

Dear Friends,

I am standing here today to talk about taking initiative. I repeat - standing because this would have never happened if I had not taken an initiative 17 years back. I met with an accident, was on the bed for a year, was admitted thrice in the hospital. In fact every time I went to the hospital with a hope that my doctor would now allow me to walk, he would admit me. There came a time when the doctors told my father- " He'll never be able to walk on his own ! Buy him crutches ! I refused...I was 17 that time ! I didn't want crutches. I told the doctor " crutches to me means dependence ... it means that I may be able to do a lot of important work but sooner or later I would become dependent on them and then I would never make an attempt to walk myself.."

**The doctor was actually angry with me. I was very popular among fellow patients and nurses because I never complained about my pain and my bed used to be a place for playing cards, where many patients walking with crutches used to come to enjoy themselves. But the doctor never liked me because my father never bribed him. In Dehra Doon hospital his rate was Rs. 400/- to do a correct operation. He didn't get that money and my foot is working incorrectly - till date..**

I was forced to leave my science studies as I was unable to attend classes but never wanted to waste my one year so I prepared for BA, sitting on the bed and got the permission to appear in the examination. For that I had to walk, I had to go to the college to write my examination. On April 13th 1988 I filled up an old socks with a lot of cotton, tied that to the foot to make it walkable, I took a hockey stick and tried to walk, I fell and got up a number of times but three days later with my brother's support - I was walking. I appeared for the exam and got about 61%. NOT bad.. the doctor was wrong. .I recollect this as my first major initiative, which really shaped up my life. About 6 years back one of the 32 senior doctors of Delhi, whom I've met for my foot, told me that your foot has a life of maximum three years, my mother, my father, my wife were sad - somewhere me too - but I didn't believe him that time and I have no reason to believe him today.. the first initiative for walking on my own has made me like this..

It was an initiative I took against all odds. That to me is the very basis of taking an initiative, that one needs to go beyond conventional logic and rationale and believe in one's own power to change things.

I belong to a middle class family. My father used to work with Military Engineering Service (MES) infamously called the Money Earning Services. So obviously his values, and ethics were never liked by most of his colleagues. He was always a barrier in the cycle of corruption and scientific distribution of commission and cuts. So life was never smooth for us. He was on a good post but in a huge family being the eldest one he had more responsibilities than resources. When I was about ten years old we went through the toughest phase of our lives. Even at that age I knew it was tough because when you count your chappaties before eating...what else do you call that. There was a brief phase when even while living in a big city we had to buy wood for cooking and that too on a per meal basis. I remember bringing a kg of wood for 35 paise and running fast so that the neighbors didn't come to know about this. My mother is here, the greatest source of inspiration, the proud woman that she is, I remember her efforts to make sure that the smoke didn't go out. That was a question of dignity and self-respect. She has always taught us that these are the biggest assets of a middle class family.

**From a very early age my father trusted me a lot, he used to say "my father was honest, I might be 5 % corrupt and you can't be more than 10% I k, now it. Try not to be even this much. A great thought, a trust with flexibility but with an outer limit. Most of us have to marry values and practicality in our day to day living, whether its about teaching your child to tell the truth or dealing with corruption in public offices. I guess this was my father's way of dealing with life.**

It started quite early in my life as well. I have often been asked why and how did I decide to give up a corporate job and start a voluntary organisation. Why do an impractical thing like this?. I guess an initiative begins with one's need to figure out a way to deal with the basics of how you define life. Whether you are going to take the path which your parents, friends and everyone else around you has taken, or want to deal with things a bit differently. It's not as heroic as it sounds. It begins with day to day things, whether you want to pull up your car window when a beggar comes close to your car. Whether you are happy to see your house spic and span but walk on the badly littered roads crowded with homeless people.

That practical formulae about honesty apart, there was one other key thing my parents ingrained in me. I don't remember any incident in my life when my father or mother said- Ye nahi ho sakta ( It's not possible or it can not happen) . But I believe in this...I firmly believe that when the attitude is positive you take initiatives..

If everyone begins with 'This can't happen' or 'this is not possible', then how will anything ever begin. Going back to the example of my foot, I remember that even after almost six months of operation there was a wound in my foot and the moment I used to put it down, blood used to ooze out...all the doctors had given up.. my father was not ready to believe that I'll never walk.. he used to make attempts...one day he decided to experiment by putting some urine on the wound and that worked, that really stopped the blood . It was his relentless efforts and a belief that Anshu has to walk...it was his positive attitude..

Goonj is alive and running for the last six years, without an organised structure of funds. I have been told time and again by funding agencies that my concept is interesting but it goes outside the realm of their funding norms. I can tell you categorically, it is running purely because we never said or thought " that it is not possible "

In my work I am often asked why work on clothes? Clothes I think is a person's dignity. I've closely experienced typical middle class dignity issues, I can imagine what dignity means for the people who do not possess much wealth. I know my mother's thoughts on dignity while taking care of the smoke in the kitchen, I know my father's fighter attitude while dealing with my injury. I feel its important to talk about these things when I am talking about initiative because its these small instances which taught me to take care of the smallest possible details while taking an initiative called GOONJ..

Today when we teach people who give material that only the good and wearable clothes should go to the beneficiaries or when we pay close attention to the attire, culture and habits of people while distributing material, the lesson about dignity is always in my mind. I strongly believe that being needy doesn't mean being a beggar. Starting an initiative is not enough, one has to struggle constantly to keep the momentum and the focus in mind.

It's easy and I dare say rather common place to see people taking initiatives for themselves. We all do, for our survival and progress. What I want to talk about is, taking an initiative for others. That is a real test of your commitment. That is when you need to have a basic understanding of attitudes, problems and circumstances which may be very different from your own.

It is initiative taking in the public domain, which I think is the life force of any society. We need more and more people to take initiatives for others. The society is full of people who will pay 500 rupees to find out the status of their file but you need a person who takes an initiative for talking about right to information. We all criticize haphazard progress but you need someone who takes an initiative to organise people and oppose big dams. A big part of our rural population go miles to fetch water from the dried rivers but when a person takes an initiative to make small check dams, it benefits lakhs of people. You need more Aruna Roy's, Medha Patkar and Rajendra Singh's in this world.

All of them started on a small level but have created an impact, have been able to touch the lives of lakhs of people, people who might not be in a position to take initiatives but are the one's who

urgently need a helping hand. And believe me these are the people who later work as your force and help you turn your initiative into a success.

Understand your value. You are not just an individual. There are thousands of people with you. It's a net where every thread matters. If you don't vote and go on a picnic on the day of voting, please understand it matters because you are not the only one, lakhs of other threads are also like you and are damaging the net.

Let me give you an example- A dalit person somehow gets a chance to study and he becomes a scientist. He goes back to his village as a part of the national literacy mission. He feels bad and thinks that his education has changed him, he is the most privileged one now, but why can't more people from his village benefit similarly. He leaves his job, goes through the opposition and alienation, which is the first stage of taking an initiative. In a few years he has reached the final stage where people are replicating his work, where not only, every single child of his village is going to a school but all the streets have lights and the village boasts of self sufficient industries. Kutambakam village of Tamilnadu and the panchayat leader Elango Rangaswamy are now a role model for lakhs of villages and hundreds of panchayat leaders who are trying to replicate this success story, once an initiative by an individual..

So why don't we see more and more people taking initiatives? I feel taking up an initiative, involves a cost- of owning the cause, of becoming accountable for its success and failures and the entire struggle in between. Early on in GOONJ.. when I used to go door to door to collect material, I was asked many questions - about my intentions, my personal life, my objectives. In short my entire credibility was put through the scanner and here I thought I was trying to do a good deed. When you work for others, everybody questions you. You question yourself- Why am I doing this? For money, for fame? Because I am frustrated, because I can make a difference. Even the people for whom you take an initiative want to ask- Why? What is your motive behind doing this? You have questions from every where- Even today I am held to account for every material which people were going to throw out of their homes anyway. My experience around starting GOONJ.. has shown me that when one goes against the wind, its not only lonely but its also frustrating when your own friends and family sometimes don't understand. You have to be really restless with a passion, to take up an initiative.

There are three stages around taking up any kind of initiative, however big or small.....each of these I have faced thoroughly in my personal life and in the cycle of GOONJ..

**The first stage is of opposing** - is the toughest where almost everybody opposes you, criticize you, doubts you, discourages you, advises you against what you are doing, your integrity is at stake and you spoil your personal life... people pretend but don't always come with you except one or two very rare true friends. Initiative almost always begins alone.

**The second stage is of silence** - People try to understand what are you upto... it starts making some sense, instead of opposing they come in observing mode and some time in suggestion mode...may be the easiest of the three stages

**The third stage when they come with you** - this success of an initiative.. it takes time to reach here but you reach here if you are determined, committed, trust yourself and others, learn from mistakes, believe in your idea and are open to criticism.. All these are important components of success. And I feel success is when people try to replicate your work and the idea..

It's not easy to become a thinker but certainly becoming a doer is tougher.. because when you add Action to a thought it becomes an initiative.. so you put in some extra efforts..

6 years back I left Escorts as Manager corporate communication and then decided not to go for a job and initiated **GOONJ..** I experienced almost every aspect of the first stage I just mentioned. It

came from people who said "if I have to work for people I should rather do some GOOD work- instead of distributing cloth." Good work meant education, providing food, running for AIDS awareness but not cloth distribution. Some friends commented- " to tune bhi shuru kar diya " because most people think that NGO means money. Someone commented on my nice cotton shirt- " ye dekho NGO wala ja raha hai " because only Corporate guys are supposed to wear Allen Solly. My mother was surprised to see the piles and piles of old clothes some in very dirty and torn shape in our house. My father was trying to understand why he spent so much money & energy in supporting me for studying mass communication twice & a Post graduation in economics. My father in law was worried because he married his daughter to a manager in Escorts but now his son in law dealt with old clothes and foot wears of people. I remember my father often suggesting me to pick up a job and continue my work in **GOONJ**.. side by side. I remember my Father in law coming with marked advertisement of big corporate companies for the positions in corporate communication. It was tough to say no to the people who trust you and love you so much but I didn't give myself any other option. In this phase of initiative I spoke about friends. Yes I had them. Meenakshi my wife, a support I can't explain and a friend Ajay, my parents too, who trusted me, made suggestions but never opposed.. not a typical parental act.

We sold a double bed and converted a bed room into a store cum office, we used to wash the collected clothes in the evening, we used to go and collect them from all over Delhi. Imagine the initiative started with 67 clothes, now talks about thousands of KGs.

But there was a second stage, which thankfully came a bit early in my work. I found people observing and suggesting and some of them even tried to join the initiative..

It's my third stage today, being called for this talk is a proof of that. When a 65 years old retired Railway Board member started taking care of **GOONJ's** Gurgaon operation without even a single penny of help or when a volunteer moved to Bangalore and started operations there in a major manner on her own. It's not only a success of an initiative called **GOONJ**.., its more a success of these people. Thousands of people know **GOONJ**.. in Gurgaon today but you need one person to take an initiative to make it happen, others join and in the chain you get more people to take initiatives.

Back in my childhood days we had a student parliament in our school. I was all set to become the Prime Minister in class 8th. A teacher suddenly changed the rules and said this year the selection will be on the basis of a debate. I participated and got a standing applause but lost.. I knew I would loose. I knew that when you try to point out mistakes of your teachers it is something unfortunately most of them do not accept. And I was quite known for this so even after giving a good lecture I had to loose. In class 8th I demanded voting and I won. It was a good learning process . It taught me the importance of raising voice, it taught me that you must initiate action against whatever you don't think is right.

It happened again when I was in class 11 and tried to correct my teacher on physics formulas - out of frustration he hit me - the first and last hit in my life - I told him I'll make sure that he was transferred..

Imagine me a 11th class student, who didn't even know a Block development officer, whose career had not even begun, talking like that. My father was unhappy with the teacher but he was more unhappy with me. He told me two things, which I remember till date- First : that a teacher is a teacher, don't agree with him on wrong things but while showing displeasure keep it in mind that he is your teacher and the second : the more important one, Never say anything which you can't do, a great learning. I certainly don't claim that it was an initiative against atrocities of a teacher. As a comparatively matured person today I feel bad for the language I used but somewhere feel satisfied that I alone raised a voice and pointed out mistakes which were also affecting 40 other students.

I wonder why we underestimate ourselves. I wonder why do we think that in the crowd of crores of people what if we don't act, what if we are not present. I wonder why don't we understand that we are part of a society, we can and must play a role.

Gandhi was one, Vinoba was one, Sardar Patel was one...these are indeed big names and I have mentioned some names earlier, they are all individuals...so one matters...that is the key to taking an initiative, to believe that an individual does matter.

You don't need a degree from IIT or IIM to help people, never think that the person who calls himself a social worker, is the only best friend of the society, its only his responsibility or right to serve people. I strongly believe that helping people is the only work which anyone can do - education, financial background, family background, your physique, cast, community, gender, age all of these may matter for any other work but not in this.

My experience of building up GOONJ.. has reaffirmed my belief in this. I have no trained social worker in my group. None of my volunteers is an MSW (Master in social Work). There are school students, housewives, aged people above 65, there are IIM pass outs, corporate guys who have this pet phrase " I'm very busy, I don't have time " The only common factor among them is that they all take the initiative for someone else.

We all know that the society exists and progresses because of some initiatives taken by a few people. We get to know about some of them - most are lost in the crowd - there are a lot of us who want to do some good but are apprehensive, direction less and desperately looking for a fraternity to do something.. You can begin with yourself - you initiate, they will come with you - It's only when you take the initiative that you find like-minded people who are looking for the right company to make a start.

When I talk about beginning with oneself, the truth I think is that somewhere all of us work towards fulfilling a need for personal satisfaction and for a feeling of doing something which is not entirely self centered. If I collect material and it reaches people in the remotest parts of the country, more than anything else it makes me feel good about myself. When you go to a temple and distribute prasad, you get a sound sleep. When you go to an orphanage and feed children you feel satisfied that you did something for someone else. We do a lot for our personal satisfaction. When you see happiness on the face of people by a simple act of giving it is something very rare. Somewhere in the last six years I have also benefited a lot with all the others " When a homeless person on the street screams out in happiness at Nizamuddin on a cold night " ab hui meri id "after getting an old coat in the night of id or when a little girl blushes with happiness on getting a fish shaped pencil box, all these expressions are priceless earnings. I cherish them.

I think initiating GOONJ.. has been a gift I gave myself. I am today a better person than I was six years ago because I have learnt so much about myself and changed in so many ways. Initiatives are successful when you constantly learn from your work and the people who you work with. I am learning everyday from the lives of the villagers I meet when I travel, I am constantly observing and learning from the day to day struggles of people who try to balance between a corporate job, their personal lives and their commitment to GOONJ..

Taking an Initiative does take a heavy toll. Between when you are alone with your initiative to when people join in, there is a long lull period, to survive that you need a lot of determination and faith in yourself. I still have a long way to go but this early lesson has helped me make some crucial decisions. For any initiative to succeed you have to believe.

All of us are living our lives, let us take some initiative for others and see the impact. It may be a very small act of teaching a illiterate child or taking responsibility for keeping your street clean, whatever it is that you are passionately interested in. I urge you to take an initiative today and change something for the better.

**Please remember- " YOU ARE NOT JUST AN INDIVIDUAL "**

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