

# HEROES AMONGST US

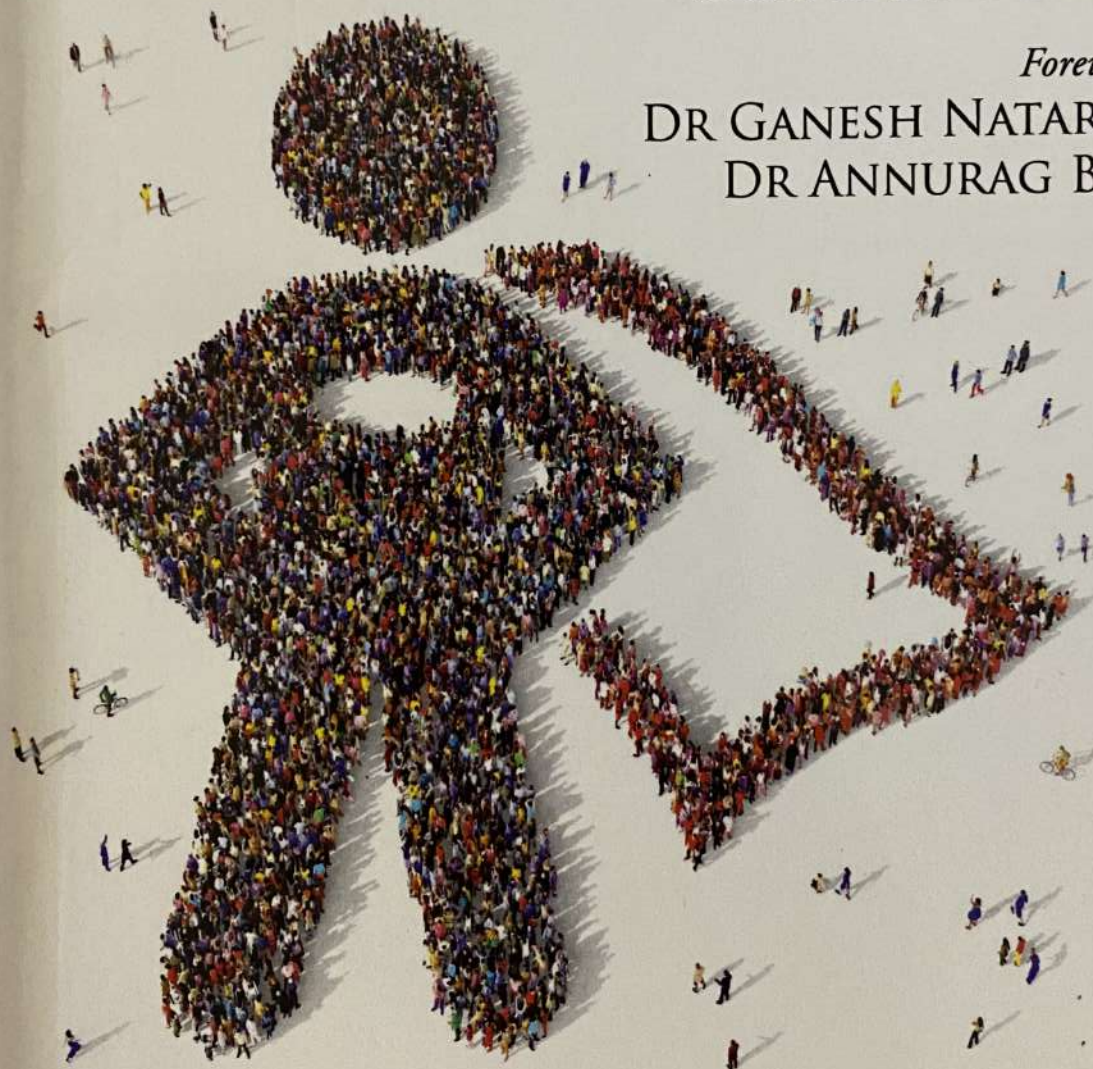
Inspirational Stories of Ordinary People  
who Achieved Extraordinary Success!

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Bloggers Alliance

*Cursive*



# Empowering India through digitalisation

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## The story of Osama Manzar

*Osama Manzar is the Founder and Director of the Digital Empowerment Foundation based in New Delhi, India. He is a global leader on a mission of eradicating information poverty from India and the global south, using digital tools. Osama is a social entrepreneur, author, columnist, impact speaker, angel investor and mentor. He sits on several government and policy committees in India and is associated with international organisations, working in the areas of Internet access and digital inclusion. The Digital Empowerment Foundation works in India to digitally empower the masses with a footprint of close to six hundred locations and interventions in more than 10 countries, mostly in South Asia. Osama has travelled to more than five thousand villages across India and across fifty countries.*

*—He is based in New Delhi, India.*

*“The first thirteen years of my life were very eventful, particularly because I lived in Ranchi, an industrial city then in Bihar and now in Jharkhand. Even though I lived in Ranchi, I travelled frequently to my parent’s village. We used to live in the campus of a factory built and operating in a collaboration model between Russia and India. It was the Heavy Engineering Corporation, a dream company of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. People from all over the country came to Ranchi to work in the factory. We, thus, believed Ranchi was a cosmopolitan city.*

*Some of these people who came were officers from well-off backgrounds, while others were tribal or people from the rural areas, who had come to a big city in search of better*



*salaries and a better life. The factory campus made me aware of different community groups and taught me the importance of co-existence. Every individual's work was important with even one layer missing, the factory would not have been able to operate."*

Osama looked forward to the summer breaks, which were spent at the ancestral home in West Champaran in Bihar. The annual experience here, gave him the exposure of rural life, cattle rearing and agrarian communities. He has very fond memories of time spent in West Champaran as a kid. The plethora of activities included flying kites, eating mangoes from the orchards, bird hunting and even fishing in the pond. The children were responsible for fetching the birds once they had been shot. Having spent about 13-15 summer breaks in West Champaran, Osama never felt like an outsider.

*"I have fond memories of the village also because my father rarely accompanied us on these breaks. My father and I had a very distant, strict and yet respectful relationship. I remember this one time when my neighbour accused me of stealing a tape recorder. I never liked that neighbour; he wasn't a nice person, but when he accused me of thievery, the entire colony agreed with him. My father, always being the respected and just member of the community, gave them the benefit of doubt. He wanted a jury to stand and I was asked to prove my innocence. He asked me to place my hand on the Quran and swear to answer all questions truthfully. That day was very hard for me, I had to make the entire village believe in me at a time when my own father did not seem to. Eventually, we learnt somebody in their own house had stolen it. I couldn't understand why my own father had not believed me and I was upset for a long time."*

There were several occasions when Osama couldn't really understand his father. Osama used to be teased a lot by a girl in school. Once he made a remark on her, the girl went straight to the principal. Osama was punished in front of the entire school. Even though Osama's father was the Director of the school and one of the founders, he remained neutral. This non-partisan jury attitude made Osama suffer many a times.



When he was in class ninth, Osama was seeing a girl in his colony who was two years older than him. Often, he would talk to her from outside her room's window after midnight. The girl's uncle had his doubts and caught them red-handed one day. The girl's uncle then beat Osama with his belt on the street for what seemed like hours to Osama. His cries brought the neighbours to the road. Osama was dragged home to his father. All the embarrassment stressed Osama's father so much so, that he got his son's head shaved. Osama was then sent as a punishment to the village, where he lived for a while.

Back home in Ranchi because of being exiled in this manner, everyone thought Osama would fail the class tenth exams coming up a year later. No one had any hopes for Osama, but he scored a seventy one percent.

*"When I completed school, my father put me on a train with two other boys and sent me off to Aligarh. I was sixteen and my father didn't come to drop me. I was in a new city and I felt abandoned. However, I later learnt that my father had money enough to buy only one train ticket. These incidents have shaped me in more ways than I can express. My father and I may not agree on almost anything, but I respect him for his principles. I learnt to be an honest man because of my father. I learnt to be an idealist because of my father, and most importantly, I learnt to be accountable for my actions."*

However, because he was scolded and beaten so often, it took Osama decades to become a confident person. In those days, most father-son relations were about hierarchy, rather than equality. The father usually sat on a high pedestal and the father's word was final, or at least, that's what fathers wanted.

*"As a child, I went to a start-up school for the minorities. My father had co-founded a school for the underprivileged children and wanted me to study in the same school. Since my father wanted children of the minorities to study in this school, he believed it was only fair that I go to the same school rather than a convent. In this school, the teachers took an informal approach to teaching. A lot of our learning came from experiences and understanding, rather than mugging. Besides the usual subjects, we learnt Arabic,*



*Persian, Urdu, Hindi and English. Every summer, I spent two months in my ancestral village, which supported the informal learning mechanism of the school. Even today, I have firm belief in the same informal system of learning, which is through practice rather than cramming and through experiencing rather than reading."*

Once Osama reached Aligarh, life had a mixed bag of lessons and experiences in store for him. He had lived sixteen years under strict parental supervision, which meant living a restricted and restrained life. In Aligarh, suddenly, he was free, the restrictions and restraints were all gone. A basic graduation that takes people three years to complete, took seven years for Osama. He failed the pre-university course and had to pass with a supplementary. Unlike his friends, Osama couldn't crack the engineering or medical entrance and so, everyone saw him as a failure.

*"To prove a point, at the age of eighteen, I joined the Air Force as an airman in the anticipation that I might get commission eventually as an officer, but I left in three months. Life in the Air Force was too restricting, just like it was at home, and so, I ran away. Eventually, I somehow managed to complete my graduation in physics. To be honest, I wouldn't have, had I not used unfair means. With my graduation complete, I went on to pursue a post-graduate diploma in journalism from the same university. It was a one-year course and that turned out to be the most productive of my eight years in Aligarh. I was publishing the college newsletter, covering news reports for the local newspapers, campaigning for a friend who was standing for the Union elections. I was also participating extensively in a lot of other co-curricular activities."*

It was in the early 1990s when the Internet was introduced in India. The Internet was where Osama found his passion and true professional calling. But that was about five years after he left college. In those five years, he faced rejection wherever he went. Be it *The Pioneer* or *The Telegraph* or even *The Times of India*, nobody wanted to hire him. But Osama remained adamant. He wanted to become a journalist. His eight years of college life had been an utter failure and he felt like a failure after college too. It was one of the most challenging phases of Osama's life. He refused to take financial support from home, even if he wanted to, they wouldn't have been able to afford it.



*"I rented a place in a slum in Delhi. This brought me even more close to poverty. It was during this phase that I met Shaifali through a common friend. Shaifali became a friend and then my girlfriend. She was five years younger and was a student at the Jawaharlal Nehru University. Shaifali supported my unsuccessful life a whole lot. She even went for job interviews with me. By then, I had a loan of Rs 40,000 on me. This was the money that I had borrowed from friends for food, rent and commuting. Shaifali used to take up a number of small jobs to support me. To help me save on food, Shaifali used to bring food from the dining hall of the hostel and share with me."*

Finally, Osama was hired at *Down to Earth*. But soon, he was fired. He worked with the SOS Children's Village of India for a while, bringing out their regular newsletter. Osama then joined the Computer World Magazine in 1995. This was truly a turning point of his career and life. For the first time in his life, he had met an editor who was a true leader and mentor. Osama's English writing skills were poor at the time, so the editor would almost entirely rewrite his story. Yet, she encouraged him. She told him that he was a reporter and his job was to find stories with the relevant information. Her job was to edit and fix the language.

*"I truly grew in that magazine and was promoted to the position of an Assistant Editor. My salary was Rs 6,500! In this role, I had the chance to meet some of the best CEOs in the IT sector. Since I was not from the IT sector, the opportunity of interacting with senior officials gave me a great chance to learn about IT; it was an on the job training. I became more and more passionate about IT and the Internet, in particular. I spent eighteen of the twenty-four hours each day, reading about the Internet or surf the internet for all the information it had to offer. I used to sit at my friend's house for hours, so that I could use the computer and the dial-up access. Finally, after a couple of years, my editor told me that I had outgrown the magazine."*

Almost immediately, Osama got an offer from *The Hindustan Times* to manage their Internet division. He helped create a dedicated website. Even though [hindustantimes.com](http://hindustantimes.com) was a decent website, it was entirely dependent on the content generated by the daily newspaper. So, Osama



thought why not create another independent platform, a news portal, on the lines of Rediff.com of the time. Osama convinced the management for a budget of Rs 20 lakhs, as well as a small team, to create a national portal called digitalHT.com.

The portal was an immediate hit and shortly after the launch, received venture capital funding of US dollars nine million. From print to web, so far, it had been a progressive journalistic growth for Osama. It was around this time that Osama began to strongly think about entrepreneurship. He eventually left HT to start a software company with a friend.

*"I quit and partnered with a friend to start offering content, website and IT solutions largely to print media. Our business venture was called 4C Plus. Very soon, we had become popular. Our clients were Tehelka, Outlook and HT, among others. We had started the year with Rs 20 lakh and closed at Rs 1.5 crore. Then came the dot com bust!"*

*"Even though I was running 4CPlus, I continued to pursue my passion of journalism. I was, in parallel, also running a weekly online newsletter called INOMY. It was a name I framed by combining Internet and Economy."*

In 2000, Osama co-authored a book called *The Internet Economy of India*. After the book was published in 2001, the book and Osama began to appear a lot in the media. He had become an expert on the Internet and knowledge economy in India. However, what truly turned this book into a lifelong impact for Osama was the understanding that he gained of the digital divide in India. Osama realised that almost the entire population of India was on the wrong side of the digital divide.

*"I saw this massive digital divide as a trigger to dedicate my life to connect the unconnected. I wanted the entire population, of which more than 70% was in rural areas, to adopt digital tools and the Internet. I wanted to ensure that no one was left digitally illiterate."*

This thought guided Osama to sell 4CPlus to his partner and start the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) with his wife.

*"I believe success is about perseverance, persistence and humility. The entire world is always seeking something: money, degree, love. You also need to give in life. This motivated me to establish DEF."*



Through DEF, Osama envisions a time when each backward district and village of the country is fully connected to the Internet. This will be an achievement that will enable knowledge and wisdom, from every nook and cranny of the country, to become fully accessible by everyone in the world. Osama sees the unconnected India as producers of information, rather than consumers of content. He visualises Internet as the medium of peace, equality, equanimity and democratic dissemination of knowledge and wisdom.

*"I feel that I am a natural believer. I believe in everything and everyone until I am proven wrong. When I had children, I knew I wanted a very different father-children relationship. In parenthood, I learnt that children are true leaders, disguised only by their size. Once you start listening to them, you can only do well."*

### Success Mantras

- *Use your common sense.*
- *Believe in destiny.*
- *Remember that, in the long-run, there is no alternative to hard work.*



What's common between a business executive, film-director, advertising guru, stand-up comic, prison-reformer, Mrs Earth winner & a social media expert? They are all ordinary people with extraordinary life stories. **Heroes Amongst Us** takes you along the inspirational life stories of 32 such ordinary people who achieved extraordinary success. It salutes their grit and passion to keep moving on despite adversity and obstacles. It celebrates the triumph of the invincible human spirit. When the life looks hard, the odds are against you and there is no hope, this book will inspire and encourage you to awaken the hero within and find your way ahead!

Dr Amit Nagpal brings together fascinating stories of the real everyday heroes from different walks of life that cut across genders, regions, cultures & professions. One thing that remains common to all heroes is their indefatigable will to succeed and not give up.

“Examples of passionate leaders you will read in this book give us hope that ordinary human beings will discover their own formula for extraordinary achievements”

*Excerpt from the Foreword by Dr Ganesh Natarajan, Chairman, Social Venture Partners India & 5F World, Former Chairman NASSCOM Foundation*

“Hugely inspired by the stories about people who dared to take the first step in order to realize their passions against all odds”

*Shreyas Talpade, Film Actor*

“Over 30 doers, dreamers, achievers, creators and digital innovators tell their stories that inspire and teach precious lessons for life. You would not be able to get your hands and eyes off the book”

*Dr Annurag Batra, Chairman and Editor-in-Chief, BusinessWorld*

“A seed has a possibility of a forest; we all have that seed in us. All the stories are of people who took that first step and found themselves living their own dreams”

*Sanjay Suri, Actor and Producer*

**Dr Amit Nagpal's** life revolves around stories. From Marketer to Professor to Storyteller, six words tell his life story. He is President & Co-Founder of Bloggers Alliance. Professionally he works in the domain of digital & brand storytelling. Personally, he is passionate about applications of storytelling.



Bloggers Alliance

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