come and work with us voluntarily. We also retain a number of people post-retirement on an honorarium, and that number is growing too. So, broadly, we look for a mix of people with the right qualifications, the right mindset, the right experience, and a real sense of dedication — people willing to work for a fairly modest salary rather than a high one. Most of our people fall into that category.

On funding — a very interesting question, because for most NGOs, the assumption is that government is the biggest source of money. In BPA's case, we've proved that's not necessarily true. Government is definitely an important source — you should take government grants where they're available, because that money is rightfully yours to access — but if you want to be sustainable, ever-growing, and really make a dent in your objectives, you need multiple sources of funding. BPA, from the early '80s, started raising money from the public. So our main sources of funding are: government grant-in-aid, where available; public donations, which work well because our cause has strong public appeal; and, increasingly, CSR — corporate social responsibility funding. We currently have 96 corporate partners supporting our programmes in one way or another. Just to clarify, CSR money goes directly to programme spending, identified by the supporting company — it isn't used for our administration or expansion.

A fourth, and increasingly important, source is our own internal funds — we have corpus funds, both general and specific, we make investments, and earn returns from those. We also have a range of products — furniture, calipers, crutches, walkers, wheelchairs, and other assistive devices — which we sell not for profit, but to recover our costs and overheads. And the newest, and increasingly viable, source is online fundraising — we're on almost all the leading platforms, including GlobalGiving and GiveIndia, so people anywhere in the world who want to support us can do so through those platforms.

**Neharika Vohra:** Wow. Two things strike me from that description. First, this is clearly a very complex organisation in terms of people — you have grant-aided staff, programme staff, volunteers, retirees — that takes real management depth to bring out the best in each group; you can't manage everyone the same way. And similarly with money — it's complex, because there's money to support beneficiaries directly, and separately, money needed to run and grow the operations itself. That also requires fairly sophisticated management. At some point, I'd really like to hear your view on how you manage that — what kind of people-management this requires — because this podcast is really about understanding the leadership challenges of running a social impact organisation that isn't just one kind of people, or one kind of work, or one single vision. We can get into that now, or later, whichever you prefer.

**Bhushan Punani:** Yes — that's a very pertinent question. The NGO system in India is genuinely complex, especially when you're working across every dimension of disability — prevention, healthcare, advocacy, capacity-building, and working with families and parents too. The good part, thanks to my own academic background and that of my colleagues, is that we've developed quite a clean model.

At the top, we're very centralised. We have five directors, including deputy directors, each with a clearly defined area of responsibility — a director for project management, a director for education, a director for fundraising, a director for support services, and so on. Each is fully centralised within their own domain, with their own team. But the moment you move from that top layer down to the next level, it becomes completely decentralised. Take education: a school is run by its principal, who's concerned purely with school management — not resource mobilisation, not fee collection, not accounting; those are handled separately by support services. So that's the model: fully centralised at the top, fully decentralised as you go down, and that's helped us manage these projects well.

There's also a lot of decentralised responsibility assignment. We have more than 40 locations where we run activities, and the person in charge of each one is responsible for everything operational at that site — though not for raising funds or accounting for them centrally, which the central team handles. Day-to-day performance is entirely on the local in-charge. Fortunately, at every location we have an independent, experienced, well-trained, dependable person with a strong sense of dedication, and that keeps things running.

When it comes to managing multiple funding sources, technology helps a great deal. We use Tally for accounting, a dedicated reporting software, and for our hospitals, a special system developed by Aravind Eye Hospital, supported by SEWA International — so every medical system runs on dedicated software, every accounting system runs on dedicated software, and HR is managed through its own software too. So we always know who's working where, what salaries and payments are due, and we follow strict timelines for statutory compliance, with someone specifically responsible for tracking every deadline, so there are no delays, no penalties, no missed dates.

One of the things I'm proudest of is that we're one of the few NGOs to have gone in for serious, well-developed investment planning. This is public money, meant for public good — if we invest it well, we earn better returns, and can spend better. Another fairly unique thing about BPA: we don't spend on building infrastructure unless we already have dedicated resources for it. No money comes out of working capital or investments to expand our campuses. Right now, we already have plans to spend more than 50 crore rupees on new construction over the next five years — but we'll only begin once that funding is assured, or close to assured. So I never spend our working capital on building a new campus, even though, at the same time, we absolutely need to build new campuses — we just work in reverse order: raise the money first, secure the commitment, then start construction.

**Neharika Vohra:** So two or three principles I'm hearing: first, minimise overheads and focus on the most important thing — service to beneficiaries. Second, everyone does what they're best at, rather than spreading themselves thin across everything the organisation needs — and you have the structure and the technology in place to support all of that. Does that sound right?

**Bhushan Punani:** Yes, no doubt about that — with one addition: we don't really have staff turnover. We've been very fortunate; almost anyone who joins BPA joins for life. I meet a lot of organisations whose biggest problem is staff joining and leaving, very high turnover — but BPA has a long history of people joining and simply continuing, for as long as they're able to.

To support that, we've built something I'd really like other NGOs to consider: a proper post-retirement policy. These days, with better longevity and better health, people don't necessarily need to retire fully at 58, 60, or 65 — many are still very functional. So if you're a good performer, with good commitment, and you wish to continue, we have a well-developed policy: you continue on your existing salary for two years post-retirement, then move to 50% of your last salary as an honorarium, which itself increases by 10% every year — though once you cross 65, the honorarium is held at that level. It's a well-thought-out policy, and the effect on staff motivation, involvement, and commitment is enormous, because most people have a real fear of what they'll do with themselves after retirement. At BPA, as long as you're physically fit and mentally sound, there's a place for you. That's made a real difference to our growth.

**Neharika Vohra:** This is fascinating — you're saying people simply don't leave. You yourself have been here 45 years, modelling that. Beyond the post-retirement promise, is there anything else that explains this very low attrition? I think it's a genuinely useful lesson for any organisation.

**Bhushan Punani:** What we do is, we never advertise positions — no newspaper ads. Instead, we take a different approach for mid-level hiring: we invite students for placements from various institutes — social work, education, law, management. When they come to us for placement, we observe their performance, and if someone fits well with our kind of organisation, and we have an opening, we make them an offer: we'll take you on as a management or social-work trainee for a year, at a fixed salary depending on your qualifications, and evaluate your performance at the end of it.

What's distinctive is that we try to place these trainees in some of the best institutes in the world for further training — they've gone to America, to Japan, to many countries. And because of that, people always ask, don't you need a bond to ensure they come back? We don't. We never use a legal instrument for that. If you're happy with us after gaining that knowledge, you stay; if you choose not to, our philosophy is that the knowledge is never wasted — they'll go on and use it elsewhere.

But the truly remarkable thing, which I'm genuinely proud of, is that nobody has ever left us after this kind of training. We've sent people to institutions like the Perkins International Institute in Boston — the finest institute in the world today for this field; we've trained ten people there — as well as to Japan, Norway, the Netherlands, and other outstanding institutions, all very carefully chosen, because we were confident they were the right people. The moment we send them, we cover all their expenses — fees, scholarships, everything — and the moment they're back, they're slotted into the same role with greater responsibility.

Second, we run a lot of refresher courses too — short courses for our staff. Our ophthalmic team, for instance, trains through our ties with SEWA International USA, Aravind Eye Hospital in Madurai, and a hospital in Pune. We send staff regularly for these short courses, wherever better training modules are available — sometimes we pay for it ourselves, and people come back well motivated. Third, we now send people to present at conferences and seminars, and we cover those expenses too. And fourth — we've reversed the table entirely: we now host national and international conferences ourselves, at BPA, which brings people from around the globe here to present, and that participation keeps everyone motivated. That's really why we don't have staff turnover.

**Neharika Vohra:** Again, very interesting — you invest in their education, you trust them, and you constantly show them opportunities to grow. That becomes a real motivator to stay. We often hear that people leave organisations because they don't like their bosses, or the culture and climate within the organisation. Is there anything you'd like to share around that — building a culture people actually like?

**Bhushan Punani:** We believe in a collective culture — not one we impose from above, but one built from the values people themselves bring, which we respect. We focus on people's strengths, not their weaknesses, and try to place them where their strengths are best used. We also don't impose very rigid rules — “you can do this, you can't do that.” If something is good for the organisation, or for your project or area, you're welcome to experiment; we give people the freedom to work. Restricting people too tightly takes away their creativity and initiative. Everyone thinks differently — we can't assume that what I think, or what any one of us thinks, is the final word. What people discover for themselves, the potential they find in themselves, makes a real difference when they're given room to use it.

Second, we don't believe in constantly pressuring people, or keeping them perpetually stressed — we give them freedom and space. Occasionally, of course, someone doesn't perform well, but fortunately, when people realise our kind of role isn't a fit for them, or that they can't meet our expectations, they generally find another path before things go too far — and I'm talking here about people

who've already been trained, motivated, and selected by us. Once someone's been through our full process, it's very rare. I think we've been lucky in selecting the right people — or perhaps the right people have selected us. We don't really attract job-seekers, people just looking for any job. We attract people who want to do something for the community, for people with special needs — and that makes a real difference. Many of our people are themselves siblings of people with disabilities, or parents, or have some personal experience of disability in their family. Such people bring a much stronger emotional connection, and accept the work far more naturally than someone with no exposure to it at all.

**Neharika Vohra:** That's very interesting — almost a personal reason for being there. Which brings me to a question about your founder, Mr Jagdish Patel, who himself lost his sight at the age of eight, and founded BPA in 1954. When you arrived in 1979, you inherited his vision. We'd love to hear how the founder's vision has left its imprint on how the organisation still runs.

**Bhushan Punani:** First, Jagdish Patel and his whole early team were an exceptionally dedicated group. He himself lived with vision impairment, and in later years lost his hearing too, and eventually used a wheelchair — but he never lost his courage; he had very high spirits, great magnanimity, real vision, and was a very well-qualified person. He'd trained in the UK in administrative studies, and — this might surprise you — he was actually one of Ahmedabad's leading physiotherapists, running a well-known clinic called Medico Massage and Cardiac. He never used his profession for personal gain; he used it to build this organisation instead.

A small example: he went to Arvind Lalbhai, who was then chairman of Arvind Mills, and later became BPA's president, and asked for support to start a small organisation. Arvind Bhai initially said, you already have your own world to run — how can I help? But Jagdish Patel was also, at the time, president of the Lions Club of Ahmedabad, and the Lions Club gave us 25,000 rupees back in 1964 — equivalent to several crores today — which funded our very first building, what we still call Building Number Seven.

Arvind Lalbhai himself, I should mention, was one of the finest people I've ever met — a man of enormous wealth, yet remarkably humble and grounded, an honest and dedicated person who was also chairman of FICCI, and what we in Gujarat call a "Shreshthi" — a respected elder statesman of business — and he stayed associated with our organisation for forty years. Other early, deeply committed supporters included people like Nandinibahen Munshaw; Priyakant Bhai, her husband; Indravadan Pranalal Shah; and Manubhai Shah of the consumer rights movement — all leading citizens of the city, giving their service selflessly, what we'd call *nishkaam seva*. They set the wheels in motion well before I joined in '79 — by then it was already a recognised school and workshop for the blind, with an administrative committee, an executive board, and a general body.

Because Jagdish Patel himself was such a visionary leader, he brought in young professionals like me, Nandini Rawal, Vimal Thawani, and others — Rohan, and Hansa Trivedi among them — who became the backbone of the organisation. We were all young, freshly out of college, with no real experience at all, but we were working collectively towards a single mission, guided by that same group of senior people — and crucially, they gave us a great deal of freedom and space to grow into our roles.

That sense of team spirit at the very top has made an enormous difference for BPA — no formula, no management degree, can substitute for genuine cohesion and a collective sense of dedication to a cause. We've been fortunate to have great unity and strong interpersonal relationships among our senior leadership. We're one of the few organisations that's never seen a real power struggle. There have certainly been differences of opinion — there should be, and there have been — but as we say in Hindi, there were differences of opinion, never a struggle for power. That distinction has made all the difference, and everyone I've named, and many more who worked quietly behind the scenes, helped shape BPA into what it is today.

**Neharika Vohra:** We often say a founder's vision casts a very long shadow, and I can see that clearly here — what happens at the top really does shape how people throughout the rest of the organisation behave, since they have that role model in front of them. The other thing I keep hearing from you is a real generosity of spirit — not about control, but about being generous, whether with employees, with beneficiaries, or in how you approach the work generally — and that, too, seems to have left an imprint on how BPA runs today.

I know I'm taking this conversation in several directions, but I'd also love to hear how you personally assess the impact of BPA's work — from the 58,000 tricycles you've distributed, to the 400-plus blind physiotherapists you've trained, to India's first accessible ATM, with Union Bank.

**Bhushan Punani:** To start with your earlier point — we're all working for a cause, and that's really what sets us apart from a corporate entity. There, you work for profit; here, we work for human gain. Our targets are entirely different — we're all working towards a single goal: reaching more and more people.

On impact — I'm quite candid about this, and proud of it: even in today's world, we've proven that you can be completely honest, completely transparent, account for every rupee, work entirely within the legal framework, follow every statutory compliance — and still survive, and grow. That, to me, is one of our most important demonstrations: you can be 100% transparent, 100% accountable, fully visible, and if you're genuinely working for a cause, people will still come and support you.

A third, important point: BPA has shown that you have to keep innovating — you can't rely purely on traditional wisdom. For instance, we introduced the concept of Community-Based Rehabilitation. People didn't like it at first — when we presented the idea, the question was, why spend so much money training one individual at a time? Why not go out to the community instead of waiting for people to come to us? So that's what we did — we went out, identified people, assessed them, evaluated them, trained them, enabled and empowered them, right where they lived. It was a difficult concept to introduce, but I'm glad it took off — it became one of the largest such programmes launched anywhere in the world, eventually covering half a million people with disabilities across the length and breadth of the country, through a consortium of funders and partner organisations.

Second: we asked ourselves, why does BPA need to own everything? We have 18 campuses of our own, but we partner with more than 150 other organisations, most of them led by people with disabilities themselves, their families, or their well-wishers. Rather than building ourselves into one mighty, centralised institution, we chose to spread out — identifying local organisations, and giving them the support, technical know-how, software, hardware, whatever they need for their own development. That's proven enormously useful — we don't need to hold everything close to our own chest; we can support others to do it instead.

Fourth, and very important: we're an NGO, but I say, with real pride, that we're a pro-government NGO. I'd justify that this way — any NGO, however large, however capable, cannot draft law, cannot implement law, cannot make national policy, and cannot run mega-projects at a national scale; only government can do that. Unless you engage directly with the government system — sit with the people who hold the power and the responsibility, and motivate, guide, and inform them — you can't really shift the system itself. It's a bit like the Chakravyuha from the Mahabharata — you have to go in, like Abhimanyu, into that old system, and try to break through it from inside, towards a new awakening. BPA has had the privilege of working with nearly every relevant government committee in the country, across different ministries — law-drafting committees, planning commissions, national monitoring committees on education, skill development, rural development, inclusion, assistive devices, science and technology — and I've had the privilege of working alongside people like Dr. Abdul Kalam and many other distinguished figures in that process, because we believe that collective wisdom, working together, is what changes systems.

We don't want to simply work for a few hundred people and feel satisfied — we want to change the system itself. That's why, even as a pro-government organisation, we also do a great deal of advocacy, including going to court when needed: we tell government, this is your mandate, you're meant to implement it — and if you don't, we'll pursue a court order to see that it happens. It's a mix of transparency, accountability, working within the government system to strengthen it, and remaining a watchdog to ensure things are actually implemented. I think that's been one of BPA's more significant contributions to disability development in this country.

**Neharika Vohra:** Very, very important. What you're describing, essentially, is that if we genuinely want to unlock value and scale impact, we have to work with government — both as a watchdog, and as a partner helping them do the right thing. I think that's a valuable lesson, because there's often a sense in this space that you either work with government, or you don't — and what you've shown is that real scale requires working *with* government, not against it, and not purely *for* it either, but genuinely alongside it.

Something else that comes up often in the social impact world: funders sometimes pull organisations in directions shaped by their own priorities. Has that happened with BPA, and if so, how have you steered back to your own course?

**Bhushan Punani:** It really depends on the kind of organisation you're working with. In our case, the biggest advantage is that we work for a cause, for marginalised people, and most funders in our particular space aren't corporate-style funders with hidden agendas — they're mostly organisations founded by parents, or by people with disabilities themselves. Take Sightsavers, a major funder from the UK — its founder, Sir John Wilson, was himself blind. Or CBM, a large funder from Germany, founded by missionaries working in this field. Once funders themselves come from that world, they're working for a cause, not a hidden agenda.

Second, most of the people who fund us aren't looking for tangible returns for themselves, their shareholders, or their company — they're looking for social impact. Third, we're always very clear that we want funding for a specific purpose, not for our administration or for general salaries, and funders quickly realise we're not the kind of organisation they can pressure into changing direction, because we're clearly working in good faith for a genuine cause. We've fortunately never had a funder try to dictate terms to us. Most of our funders, as you'll see in our annual report, are themselves mission-driven organisations, working towards causes that closely match our own.

We also approach it the other way round: we identify our own needs, prepare our plans and programmes, and then go to a funder and say, here's our need — are you willing to support this? We don't go to a funder and ask what they want us to do, because we know our own work best — and the same logic applies to CSR funding. We look at a company's own stated priorities online, rather than approaching just any company and pitching whatever we happen to be doing. We look specifically for companies genuinely committed to the disability sector, who care about spending their money well. I won't hide this from your listeners: there are NGOs out there with arrangements where money changes hands and comes back in some form. BPA, very proudly, has never done anything against the law, against custom, or against basic ethics. We work only on projects, and with funding, that's entirely clean — money spent exactly the way it's meant to be spent, fully accountable, fully reportable. My trustees, my senior team, all of us

share that same mindset: we will not take a single rupee that has to be spent the wrong way. We only take what we call “good money” — pious money, meant for a clear purpose and a definite goal. We do get plenty of other offers, but turning those down has kept BPA secure, progressive, and, I’d say, genuinely honest and dedicated.

**Neharika Vohra:** That’s music to my ears, and I think it gives our listeners real hope — that it’s possible to be honest, and to avoid being pressured, as long as you stay clear about what you want and how you want to achieve it. One more question on this: how do you ensure that persons with disabilities retain real ownership and voice in the organisation’s direction — since, in some sense, BPA is doing this work on their behalf? How do you make sure their voice is always represented and counted?

**Bhushan Punani:** We follow a few firm principles. Key positions in our organisation — vice president, secretary — must be held by people with visual impairment. Across all our branches under the National Association for the Blind, in every district, it’s an unwritten but strictly followed rule that the general secretary must be a person with visual impairment. We also actively encourage gender balance among people with disabilities in these roles.

Second, wherever we work, we prefer to partner with organisations actually run by people with disabilities themselves, and we encourage and motivate them. As we speak, my team is currently in Jaipur, in Pune, in Ujjain — we always look for, and support, local organisations set up and managed by people with disabilities, and we let them run the local show; we simply support and encourage.

Third, and very important, we take our meetings — executive committee, general body — very seriously. It’s never just “let’s hold a meeting and be done with it.” There has to be a proper agenda, real discussion, recorded minutes, follow-up, and an action-taken report each time. That keeps our members genuinely engaged and involved. We also run WhatsApp and email groups to keep sharing information continuously. And, importantly, most of our literature — our website, our newsletters, our invitations — is produced in accessible formats, so people with vision impairment can read everything directly, whether on WhatsApp, email, or using screen-reader software like NVDA. All of that keeps people engaged — though I do agree that every organisation needs active, meaningful, outcome-oriented involvement from its stakeholders, as a basic principle.

**Neharika Vohra:** I think that’s really the key principle. A couple of questions about you now, since you’ve also been here 45 years. Looking back, are there two or three things you might have done differently in your own career? And separately, how are you thinking about the future? I’d like to ask you both, in hindsight, and looking forward.

**Bhushan Punani:** First, I’m genuinely happy with what I did. The only thing is, I might have been happier if I’d built an organisation that grew faster. We’ve grown at a fairly slow pace — about 18% a year, which is good, but not exceptional; we never doubled year over year, because we deliberately kept a measured pace. Second, looking back, I think we could have done better with earlier, deeper penetration into remote areas, with more participation from people further down the line, and with a system where need, rather than available money, drove our programming more directly. For many years we stayed confined largely to Ahmedabad, until we realised there are millions of people who’ll never come to Ahmedabad, or even to Gujarat, unless we go to them. For the last ten years, we’ve been reversing that — setting up small daycare centres in places like Kutch, Sabarkantha, Banaskantha, and various tribal-belt areas, essentially mini versions of BPA at a small, local scale. We’re correcting for that now, but I do wish we’d started it earlier.

On Community-Based Rehabilitation — the concept itself was excellent, but it wasn’t always sustainable, because we were the ones identifying needs, raising the money, and driving the process. Looking back, I think the model should have flipped: rather than us doing it for the community, it should have been the community’s own initiative, with us supporting it once they came forward — we could have waited for that initiative to emerge organically, and then backed it. We’re trying to correct that approach now.

As for the future — I was speaking to a group just this morning about five trends that are really reshaping our field. The first is technology. From this academic year, 2025–26, every student at BPA will be educated digitally — we could have done this five years earlier, but better late than never. The second is assistive devices and technology that can genuinely change lives; we’re investing heavily there now. The third is inclusivity — rather than people with disabilities adapting themselves to fit our systems, the system itself needs to adapt to them. So our new mandates, laws, and judgments are all being approached through an inclusivity lens.

And — instead of confining ourselves purely to the disability sector, why not open up more broadly, as a development organisation that gives everyone a chance to grow? Towards that, for the last three years, we’ve run statutory compliance workshops for other NGOs across Gujarat — we invite them, sit with them, and walk them through their legal obligations and responsibilities. We’ve also helped frame several of the relevant laws ourselves, though many still aren’t implemented as well as they should be — so we now have a dedicated advocacy division pushing to see that laws actually reach the people they’re meant for. And finally, and importantly — even with the number of schemes and programmes that exist, there’s a real lack of public awareness; many people who should benefit don’t even know their rights, entitlements, or the concessions available to them. We’re now using media far more proactively — social media, print, and electronic media — and we recently motivated the Prime Minister’s Office to commission

films on accessibility; nine have been made so far, and shown around the world. We also actively promote useful tools built by others, wherever we find them, that make the world more inclusive. So we're essentially flipping the table on what we couldn't get to for years: more focus on awareness, more on inclusivity, more on reach, and on sustaining the idea itself, not just the organisation — which is, frankly, the harder task.

**Neharika Vohra:** That's fascinating — you're going beyond just your own beneficiaries, into building the capacity of other NGOs entirely, helping anyone doing this kind of work. And your idea of the museum, creating an experience of vision in the dark, also sounds genuinely path-breaking — giving people without that lived experience a way to actually feel it.

One more question, and then I think we'll start wrapping up: succession planning. It's a known vulnerability, not just in the social impact sector, but across organisations of every kind. How has BPA planned for sustainability beyond your own tenure?

**Bhushan Punani:** I think this is a very important question — possibly the question every organisation should ask first, because it's where so many fall short. I'm honoured, and genuinely proud, that my own mentors planned succession very deliberately. When Jagdish Patel was only around 50, he brought in myself, Nandini Rawal, Vimal Thawani, and several others — Harish Panchal, Bharat Joshi, Kandere Desai, Arindam, Dharmendra — all groomed to be tomorrow's leaders.

What we did, in turn: in the first generation that followed, it's the three of us — myself, Nandini Rawal, and Vimal Thawani — as directors, alongside our trustees, Raju Vaishya and others, including Rohit Bhai. In our own time, we've built a layer of deputy directors — we were three; they now number five, all extremely well-qualified, well-meaning people, all trained abroad, all from strong family backgrounds. Three hold doctorates; the others have multiple postgraduate degrees — Dharmendra alone has four postgraduate qualifications, and Bharat has six degrees, including time spent at an institute in London. One of them studied in the USA and did research on human rights; Arindam comes from Shantiniketan, and Dharmendra is very well established in management. So, within our own working lifetimes, we've already built a group of people ready to take this organisation forward — and I'm proud to say they're often more efficient, more effective, and better educated than we were at their stage.

What's more, their own families now work alongside us too — in several cases, spouses have also joined BPA, so these are genuinely "family people" within the organisation now. They come from very diverse regional and educational backgrounds — some trained in the US, some in the UK, others at Shantiniketan — and they're all now deputy directors. To take the logic further, we already have a third line ready too — a group we call chief coordinators, managers, and campus managers, many of whom have also been sent abroad, to Perkins and other institutes, and are well motivated to take things forward.

They're being trained directly by leaders in the field. Akhil Paul, for example, was mentored by us, and went on to head an international organisation based in India. Mira Joshi runs our mental health programme; Jigna heads our development programme; Kurupa and Deepa are among the many other very well-qualified people we have. So even beyond the second line, a third is already in place.

We've been very fortunate — I do believe God has sent us a remarkable group of well-meaning people. And I'd be failing in my duty if I didn't add one more thing: everyone I've named, and many more besides — even our school principals, many of whom hold PhDs and are well established in their fields — aren't only running their own projects; every single one of them is also a fundraiser. That's quite rare for an NGO. Most organisations treat fundraising as the job of a dedicated fundraising department, full stop. At BPA, from the watchman to the president of the institution, everyone is involved in resource mobilisation — and I don't mean only money; sometimes it's other kinds of resources too.

That's made a real difference. We do have a formal fundraising division, for accounting and for sending out appeals, but from my executive director, to project directors, to the president, to project managers — everyone contributes to resource mobilisation. And lastly, very importantly: everyone speaks the same language, everyone shares a deep sense of dedication, and, fortunately, we don't have interpersonal conflicts. We don't draw swords and settle scores. We hold a high degree of mutual respect — we call it the "BPA family," a genuinely large family, and our second guiding phrase is "keep BPA shining." If you look at the media, we're there almost every day, one way or another; our social media presence is strong; our resource mobilisation and fund management are well regarded; on statutory compliance, frankly, I think we deserve some kind of award — with this many staff and this much complexity, we have no pending court cases at all, barring one income-tax matter that's already been resolved. For an organisation of this scale to have no outstanding legal proceedings, I think that's the grace of God, and the quality of the team we've built. We're a fairly classic example that good work follows from good people, good intentions, good spirit, and a genuine team — and BPA has, I think quite justifiably, proven that you can work as a team, grow as a team, and stay together as a team, without ever turning on each other. We're not here to fight or settle scores — we're here to reach people with disabilities, and to a large extent, we are.

**Neharika Vohra:** Wonderful. So, with everything you do, how do you take care of yourself? You're still smiling, still generous, still giving your time and effort — you're even on the boards of a few for-profit companies. What's your secret?

**Bhushan Punani:** First, this was always a choice I made — I wanted to come here, and I did. So I have no regrets about money I might have earned elsewhere, or anything I might have lost along the way; I only think about what I've gained. Second, I believe deeply in yoga and meditation — I start every day with both, and that keeps me going. Third, I try to focus on the positive in people, not the negative. Fourth, I have my own way of working through anger, or difficult or discouraging thoughts, or setbacks — I find solace in remembering the good we've done. It's always better to smile at things than to frown at them.

And fortunately, I have a wonderful family. My wife was a lawyer at the High Court — an additional public prosecutor — and my daughter is a lawyer too; they're both extremely supportive, genuinely decent people, and honestly, the whole BPA family is just as supportive. That's why, even today, I work from ten in the morning to about half past eight at night, and I'm in even on Sundays, until around four. But it never feels like a burden — it's the sense of accomplishment, the results you can see, that keeps you going. Most of us, by the grace of God, have had good health, and I think most of us are genuinely blessed — God seems to give us the strength to keep doing this work, and we should always stay grateful to the people who brighten our days and let us do good things. That missionary zeal — working for a cause, not for personal gain, not for profit, but for bringing a smile to someone else's face — that's what keeps us going.

**Neharika Vohra:** That's lovely to hear, very heartening. Any last thoughts you'd like to share? Thank you so much for your time, but please, anything else you'd like to add.

**Bhushan Punani:** Yes — to everyone listening now, or who might listen later: don't always think about yourself. Don't dwell on what you've achieved, what you've gained, what car you drive, what house you live in, what your family looks like, or what your bank balance is. Think instead about what you've done for others. Have you justified your life by doing something genuinely good for someone who needed you? Look around — there are a great many people far less fortunate than you. A small helping hand, a little support, a little guidance, can change the course of someone's life. Let's not always think only of ourselves — think of the wider world around us, and try to do our own small part. We can't change the whole world, but each of us can become the beginning of real change in the lives of many people.

The moment you step away from the temptation of accumulating property, investments, vehicles, and possessions, and instead invest your time, energy, and effort in doing good for others, things genuinely change. You can't, after all, eat more than you actually need — so why not do something that brings you real, intrinsic satisfaction, something that makes you genuinely happy, genuinely smile? When a girl I once taught tells me she won a silver medal at the Paralympics in Japan, and is now an Assistant Director; when a student tells me he won a medal in chess, and is now the Taluka Development Officer of Ahmedabad — that makes my day, that makes my life feel purposeful. You feel you're living for something — some definite cause, some real goal. Most people live only for themselves. The moment you start living for others, you start making a real difference.

**Neharika Vohra:** Thank you so much for your time and your words of wisdom — I hope all of us are able to learn from this, and grow because of it. We wish you, and the whole BPA family, the very best, and hope to keep learning from, and being inspired by, you. Thank you.

**Bhushan Punani:** Thank you very much. Thank you.