Goonj: Rescuing Uttarakhand and Bridging the Clothing Divide
by David Bornstein

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In the hilly and scenic state of Uttarakhand, India, monsoon floods have become deadly – killing almost 10,000 people. The flashfloods this month have absorbed villages, ravaged homes, and left thousands displaced. New Delhi-based NGO Goonj provides relief aid to those affected by such natural calamities. Goonj has been on the forefront to bring relief items to the families of Uttarkhand as evacuations and rescue efforts continue.

Last year, David reported on Goonj for the Fixes column in the NYTimes. Given the recent events, we're reprinting that column this weekend. But, first, here are some images from the relief efforts at Goonj's base in Rishikesh, Uttarakhand.

Bridging the Clothing Divide

by David Bornstein, NYTimes

The sign on the rickshaw caught the attention of Anshu Gupta. It read: "Disposer of Dead Bodies." Gupta, a freelance journalist, asked the rickshaw owner, a man named Habib, if he could join him on his nightly rounds. For his services, Habib was paid about 50 cents per body.

Gupta was moved by how respectfully Habib wrapped the bodies in the white cloth he was issued by the police. Most were migrants wearing tattered rags who had likely come to Delhi to find work. Habib said that in summer he collected four or five bodies a night. In winter, it was a different story. When a cold wave hits Delhi, temperatures can drop below freezing.

"In winter," Habib told Gupta, "I have so much work. I can't handle it."

One of the most glaring oversights in the field of development is the lack of attention to clothing. Countless organizations work on food, energy, education, health care, economic opportunity — but beyond disaster relief efforts, you hear little about the need for clothes. In India, this makes no sense. Despite the explosion of growth in recent decades, hundreds of millions of Indians still live in conditions of extreme material deprivation. Somewhere between 40 percentand 80 percent of the population subsist on 50 or 60

cents a day, according to government estimates.

For very poor people, clothing is shelter. “In earthquakes, the shake kills people; in a tsunami, the water kills people; but in winter, the cold does not kill people. It’s the lack of proper clothing,” says Gupta. “Why don’t we consider lack of clothing a disaster?”

Torn, threadbare cloth is the most visible sign of poverty. “In India, for a woman, the first priority is to cover herself,” said Gupta. “Even more than eating.” It’s hard for Westerners or middle-class Indians to relate to this level of material existence. (To gain real insight into India’s urban poverty, I recommend Katherine Boo’s extraordinary book, “Behind the Beautiful Forevers.”) Many Indians possess only one or two items of clothing, notes Gupta. A woman with one sari must conceal herself while it dries after washing. And many women stay hidden indoors during their menstrual cycles because of orthodox religious beliefs and because they have no proper undergarments and only a piece of cloth to serve as a sanitary napkin.

Gandhi once wrote: “Whenever you are in doubt or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test: Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him.”

What seemed a useful action to Gupta and his wife, Meenakshi, was simply to give away some of their clothes. The couple were not wealthy. But going through their wardrobe, selecting clothes they hadn’t worn for three years, they found 67 items. This raised the question: With India’s vast emerging middle class – and the explosion of consumerism in the country – how much clothing is gathering dust in wardrobes? More than can be imagined. So, in 1998, the Guptas started an organization, Goonj (meaning “echo”), to redistribute some of it to where it was most needed. They wanted to find a way to address the problem systematically – to craft a permanent, rather than an episodic response, to what they considered a non-natural, perpetual disaster. And it’s a testament to Goonj’s work that in an age when business-friendly poverty approaches are attracting the lion’s share of attention, its nonmarket, nonmonetary approach – one grounded in empathy – has garnered majorawards, including one from the World Bank’s Development Marketplace.

Goonj is bringing efficiency and integrity to work that is often handled carelessly and without consideration for the lasting effects on communities. It is getting middle-class Indians to recognize the tremendous value of material reuse and recycling in the context of their country’s poverty. It makes optimal use of the materials it receives. And it has found a way to assist villagers that moves beyond the stigma of charity, through a program called “Cloth for Work” – which links clothes to self-organized development activities in villages. This may sound like American-style welfare reform, but the model is grounded in the Indian concepts of Bhoodan (land-gift), Gramdan (village-gift) and Shramdam (labor-gift), which were advocated by Gandhi and his disciple Vinoba Bhave, and spread widely across India during the 1950s.

“Goonj’s culture is very modest, very frugal, very factual,” explained Anil K. Gupta, a professor at the Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad (who is not related to Anshu Gupta, Goonj’s founder). “From a business perspective, what is striking is the culture of the enterprise. Those who give and those who receive are equal. From the people who give the clothes, to those who sort and pack them, to the people who receive them, the whole chain is full of respectful links. Not many supply chains are full of respect.”

Anshu Gupta has assisted in multiple disaster relief efforts and he designed Goonj to avoid two common mistakes. First, assistance is often distributed in a way that degrades people. During the 1991 earthquake in Uttarkashi, in Northern India, Gupta saw villagers reject bundles of clothing that were literally thrown at them out of trucks; many chose to dress in potato sacks rather than suffer the indignity. Second, contributions of goods are often mindlessly out of touch with people's needs. In Chennai, after the massive 2004 tsunami, Gupta helped sort through 100 trucks of donated clothing. "Among the first 100,000 units, we found 1,300 [full face] woolen hats," he recalled. "Who on earth told anyone to send them to a place in Southern India by the sea?"

"Unfortunately, the biggest problem with donation is you give what you have," he added. "You often don't give what people need. Somewhere we need to dignify giving by shifting the focus from donor's pride to receiver's dignity."

Today, Goonj operates collection centers in nine Indian cities and provides about two million pounds of materials, mostly clothes, but also utensils, school supplies, footwear, toys and many other items. It has an annual budget of $550,000, 150 employees, and hundreds of volunteers. However, with more than 250 N.G.O. partner agencies, it will assist about a half a million people in 21 states this year.

"Their main center in Delhi is remarkable," explained Madhukar Shukla, professor of strategic management and organizational behavior at XLRI: Xavier School of Management, in Jamshedpur. "It's staffed with about a hundred women who come from nearby slums and they manage most of the work. The system is like a well-managed factory, which creates a lot of efficiency in the operations." Goonj uses a color-coded sorting system that can be run by people around India, regardless of their education level. It sorts, grades, sterilizes, matches, repairs, repurposes, and packs contributions based on myriad details.

Consider: Most of the surplus wealth in India is in cities, but material poverty is deepest in villages. However, urban men are six inches thicker at the waist than their rural counterparts. This means that slacks and shirts cannot just be sent out; they have to be resized or the cloth has to be repurposed. Similarly, in cities, many women wear jeans and T-shirts, or Western-style business clothes; in the countryside, they wear saris (including blouses and petticoats) or a loose pantsuit called a salwar kameez. And of course there are large differences in weather around the country. All of it has to be considered.

Goonj makes use of just about everything it receives. It repairs saris and woolens, which are in the highest demand, adds drawstrings to pantsuits, turns jeans into schoolbags, T-shirts into undergarments, cloth scraps into quilts. It matches children's school uniforms by color. One of the most important jobs is producing affordable sanitary napkins. "Many women use the dirtiest pieces of cloth," said Gupta. "Because hand pumps are in public places, they hesitate to wash it because it is a taboo. Sometimes two or three women in a household with different cycles will share a cloth. People use sand, ash, jute bags, dry leaves, grass, anything that can absorb. There are many infections."

Goonj sterilizes cotton clothes and sheets, cuts them into handkerchief sizes, and distributes them, or sells them for a few rupees, in packs of five as sanitary napkins. (By contrast, a set of eight store-bought sanitary pads costs 60 rupees or more – and, unlike cotton, they are not biodegradable.)

Goonj also takes pains to see that its materials actually reach the intended recipients, no

small feat in a country where corruption is endemic. They carefully vet N.G.O. partners and do follow-up visits. If that is impossible, they require that photographs be taken to show the distribution of goods. They have a network of trusted locations for truck storage. “This is ultra hard core logistics,” Gupta said. “It’s a tough game to deal with local police and government officials and tax officers. But we have a zero bribe policy.”

Local organizations contact Goonj to participate in the Cloth for Work program. They propose a development activity – building a bridge, repairing a road, digging a well, building a school. In exchange, each laborer receives a family pack – a kind of currency in cloth: two full outfits for four people, roughly 600 rupees worth of clothes ($12 value today).

For instance, in a village called Sukhasan, in Bihar, where a bridge had been washed away years before, villagers in 2009 organized to build a 240-by-6-foot bamboo bridge. “People had been walking 10 kilometers to get to the other side,” recalled Gupta. “A hundred people contributed bamboo and a few days of labor.” Goonj supplied nails and wire. The whole thing cost $50. “It impacted the mind-set of the people,” Gupta said. The community later reorganized to press the government to improve the bridge, so motorcycles could cross. Now there is a bridge made of concrete. In the past two years, Goonj has supported 900 similar Cloth for Work campaigns.

One of the main themes of Fixes is that we often overthink social change efforts and undervalue simple solutions. We fall in love with elaborate schemes and overlook urgent and basic needs. At a time when Indians are amassing untold quantities of material goods, one of Goonj’s central contributions may simply be its “customer education”: teaching Indians about the immense humanitarian potential in reuse and demonstrating a model that delivers as promised. “Everyone in the world has a right to a dignified life, not just the chance to survive,” says Gupta. “Clothing and dignity go hand in hand.”