



SOCIAL ENTREPRENEUR ANSHU GUPTA

# The Material Man

TEXT: SWATI BHASIN

## A social innovator takes on the charge of clothing the needy

It was while Anshu Gupta was on a freelance assignment with the *Deccan Chronicle* on a bitterly cold winter night in Old Delhi that he realised how extremely privileged he was. He stumbled upon a barely clad man trying to keep the cold away with liquor. It was a troubling narrative. But for the twentysomething Gupta those images gave an insight into the importance of clothing: the lack of which could lead to death; the presence of which was a road to dignity. Not long afterwards, leaving a job with a blue chip company, Gupta set up Goonj (literally echo) devoting his life to collecting clothes contributed by the advantaged and distributing them to those in need.

From a niggling idea that thought has now become

a streamlined movement. Gupta, a strapping forty year-old with the build of a basketball player, is at the hub of a collection centre-cum-office-cum-recycling unit in Delhi's trendy Sarita Vihar. In a very functional office where the walls are decorated with precious awards, charts showing schedules, goals, Gupta and a team of five, along with 300 volunteers, collects, coordinates and dispatches clothes. From the 67 items that Gupta initially picked out of his own wardrobe Goonj presently provides 70,000 kgs of clothes, utensils, school material and old furniture every month to various parts of India. Helped by 250 partner groups Goonj's collection centres operate in seven cities distributing to 21 states. Looking back, Gupta says: "I never followed any conventions. I didn't know anybody who could guide me. I made my own rules for approaching people, giving presentations and fundraising."

It was uncharted territory for this powerful



PHOTO: PUNEET SINGH

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entrepreneur but the results have been satisfying. The size and the scope of the operation have grown dramatically. Contributed clothes are divided according to gender, age, size and other demographic and geographic needs. And the art of giving has extended beyond clothes to toys, books for children, electronic gadgets and office furniture. A separate unit is dedicated to making sanitary napkins for rural women from sun-dried cotton cloth filled with unused material donated by export houses. Five units are packed together and sold from ₹ 1 to ₹ 5 depending on the spending capacity of the women in the villages. Presently, Goonj produces around 200,000 napkins every month for distribution to the rural hinterland. Additionally, meetings are held to educate village women on hygiene and destroy myths about menstruation.

Gupta never intended Goonj to be an organisation that pitied the deprived. Respecting the dignity of the needy has been his mantra. That’s the reason why the projects and schemes being put in place enhance the receiver’s self-worth. The organisation’s Cloth for Work initiative, for instance, ensures that clothes collected for villagers are not distributed gratis. The villagers need to ‘earn’ the clothes just like wages. In the remote areas of Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Orissa typically villagers



collectively construct bore wells, bridges and repair damaged roads in exchange for value-added clothes. Similar guidelines are also developed when toys and books are being distributed to children.

The core philosophy of Goonj lies in not wasting anything that is contributed. If it is not worthy of distribution it is all transformed creatively by untrained hands: audio tapes are used to decorate handbags, colourful stress balls are made from swatches, mats and mattresses from waste material are some of the items sold in fund-raising camps or distributed in villages.

Innovation and strategising has been a key element of Gupta’s thinking. From an empty till, Goonj today has a turnover of around ₹ 40 million: around 50 percent comes from individual contributions, the rest from the sale of products. “People invest their money and they get happiness in return, he says.

It’s a trade-off which that has worked well which is why Gupta prefers to call himself a social entrepreneur instead of a social worker because he knows he has to generate enough money in order to meet the basic requirements of logistics — staffing and transportation. “I really do not believe in charity. That is why,” says this iconic entrepreneur-activist, “we have to change our thinking from donor’s pride to receiver’s dignity.” ■

*More on Anshu Gupta at [www.goonj.org](http://www.goonj.org)*