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GOONJ

**A mission where one man's trash is being
made into another man's possession**

COVER STORY

CLOTH FOR DIGNITY



Cloth sorting according to the size, gender, etc.

Goonj, a Delhi-based not-for-profit organisation believes in dignity and not charity. Tells Smita Singh...

Roti, *Kapda or Makaan* (food, clothing and shelter) are the three most basic needs of a human being. While we all agree with this statement, somehow the focus is always on food and shelter. Even the government concentrates only on these two aspects. So it provides subsidised food for the poor and under various schemes such as the Indira Awas Yojna which provides housing. But why is there no Indira Kapda Yojna? Clothing as a basic need is ignored. Yet, seeing a naked person makes us uncomfortable. We squirm. Delhi-based social entrepre-

neur Anshu Gupta, decided to do more than just squirm. He along with his wife Meenakshi, set up Goonj, a not-for-profit organisation in 1999 with the sole aim of providing clothes and dignity to the underprivileged. What started with just 67 clothes from their own wardrobe has today become a movement with 100 tonnes of clothes being dispatched across the country every month.

THE BEGINNING

It was on a cold winter night in Delhi that Gupta met Habib, an old man whose job it was to collect and dispose of unclaimed bodies for the Delhi Police. At that time Gupta was working as a freelance journalist and he met Habib in regard to a story. Habib's little daughter told Gupta that at night when she felt really cold she hugged a dead body and slept. This statement left a deep mark on Gupta and made him realise the importance of clothes, especially winter wear. "If earthquakes and floods are treated as natural disasters, why not winters. Every year a large number of people die of cold," says Gupta.

"PEOPLE THINK THAT BY GIVING AWAY EVERYTHING THEY DON'T NEED, THEY ARE DONATING. THEY ARE NOT DONATING, THEY ARE DISCARDING"

A few years after this incident he set up Goonj. What makes Goonj different is their philosophy that charity undermines dignity. Clothes are not donated but are instead rewarded for work done. Under Goonj's 'Cloth for Work' programme, villagers undertake community work and as a reward for their efforts are given clothes. Local NGOs help villagers identify a pressing development need of their area. It could be digging a well, cleaning a pond, building a road or anything else that their village needs. Villagers are then encouraged to do *shramdaan* (community work) and as payment receive clothes. At least two pairs of clothes for each member of the family are handed over. "We have managed to reposition cloth as a development resource instead of a traditional charitable item," explains Gupta.

'Cloth for Work' has resulted in villagers of Khandawa in Madhya Pradesh clearing their fields of pebbles and stones and making the land more fertile, they have also dug up a well. Similarly, in Madhya Pradesh's Dabia village, the local community got together and cleaned up an old well. In a village in Bihar they helped repair a road, while in another the whole village was cleaned up.

NOT CHARITY BUT DIGNITY

Goonj is working towards reducing the gap between what is given and what is needed. "People think that by giving away everything they don't need, they are donating.

They are not donating, they are discarding," says Gupta. Goonj's collection centres receive everything from ties to high-heeled shoes – sometimes even just a shoe.

Workers and volunteers at Goonj's Delhi centre in Sarita Vihar diligently sort through all the clothes. These are then separated as per gender, age and cultural and climatic conditions. For instance, nighties are sent to West Bengal while only sarees are sent to Bihar. Those in perfect condition are sent for the 'Cloth for Work' programme, while others are washed and repaired and sent as relief material to earthquake and flood affected areas. Not a single dirty or torn piece of cloth is ever given away. If a button is missing, it is replaced. If a shirt is torn, it is repaired. If a stain cannot be removed, the piece of cloth is put in a separate pile to be recycled. "Handing over dirty or torn clothes will undermine the dignity of the receiver. We will not do that," emphasises Gupta.

Nothing is wasted at the Goonj centre. Oversized clothes are cut and used to make *sujni* (layers of cloth are stitched together to make a blanket or a mattress). These are typically outsourced to villages where women earn Rs. 30 per *sujni* and on an average make four or five a day, earning an income of up to Rs. 4,500 a month. These are sold in villages as an alternative to blankets at half the price of a blanket and are also sent to natural disaster affected areas. Moreover, they help utilise all the torn, stained and wasted clothes which would otherwise just get dumped.



Turning old cotton cloth into sanitary pads

COVER STORY

CLOTH FOR DIGNITY

SCHOOL TO SCHOOL

'School to School' is another flagship programme of Goonj. Here books, water bottles, tiffin boxes, toys, stationery etc., are collected from urban schools and reused in schools in slums and villages.

Children going to rich urban schools don't even realise how much they waste things. Pencils and erasers are discarded by the dozen. Half-used notebooks are thrown in the bin. Tiffin boxes, water bottles and school bags change as per the latest cartoon character. But all these things are precious to children going to schools in slums or even in villages.

Goonj has helped convert several anganwadis into colourful and playful places. "An anganwadi worker said: *pehle baccha aata nahi tha ab jaata nahi hai* (first children used to not come, now they don't go)," says Gupta proudly.

Often books that are of no use to school children are also donated, such as fiction for adults or books on management or engineering. These books are sold at camps held at educational institutes.

NOT JUST A PIECE OF CLOTH

During his travels through villages Gupta realised that during their monthly periods, women went through hell as they did not have access to a clean piece of cloth. Women used everything from grass to ash to gurney bags and rice husk to absorb the flow. They used the dirtiest piece of cloth as they associated menses with impurity. Net result:

they suffered from infections, itching, boils etc. The more he and his team discussed the issue the more convinced they were that they had to find a solution.

"Here we were sitting on piles of clothes. We knew we could somehow come up with something," comments Gupta. So in 2004, the 'Not Just a Piece of Cloth' programme was started where Goonj makes sanitary napkins out of old clothes which are cleaned, dried and then cut into smaller pieces and rolled into a napkin. These are then packed as a set of five and sold at a nominal rate in villages. Urban women are encouraged to sponsor rural women under the '60 Dignified Days' campaign where for Rs. 250 an urban woman can sponsor a rural woman's napkin needs for a whole year.

Menstruation is considered a taboo topic in India and most women are uncomfortable talking about it. Even the government health departments are not doing enough to take care of this problem that makes women feel ashamed. "These days of shame and helplessness need to be dignified," says Gupta. Goonj wants to reach at least 50,000 women this year through its 'Not Just a Piece of Cloth' campaign, providing them a hygienic option for those days.

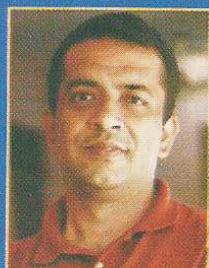
The World Bank recognised Goonj's initiative and awarded it the Global Development Market Place Award in 2007. In 2009, the campaign won Changemakers Innovation Award and in 2012 the Edelgive Social Honour (See box: Goonj Awards & Rewards).



Sorting of toys & games

BESIDES THE DONATIONS, GOONJ UTILISES ITS OWN RESOURCES TO FUND ITS ACTIVITIES. NOTHING IS WASTED AND EVERYTHING IS RECYCLED. OVERSIZED CLOTHES ARE MADE INTO BAGS, FOLDERS...

NOT JUST A PIECE OF CLOTH BUT DIGNITY



*Anshu Gupta
founder, Goonj*

Popularly known as the Clothing Man, Anshu Gupta left a corporate job in 1998 to found GOONJ with a mission to make clothing a matter of concern and to bring it among the list of subjects for the development sector. He is creating a mass movement for recycling and reuse of tones of waste material by channelising it from the cities to the villages, as a resource for rural development. A powerful and

inspiring speaker, Anshu addresses many national and international forums to bring clothing on the development agenda and to motivate the youth to take action. He is a regular speaker in many parts of the world on innovation, leadership, village development, power of youths and social entrepreneurship. Goonj is considered one of the leading social enterprises in India, the largest non-monetary resource agency and people also call it one of the largest civic participation movement. More so, many organisations around the world have now started replicating Goonj's initiatives. Excerpts from the interview...

WAS 'CLOTH FOR WORK' THE FIRST SCHEME THAT YOU STARTED?

In the initial days we called it Vastradaan meaning donation of clothes. However, whenever I used to speak to our partner NGOs I used to say that clothes should not be given for free and that they should be given as reward for some work done. And it wasn't as if people were not working, they were. But they used to work at one place and at some other place clothes used to be distributed and the whole thing was not linked. So they didn't feel that they were being rewarded for their efforts. It was much later that we realised that we could actually use the clothes as a currency. So you work for the betterment of your community and in return we give you and your family clothes. That's how 'cloth for work' evolved. Even the work they do is decided by them. Sitting here in Delhi, we don't decide what each village needs. May be a village needs a new well or may be it needs to clean its pond. The villagers decide what they need and they work towards it. They contribute in terms of labour and sometimes even resources, we reward them with clothes.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES THAT YOU HAVE FACED OVER THE YEARS?

The biggest challenge has been the mindset of people. When you are constructing a new building it is always easier when you start on a flat piece of land. You dig the

foundation and start constructing. But when you are constructing at a place where there was already a building, it's more difficult as you first have to demolish the standing building and that's exactly what's happened with us. We have had to demolish the existing mindset of the people where for hundreds of years they have thought that as givers of clothes they are donors. Whereas we always say that you don't donate you discard. Also the person who receives thinks he is getting a donation whereas we say that he has earned it with dignity. The other problem is of course money. I know several people who say they support two different organisations. So they send clothes and other materials to us but give the money to another organisation. They need to understand that I can share several emotional stories but at the end of the day there are massive logistics involved and that needs money. For instance, transferring a truck load of clothes to Assam for flood relief costs Rs. 95,000. There are salaries and rent to be paid. We are operating on minimum costs possible but still money is needed.

More than 50 per cent of our donations come from individuals. It's all word of mouth. We don't have a fund-raising department. People go to our website and our Facebook page.

HOW DID THE VARIOUS INITIATIVES COME ABOUT?

Everything evolves. For instance, we realised the problem of the sanitary napkin but we didn't know we were sitting on the solution. Often when we gave clothes to women we used to tell them that if it is oversized, they could make pads out of it for themselves. Then we thought why don't we do it ourselves. We started talking to villagers and realised that it was a huge problem and we could really help out.

Similarly, we always collected school material and distributed it but there was no method to it. Then we decided to connect schools to schools. We started giving toys to Anganwadis to make them a more child-friendly place. We have been told that attendance in Anganwadi schools has gone up because of the toys.

WHICH OF THESE INITIATIVES IS THE CLOSEST TO YOUR HEART?

'Not just a piece of cloth' is the closest to my heart as it has to do with the dignity of women. We have been working on it for several years now but there is still a lot of work to be done. Next is 'cloth for work'. It is a huge concept. We are almost creating a parallel economy now. We are talking about an economy which is not cash based but is trash based. A large number of development activities can happen where cloth is the new currency.

COVER STORY

CLOTH FOR DIGNITY

GOONJ AWARDS & REWARDS



CNN IBN's 'Real Heros' award to Anshu Gupta

- **NOV 2012:** 'Social Entrepreneur of the Year Award' to Anshu Gupta, founder, GOONJ by Schwab Foundation, a sister concern of World Economic Forum
- **JUNE 2012:** GDN-Japanese Award for Most Innovative Development Project
- **FEB 2012:** Edelgive social honour for the initiative 'Not Just a Piece of Cloth'
- **DEC 2011:** SAFRG award for initiatives in raising resources
- **NOV 2010:** Listed in 'Forbes' as one of 'India's Most Powerful Rural Entrepreneurs'
- **MAY 2010:** 'Innovation for India' award by Marico for developing innovative solution by using old cloth and other material
- **MARCH 2010:** Jamnalal Bajaj CFBP Award for 'Fair Practices'
- **NOV 2009:** 'Cloth for Work' wins international Lien i3 Challenge Award
- **JUNE 2009:** 'Not Just a Piece of Cloth' wins Changemaker's Innovation Award
- **MARCH 2009:** CNN IBN's 'Real Heros' award to Anshu Gupta in women welfare segment
- **MARCH 2008:** 'India NGO of the Year' award; in a nationwide search & selection by Resource Alliance
- **MAY 2007:** Goonj's sanitary napkin project 'Not Just a Piece of Cloth' wins World Bank's Global Development Market Place Award
- **JULY 2007:** Goonj's first initiative 'VASTRA-SAMMAN' recognised as one of 'The Good Practices' in Dubai International Awards

CASH OUT OF TRASH

While Goonj receives some funding from individuals, it is not sufficient. Although Goonj operates on minimum costs and is run efficiently, money is still needed to take care of all the logistics. Maximum costs are incurred in transportation. Clothes, books, utensils all have to be collected from various places, sorted, packed and then transported to villages across the country. Goonj has dropping centres in 14 cities including Delhi-NCR, Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, Bhubneshwar, Chandigarh and Bangalore. All of this costs money. Add to this the rent for the premises and salaries of its 150 employees (90 per cent of them are women).

In the last 13 years Goonj has spent a total of just about Rs. 30 lakh of which maximum has been spent on transportation. On their own infrastructure they have spent nothing. The only things that have been bought are a few laptops and printers. The office has tables and chairs of different colours and sizes as they have all been donated. "When a new member joins, he sits on the floor with a carton for a desk till we manage to get a table and chair. That's just how it is," explains Gupta.

Besides the donations, Goonj utilises its own resources to fund its activities. Nothing is wasted and everything is recycled. Oversized clothes are made into bags, folders, mobile pouches and the like which are then sold at exhibitions and camps held across the city. Paper bags are made of old newspapers. Goonj even collects paper from photocopiers across the city. Mostly the paper is used on only one side, they make notebooks out of this. All the staple pins are removed carefully and collected. They are then sold for Rs. 30 a kg.

Goonj has shown that with a little bit of innovation and thinking one man's waste can be converted into another man's possession. As it continues on its mission of providing clothes for all, Goonj, in its own way is helping bridge the have, have-not divide.



Anshu Gupta motivating & interacting with the people of Alamnagar, Bihar at the time of implementation