

## Tamseel Hussain- Transcript

**[00:00]** My name is Tamseel Hussain, and I'm 30 years old. And what I do is: I'm a social media, mobile, and public engagement expert. And I help organisations transform themselves digitally and become mobile first and essentially, where you can't survive without being a social media (expert) or using develop as a technology. My mother was a housewife, and still is. Right now she's running the house. And my dad had his own travel business around education tourism, and his own non-profit. I started working at a very early age, because I believed that practical learning is way better than, like, theoretical learning. And the way Delhi University works is, and your schools work is, very less of practical and more of theory. And now it's changing, but at that time, during my time, that's like I think around 2000 to 2008, it wasn't very practical. So I studied in Don Bosco School and then I moved to Delhi University and I did political science there. After that, I chose that it's better to work and get more practical learning through mentors, and yeah, here I am.

**[01:13]** I started working with my dad. It was mainly helping him run his business around connecting with schools, engaging with young people, engaging with students, and doing responsible tourism in the hills and in different parts of the world. Like Middle East, Southeast Asia, and that's what the role was. I'm doing a lot of workshops with students and teachers from different countries... that's what the role was like. But right after that, I did my first ever internship. I mean, I was already working, but it was like a family business so I was always like I want to move out and like I want to do something on my own --- that thing is always there. Anyone who has a family business, I think most people the first thing that they think about is - a; I want to do something on my own.

**[01:56]** So my first internship was a copywriter at M&C Saatchi. And which completely didn't suit me and I think for the first --- I did that for like I think three to four months, and I knew that I wasn't fit for an advertising world. And after that, I moved to Auroville, which was in Pondicherry, and spent a year about living in Auroville, understanding the lifestyle, and understanding responsible living. And understanding the idea about living with different people from different parts of the world and living in a community. So I was there for about a year and I worked with this organisation called Upasana Design Studio, which is one of the most prominent design studios in Auroville, and I worked with this small organisation called Bell Paper, who make like things out of papier-mâché and like which are products that you can actually use in your daily life.

**[02:43]** After that, I shifted back to Delhi, because I think it was time to come back to sanity, and I was almost deciding to live in Auroville and live in a forest, but it was quite an early age to take that decision. And after coming to Delhi, there was only one organisation I actually wanted to work for, which was Greenpeace India. So I tracked them down for literally four months, or three months, every day calling them saying that - I want to work for Greenpeace India - because at that time they were the only ones who had a department called Public Engagement, which I really believe that engaging communities and engaging different kinds of communities makes a lot of sense, in order to do something. And Public Engagement is a very niche and specific department. At that time, I think the UK government was the only

government, amongst the few governments who had a Public Engagement department. And I really wanted to see how public engagement can happen in real life.

**[03:35]** So I worked with Greenpeace for about a year, and after that, I joined my dad's business again and started working in the Middle East, Egypt specifically, doing exchange projects between Indian schools and Egypt. And at that time we started a new product which is very interesting, because Egypt tourism had just opened up, and it was booming, and we want to get as many students as we can get, because just to see parallels in the country. So worked on that, and worked in Southeast Asia on that, and I think after like a year or two, I decided that there was this new trend which was building up, which was on online petitions. It was picking up in the US a lot, and people were signing petitions and at that time in India, petitions were mainly looked at as a signature campaign, never as a campaign which can create change. And I've always been in departments, even when I was in Greenpeace, trying to prove a concept how public engagement can work and I was only doing online and offline engagement.

**[04:34]** So started working with change.org, was the first person they hired in India, and it was exciting, I think, for three years worked with the organisation, created a proof of concept of online petitions, from a time when people were like – signature campaigns don't work, what's online, this thing is clicktivism – to a time when everybody is signing petitions as well as starting petitions. And at that point, I think, my dad fell really ill, and I had to leave that job because I had to get, like, a job which is sort of higher paying and stuff and more, how do people say, more stable. So I became the Head of Digital for Oxfam India, and I founded the digital team there, and really helped the person who is also my mentor, worked with him to build a communications learning, communications literacy, and understand change management, how it happens. So I worked with Oxfam for around two and a half years. And there's something which was telling me, because I had realised like the way India is, and the way India is working right now, whatever nonprofits are doing is not going to work, like they're part of the system because India had a huge power shift at that point, right. You had a government which is very focussed on deliverables, very focussed on, it had a fixed agenda, it was strictly against nonprofits, and nonprofits were taking a lot of time to understand the government and take action in a different way, and I realised I was just trapped in that thinking, and after institutionalising digital and communications, I decided that, I really need to understand what India is all about.. Again.

**[06:11]** And when I started digging into it, I remember going to Dharamkot, for like, about a month, and just taking a break after quitting my Oxfam India job. Researching on something which was amazing at that point, which was 700 million Indian millennials. And that's the power we have, the power of young people, 18 to 35 year olds, who are not only in India, are spread across different parts of the world, and they come under the umbrella of being an Indian, and how to really understand them, and work with them, and influence them, in an age where there's so much of noise, social media has become a threat to a lot of people than an ease, and how do you really work with young people who want to do that. After discovering that, one of the things I realised that social media's power is misunderstood in a lot of sectors and also has become like a huge need for a lot of people. What we were doing is also like how the amount of people coming online because of the Prime Minister's Digital India initiative, and like, demonetisation, people being forced to use the formal economy and stuff, a lot of people were

coming online using their mobile phones, as much as they could. And one of the things that I realised was that if you actually have a product or a shift in thinking between people who usually don't think on how to use social media, mobile phones, and the communities that they work with, to create like long-lasting change.

**[07:36]** So I started hustling after that, and I started my freelance career. Initially, it was quite intense. Initially, it was how do you make people understands the need of Indians millennials. First of all, a lot of people didn't even understand the term "millennials" then, it was all "young people" or "youth", and completely misunderstood. And then the idea of inclusivity, how mobile phones and social media made things more inclusive. I mean, India, more people are consuming content in Hindi right now, as compared to English, and that's a huge shift. Election 2014 was just the hugest learning. Completely missed that point, we just rewind and put it later.

**[08:17]** After quitting change, I worked on Karnataka elections, specifically with an MP in Karnataka who I really admire. And on setting up his social media profile for the elections 2014 and that was a huge learning to understand the power of social media, how you can influence the media with Twitter, how you can influence the media with Facebook. And after that, I joined Oxfam India. So I already had these learnings, I already had politics. While hustling, I worked on a couple of projects. I worked with this organisation called Public Health Foundation of India, and they had a very unique unique demand: it was, how can we start a campaign on mental health, for young people? And one of the things that I had actually come out with for my research was that mental health is a huge issue among young people, and that time people had started talking about it, at that time we only had Deepika Padukone who had come out with a mental health issue, and there was a huge stigma around India.

**[09:14]** So what I wanted to do was, I want to design a campaign which is social media first, and engages young people and encourages them to share their story of mental health, either like putting their own face to it, putting their own name to it, or doing it anonymously. So building a social media driven campaign for a dinosaur historic organisation like Public Health Foundation of India, was amazing. The campaign was called "It's Ok To Talk" and I think it was a huge success, they partnered with Instagram on it, and that campaign now is institutionalised, and you have like people in an organisation who don't think traditionally social media, really working, really having social media as a strength of that campaign. It's a community of young people who are literally helping each other out and talking to each other and sharing their stories, and trying to break the stigma in India.

**[10:02]** While working on that, I started understanding "okay, so this is a campaign which is only targeted towards the urban youth". At least the first phase of the campaign, we had decided that it'll be all about urban millennials in India, and now what they're doing is, after a year, they're moving on towards areas which usually don't have access to English language or, they don't speak in English, but they speak in regional languages, so now it's like becoming a different way. But I wanted to test, and I wanted to break, a typical way of thinking that people had, that – hey, people who are not traditionally using social media in English, we can't reach them. So I met this amazing organisation called Chintan India, it's a Delhi-based organisation which works on base, and they literally cater to about almost around I think 12,000 waste-pickers, uplifting them and engaging with them and empowering them to like hold their own.

And in landfills, in an area which probably we wouldn't imagine how people would survive. It's basically most of the stuff we consume, ends up there. And they have a living, and they have an economy running on that, like around base economy.

**[11:08]** And it was this amazing moment, and I think, like two months into the consultancy, my role was to like, transform their organisation into a communication and digital adaptive organisation, which means, setting up a digital department, setting up a communications team, setting up a thinking which is more public than internal, and just policymakers. So one of the first things we did was, we got Instagram, and we got Hindustan Times, to a landfill, and trained like around 10 to 15 waste-pickers live on Facebook on how to use Instagram to tell their story. And the aim of that project was that young people would engage with waste-pickers in a way that they haven't before. And you actually have a waste-picker just holding their phone, and talking to the phone and talking of what they're doing. At that point, once we did it, I think we got around 15 waste-pickers on Instagram and they started using it on a daily basis. And in about 3 to 4 months, something amazing happened. The government's GST norms had come out, and they had put like around 18% tax on ewaste and waste (12:10). And the waste-pickers were literally losing most of their income in taxes. And we saw this tremendous thing, they actually started a campaign on Instagram, using #WasteGST, and literally talking about their issues that they had. And slowly, because of all the lobbying work done by Chintan, and a lot of advocacy work done by various organisations like Vivichitan (12:28), you actually had that waste GST price reduced, at a time when people couldn't really believe that you could challenge the government, and that was one of the most exciting projects this year, after mental health.

**[12:44]** I got a chance to understand election campaigning and the use of social media, a lot deeper than I would have this year, because I got to work with a lot of political consultants who are designing election campaigns. And it's interesting to see how people are going to use social media in... next year, I think we have around 5 state elections happening, and the year after that, it's predicted that it'll be a general election. And use of social media and fear of social media has reduced because I think when --- I remember initially when I was talking to a lot of opposition parties, the current government has this amazing social media unit, and the opposition, anyone in opposition is literally struggling to overcome their fear of how to use social media and how to communicate on social media, because the responses are so quick. And to see that vulnerability was very exciting to now --- what you see how political parties are responding to most things.

**[13:34]** Another project which came in, if you remember the part that I mentioned, that public spaces was completely missing. I met a couple of architects. And they were redesigning sector 17 market in Chandigarh. And it's one of the most historic markets there, because it's huge, and it's well-designed, it's designed by like Le Corbusier, who's the French architect. And to redesign that market is huge because it's actually the city centre of Chandigarh. And I wanted to introduce this thinking called placemaking, which actually became a movement among urban planners last year, and it has a huge potential. Why? Because we're actually, I think in India, it's predicted next year there'll be like around 270 million people using social media. But if you notice the most common thing people do with their mobile phones and social media is actually click pictures in public spaces, or in restaurants, or at bars, or let's say at family gatherings, or like events, mostly public spaces to show themselves, that they're actually there in that public

space. But how most of the public spaces are designed in India are not designed citizen-friendly. They're not very citizen-friendly, when it becomes easier for people to access, more walkable, more like connected. And Chandigarh sector 17, to build a place-making plan, was very exciting, and I think this year's another highlight was to actually present that plan to the Punjab government and the Punjab government just loving it, saying – hey, we can actually make young people own a public space. And why? Because they'll find it more interesting and more social media stories are going to be driven out of it. So I think these were my four highlights.

**[15:12]** And what I'm doing now is I'm actually consulting with a couple of people and training them on social media and making it more digital adaptive. And I think I'm really excited about starting my own firm as well, it's called People Like Us Create. It's a mobile storytelling network. It's just training more people how to tell media-level stories, and make the stories that you hear from media, and influence broadcast and like, print, on how people can use their mobile phones and tell better stories. Ideally what I'm doing is, I mean PLUC has already launched, it's been 5 months that PLUC has launched, but when you're actually starting up something, there's a huge huge --- I mean the same stress that I faced at the beginning of this year was like, how do I convince people in understanding social media, and not be scared of it. And literally seeing more power in social media than the whole traditional media of viewing digital. It's the same. I mean, PLUC's going to take time for people to understand, and right now what I'm doing is, I'm doing part-time PLUC and part-time consultancy. So I think that'll carry on until the beginning of the year 2018, hopefully until I've become a start-up, full-time...

**[16:22]** I think what I'm going to do is create more communities, and more people who think like me. And make sure that it's institutionalised as a system within India, among the 700 million people that I talked about. I think it was never meant, I never really wanted to start my own thing, that wasn't my dream. Obviously because I've lived in a business family, and I know the things, the shortcomings that happen, the dark side of starting something of your own. What I meant was like doing something of my own, instead of under my father's shadow. You know what I'm saying? Like working somewhere or creating your own name, that's ideology. It was never to start my own business. It actually happened and I ended up being there because while getting really deep into how young people think in India, there's no one who's actually owning this space.

**[17:10]** And to build credibility and authenticity to anything that I'm trying to promote to the people or the clients I work with, I mean, I just had to become a part of gig economy. I mean, in general, because people believe in a brand. And that's one of the data points that came out for most people. People believe in brands shaping things more than individuals doing stuff. So that's pretty much how it ended up: oh, okay, there's a space empty, I have to start it. That's how it became. It's a recent shift, and I think social media plays a huge role in it, especially the amount of noise coming in. Young people who are aged between 13 to 17, most of the thoughts that they have are shaped by brands. Most of the things you see them sharing on social media, shaped by brands and influencers. If you notice, most of the people driving conversations in our media space, in everything that we see around, are people who are either shaped by brands, or are brands themselves, because they've connected to different kinds of brands, and they are actually influencing what we see on broadcast and what we see on different networks. And people who are trying to reach out to a larger audience, are beginning to use these people or

use these brands who understand a set of audience that they can never reach out to. So that way, people are becoming more dependent on connecting with brands, that way.

**[18:37]** I think, one of the biggest power I realised of being a freelancer: one, I don't have to go and actually sit inside an office for eight hours and work there. Second, I actually have the power to cross-pollinate, which means that I can work with a nonprofit, I can work with an alcohol brand, I can work with a corporate, I can work with a politician, and I don't need to say that – hey, my ideals are aligned to one organisation. So I can actually help different organisations benefit from each other because, why? Because I'm at the center point. And by the time 2017 ended, I realised one of the biggest strengths I have is because – hey, I can help you reach out to an alcohol brand, I can help you reach out to a restaurant, I can help you reach out to a corporate, politician, or, I can help you get some nonprofits aboard. Or a journalist. And that just became like a powerful thing, the cross-pollination aspect. And I think that way I'll always be a freelancer, because that cross-pollination power is, a lot of people don't think like this.

**[19:42]** When I started, a lot of people were either doing their startups, either becoming a part of the gig economy, saying that they are freelancers, either having a failed startup, or people were just doing freelance because they wanted more money, and they were stuck to one way of thinking. What it has done is that, it is not only the current environment or the current unemployment focus. I mean, what does a freelancer really help an organisation do? It helps them think about something that their own team can't think about, right? A freelancer fills in that gap, and takes that huge responsibility that you've given to one employee and fills it for you in a shorter amount of time. So what I've seen is, I've seen an immense increase in the amount of freelancers that are out there. Right from, design, web design, social media, everything, right? Why? Because people don't want to get stuck to an organisation, in general. So as you see them doing multiple projects and struggling around as freelancers. So I've seen like an immense increase in freelancers, as compared to how it was, probably in my last decade of working for organisations. Like we used to hunt for freelancers, we used to not get the right freelancer. We used to hunt for a freelancer, the price was so expensive. But now you see a lot of freelancers, you can get a freelancer in, like, let's say 5000 rupees a day to 25000 rupees a day. Or even more. And that has become easier for organisations and even organisations prefer working with freelancers, because they get that other side of thinking. So I've seen that huge shift happen, definitely. It's an increase in the number of people who are freelancing now.

**[21:18]** I think there are two kinds of freelancers: one are people who are freelancers who just help you do your day-to-day job, who take up your social media account. The second are freelancers who are actually specialists. And these kinds of freelancers are very few in India, because most of the freelancers are like – hey, I need a job, I need a client – so they would do it. But other freelancers are specialists who literally plug and play. And the reason why there's a rise in these specialist freelancers, you actually see people preferring to work with each other on that. I think there's a huge increase in freelancers right from people who make food menus to people who like do advocacy policy to like people who are strategists, who help you build organisational change management strategies. Immense increase on freelancers. And all across the fields. Because, I think, you decide to become a freelancer when you realise that hey, I have enough networks, and I have influence to convince a person to hire me. And people who build those networks --- you see like an immense increase in it, especially a lot of people who have

been in a job for more than 15 years, 10 years, to a lot of people who, did a job, tried their job once, they're like – oh, okay, I can't really sit in an office and I need to like go out. So that way, yeah, there's been an increase across fields.

**[22:33]** I specifically think social media as a field, freelancers were always there, but you never get the right freelancer, because they're so temporary and their quality differs, because if they don't understand your brand and they haven't worked with your brand before, you can't really get the right output out of the freelancer you have.

*Interviewer: And also, what I notice, is the connotation around the word "freelancers" went from really pejorative, kind of, "oh, you're a freelancer, you're kind of a loser, you don't have a job", you know, to actually something that is half-mysterious, enviable status, and you associate also a sense of freedom, independence, and it's become something really cool.*

**[23:22]** Yeah, no, I totally agree. When I decided to freelance after quitting my job, because I didn't really search for a job before quitting, I just said I wanna rethink where my career is going. And that's how I've noticed a lot of people do that in general, but I think like, I was burdened by the stigma. Before I got into freelancing, I talked to a lot of my friends who were freelancers. And I didn't get a really positive vibe, saying – hey, you have such a thriving career, why are you quitting to become a freelancer – and you see, okay, it's like, I've got three rules: one, save up enough money for at least six months of where there's no gigs coming your way. Second was, make sure your regular running expenses were really low. Third was, make sure you're profiling yourself enough, so that your clients know what you're doing. And fourth was to make sure like, people are talking about the work that you're doing. These are four things that I got. And I realised I haven't done you know, one rule, I haven't followed it, but...

*Interviewer: The next rule is don't get ever depressed.*

**[24:28]** Yeah! Don't get like super low. And after starting it off, and initially, when you start it off, you just realise that – hey, I'm not getting the response that I really want, you start getting low, saying – oh god, what have I done, I had such a great job, I could have just like taken this. And I got like some offers from some amazing organisations, which I actually had to decline. And the money that I was getting, and everything that I was getting, it felt like a sacrifice at that point of time. And till a point when, then you come up to a stage when you're deciding – okay, so what is my per day rate, what is my hourly rate? And then you come to a point, once you've understood how freelance works, at a later stage, - how do I increase that rate? - and that happens through the work you produce, specifically, of how many people are viewing the work you produce. And I think I would encourage people to get into freelancing if they really know, if they have networks. Without that, your freelance gig is a fail. Unless you're some genius AI-bot builder. Otherwise, if you don't have networks, do not jump into freelancing. Without that, you might just get really depressed.

**[25:35]** I live in a female-dominated household. And after my dad passed away it's amazing to see how my mum's sisters have come together and they're like living together in a female-dominated household. And, at the moment, I live with my parents, yeah. I actually moved back in with my mother, after my dad passed away, to make sure it's like sorted from that perspective. Otherwise I was actually living out of Hauz Khas Village earlier. I'll be honest, like,

I was listening to this podcast which is run by Kairas, for the biggest organisations started are on the basis of the money you borrowed from your family and friends. When a venture capitalist funds you, the first question they ask is, so have you already taken investment from your family and friends? And the reason is because, a venture capitalist trusts you, because you actually owe your mother or your mother-in-law or your family money, and you know you would have to give that money back. And that's the most common practice that a freelancer, a businessman, an entrepreneur does. It's like, first thing is, you borrow money from family and friends. And I think that initially, especially the first three to four months, it really helped me out. Yeah, because I literally, I don't have a habit of saving. I didn't have a habit of saving money. I love splurging money. And at that point, I think, the three to four months if I didn't have the support of my family, and having a shelter, I probably would have never been able to pull this freelancing gig off.

**[27:07]** It takes, you have to sacrifice a lot, like. You literally, right from your travel to food, and I live in the suburbs. Your food, travel, expenses, everything, it adds up to it. It's like building your own business. I think it's important to understand the fear of not getting your next buck. To understanding how to save money. To, especially someone as spoilt as me, to understanding how to convince people and how to sell yourself. To understanding how to network. And how to make sure that people believe in the idea that you want them to believe. So for that, I think freelancing is the best learning. I mean, I got most of the learnings I've got in life are through mentors. But for the first time, literally doing, getting my hands dirty, probably made me stronger as a person as well.

**[28:00]** I think the Indian market's tough when it comes to the taxes and all these things, like really selling yourself because there's such a huge competition. The idea, I think with every freelancer, is what niche you are, and how you're providing, and the clients you choose, right? In India, you have, at least, I'm going to guess, it's a number which I don't have data for, at least 15 freelancers for the same job that you're pitching, and it's like higher competition, so it all depends on how you market your work. That way it's different from anyone else. There's a rise in unemployment in the country. Most people are unemployed, the first thing they do is if you go to a Social, one of the biggest things I've noticed in Social, especially in the last three years, Social opened as a cafe which was a co-working space. And a bar at night, and a cafe, and co-working became like huge after Social. And it started off with these, like, all these young entrepreneurs, and young start-up people, or freelancers, working together under one roof. Now you go to Social, you actually see an increase in age group. You see people who are 45, 35, 38 working from Social and believing in their own concepts. So it's a huge shift, you see unemployment and its effects showing. According to me. I mean at the age of 38, 40, if you're kicked out because of automation or because of anything else, and you decide – hey I need to start job hunting. That whole idea of going to office every day, you want to go to a space where you can sit and work. And when you sit and work, you think with thinkers who are like you. And you either choose freelancing, to whatever projects you get, whatever skills you have, or you're job hunting or you're starting a business. So I would say it all kind of has a blurry line, and that increase in age group is a huge sign that India needs to address an issue of unemployment in a drastic way. You see a lot, the amount of people that I meet, the amount of people that I see, who have either quit their jobs or have been let go of jobs, these are two options that you get



from freelancing. And slowly I'm beginning to notice a lot of people who have been let go of their jobs freelancing.

**[30:11]** I think that insecurity is there. I've gotten used to it, and initially, I had less work to show. I only had like my decade of experience with different brands. And that counts a lot, when you are freelancing, which brands have you worked with? But once people start seeing your work publicly and what you can do as an individual, it becomes easier to address that idea of insecurity in a stronger way. Like right now I'm not stressed about – hey, am I going to get my money next month? I'm thinking like six months later or eight months later, as to how to restructure (30:42) a system, how to take up a project which can really result in something. So that consistency has come in.

**[30:49]** Well, I think you need to have a lot of inner strength. I was talking to a friend of mine, who is also a freelancer, and he's a web design freelancer. And he hasn't been able to hit it right, and it's been 2.5 years. And it's a huge risk, like, you literally have to worry where your next buck is coming, you need to be strong. You question your skills, you question your mental state, you question – am I doing the right thing? Am I really cut out for this job? You question your different skills. But in the process, you actually learn a lot. I think one golden rule for freelance personality is to be open to learning. Like, you will face humiliation, you will face success, you will face a lot, a lot of sad moments. But the whole idea is to know what's coming, having confidence in your skills and strengths, and building new skills. The moment you stop learning new things, you're actually pretty much redundant to the whole working world.

**[31:47]** And I've actually seen an increase in that, even people who are working, or freelancers, have a shift in culture that more people are beginning to understand the idea of "open to learning", which they never did at least two years ago. Yeah, like, at least be up to date with the skills in the market and the new technology that's coming in. No matter how old you are, no matter what job you're in, technology is taking over most of the jobs that we're going to be doing. And it's hitting the most marginalised first. So it's important to know how you can up the game with other competitors, or like other people, by knowing what technology is coming in and what skills you need to learn. How like things work in Canada or US right, it's like, if you need to learn a new skill, you can do a course in it. In India it's different. Because people literally go on practical learnings a lot more, because there's this huge need of new skills. There's always an option of doing a course and learning a new skill, but that's a longer process. You can actually start doing it on your own. And start practically learning it. That's what I think. Because that gives you more experience. A certificate doesn't really matter that much. For a freelancer, it's important the kind of brands that person has worked with. Education, all these things, I don't think it matters, it connects with people.

**[33:01]** Yeah there are no perks in a freelancer. You're defining your own perks. And getting your own personal, and like, professional life balance. That's a strength you have, so you actually have to make sure you have your basics sorted. You have your health insurance sorted, you have your taxes sorted, you have a good CA. All these things you're managing on your own. Unlike, like, an organisation where you get a provident fund, or you get EPF's and like you get tax benefits and you get the ease of not doing your own accounting. I think in this case you have to learn how to do it. And these are the skills which are most important for any job, or any kind

of individual I think, this is what you learn from freelancing, the most. It's a huge learning, but also it's a, for people who are scared of numbers, like me, it takes a long curve to understand or manage your budgets, at least, and consistently do it, until it becomes a habit. So, it depends, every individual is not fully, 100%, in everything, right? Freelancing gives you an opportunity to learn things which are your weaknesses and overcome them by institutionalising it.

**[34:05]** Also I think in a freelance world, gender is also the kind of work -- okay how do I explain this -- I haven't seen a huge gender shift in India, but I'm sure globally there's a huge gender shift that you have more women freelancers coming up, and working in different things. But in India, what I've seen is, obviously because we have more male population in general, we have more male freelancers. But in the recent shift, I've noticed that a lot of women are becoming freelancers, becoming very successful freelancers. It's also based on the same principle of having networks and like, making your way through it. But there's definitely been a shift in a trend, like, what I've noticed --- I don't have data to prove this, would definitely like to look at data --- but like there's been a shift in, at least when I go and like talk to people, and the circle that I'm in, I see more women freelancers as compared to how it was, like, at least a year or two earlier.

**[35:01]** As I mentioned earlier, like, initially when I started to freelance, there was a stigma attached to it, and, once you start getting success in your freelancing thing, there are two kinds of envy you notice. One, of people who have to get up at 9 a.m., go to an office, where you're saying, I can only do 11, 12, and that's a benefit you're doing because you learnt how to balance your personal and professional life. And you know exactly, I'm not a morning person, so most of my meetings will be in the evening or I would map my meetings according to the traffic situation in Delhi, because I know that I don't want to face traffic. And that's the success you have. What I've noticed is that people do get envious. Especially people who are in the same field and are working. There's a lot of envy in this. There's also like, I think as a freelancer now you're looked at someone, especially when you start getting success in your work, you're looked at, as this person who knows how to hustle. And hustle means, like, taking that plunge and... like, when people talk to me, they know that I've taken the plunge and I'm doing way too many things, and they all see the impact happening in front of their eyes. So instead of envy, I get more of a sense of a credibility and a lot of responsibility when people are talking to me about a subject that I'm connected to. So envy was initially, I think I've only seen envy once, when I've worked and I've plugged into teams, because usually I'm training teams on social media and digital. That way I see envy because people are, like, working since like, 9 a.m. and I'm coming in at 11 and working four hours but just giving them something that they can use for a longer time, and making their lives simpler.

**[36:39]** I detest people who don't be on time, because they get a service on time, and it's a very natural trend, at least I know, like when you freelance in the music industry or the restaurant industry or any other things, delay in money is the most common thing. Some delays are at least three to four months, some delays are a month, some delays are 15 days. And I know that freelancers, whenever there's a delay in money, they get hit the most. I think how I address that is very simple, it's like, having the power and having enough savings to say that -- hey, you don't pay me my money, I'm not going to give you a thing more, right? And making sure those agreements are, your paperwork mentions it, and you can at least challenge them whenever it's

needed. Fortunately a situation like this hasn't come, which has become so severe, but delays in money are the most common things that actually happen for freelancers. But I know of freelancers who haven't got money for six months and three months, and they have no other way except to resort to violence when it comes to putting it up on social media, and throwing it out into the public. So that's the most amount of violence that I've actually seen when it comes to that.

**[37:45]** The more people know about your work, the easier it is for you to establish credibility. If you haven't established credibility and people don't know about your work and you're not known for a field, I don't even know how you would survive as an external being plugged into a team. So it's like people know your work, I'm very very social, and I know that people know my work through the things that I've put up on social media. And it's very important to communicate to the public about the work that you're doing. But for people who are not that communicative, who are not known in the circle, I can imagine it's going to be very difficult. It's a natural shift right, like, you are literally taking over someone's role, and enhancing someone's skills, why will that person trust you if they don't know what you would do? I think you can't be an antisocial freelancer, it's impossible. Your public skills and your people skills are the most important things. You are your own PR agent, you are your own marketer, you are your own promoter. So if you don't talk about your work, people don't know about it. Once someone knows about it, they should be inspired enough to engage their friends, to say that – hey, this freelancer's amazing, because look, this is exactly the work that we need in our this thing, and like, in our work and we can actually change that. So that way, I think marketing yourself, and you have like social media channels which you can do it from is good, make sure like word-of-mouth is travelling quite a lot, but if you're an antisocial freelancer, you pretty much will be only known for a few people. And that becomes difficult. Because the kind of work I do is, I become a part of the teams. I'm not just clicking a few pictures or making a documentary, and submitting it. Because that serves a different purpose, right? That's a different kind of a freelancer. I'm more of a strategist freelancer, and changing how the team works. So that way for me, it's impossible to be antisocial. Although I do want to be, I've become antisocial for my personal life. I've become more social in the professional life, and that's a shift which has happened ever since I started freelancing because I'm talking a lot more about my work.

**[39:47]** I'm excited and driven about my work right now, but I know it reaches points of burnout. Because once you take way too many clients as an excitement, and you have like a delivery standard, and especially if you have OCD about that delivered standard, you can actually have a burnout. I've had, like, a couple in 2017, and going forward, I want to make sure that I can control this. But you totally lose out on your social life, and that's something I've realised -- of your personal life -- and I'm trying to make sure, 2018's ambitions are to make sure I can balance personal and professional.

**[40:26]** Well, the government could definitely reduce my travel time, by fixing the road situation and traffic situation in the city that I live in. Cities can be more livable and lovable in order to, make sure, people are connected with the city more and like, India, as a country, is not suitable for doing business except for a few cities like Hyderabad, Bangalore, and Bombay. These are the top 3 cities when you look at it, for ease of work or ease of doing business. And that ease of doing business is specifically connected with how people are able to access their

workspace, how stressed are they when they're actually travelling to their workspace or going to the workspace, and I think that's something that the government has not, it's pretty much not on top of their priority. Like, how Hyderabad transformed itself, or Bangalore transformed itself, so that's something that I would definitely say, my daily commute, to like, me feeling less stressed when I'm accessing a workspace, because I work with so many clients. That's something that the government could definitely do, and easing the tax norms a bit.

**[41:30]** And I think Start Up India tried to definitely do that, by giving benefits to people who are starting up, around tax norms. But, I mean, I see a lot of people getting benefits out of it, so it's a welcome move, I would say, from the government's side. But also, going ahead, there are a lot of, lot of, benefits that the government can give to freelancers. Why do you need more people to be freelancers, or do you need more people to be employed? As a priority, where will the government focus on? And I, personally, I feel the livability angle of a city is way more important for me, as a freelancer, versus the government giving me super extra tax benefits when it comes to, being a freelancer. I mean, they're regularising it with GST, obviously those tax norms are going to increase, and that's where it's going to hit me bad. But, other than that, I don't think it's hitting me yet when it comes to tax norms. And I think, improving at least the CA, how you get your accounting done for GST, which is a very complicated process for a freelancer, could help. But I would say for the government to prioritise so that cities are more sustainable and livable, is more important to me right now, so that more clients come in and I can better people to work with, instead of just working with existing ones. Most of the people that I want to work with, they don't set up their offices here, because the cities are not worth living.

**[42:51]** GST has, kinda... I mean I have a really good CA, so I don't really know how it has affected me, basically. Just to get like a GST number, in addition to the existing thing, is kind of a pain. And to do monthly taxes, which is not easy, the process of doing GST is pretty complicated if you don't have a good CA. The CA's are, also overloaded with extra work which they didn't have, and now they're trying to pick and choose the clients they're working with, so that way I can see GST being like a hindrance. Especially after demonetisation. And I think some of the bills which are coming in, once you have more people being formal in an economy, I think the biggest things is that I just saw, like a thing, that the government is introducing an FDRI bill, which is very, very, very serious for an Indian population. And what happened in Cyprus, or what happened in other states, where the government can take your money when you're down in debt, and that's a huge thing which I'm not okay with. Government having access to my money.

**[44:00]** I'm excited about the fact that I'm using less currency notes and more digital economy, because it's formal and plus I love using --- I'm always in favour of anything digital. But there's a huge set of data and I don't trust where my data is going, so that's something that's worrying me a lot as well. But yeah, just simplifying the process of taxes is good, and giving more subsidies to people who are starting up. Yeah, I mean usually when you're setting up this thing you charge your GST, but like, that's really, not the case for a strategist. I engage with people for at least six months, I'm getting like monthly this thing, it's not --- I don't charge it, it's included in my fee.

So I have to cut from my fee and it goes, TDS plus this thing. With freelancers, it's a thing that they're losing money. It's tough for them to charge GST, especially if you're a strategist freelancer. Obviously as a designer, as a photography, you add GST on top of service tax and all those things that were there earlier, it's converted to GST at a certain percentage. But I've noticed that, I don't, I mean I just include the GST in the price that I'm giving, because it's easier to negotiate that.

**[45:11]** I think one of the things that I will see as a client is, I mean, thankfully most of the clients that I have met are amazing. I've become very picky with the kind of people that I work with. As soon as I feel, three things that are missing in a client, the idea of open to learning, the urgency of what they need immediately in the work and what value I can add, and third is that they're good with their money. And if they have finances to back themselves up, and like, how is my work directly benefiting them. So if the clients are not clear, I usually don't work with them, but if some of them are clear, I think the idea of --- when you're working with a freelancer, especially if a freelancer who's actually involved with your team, it's very important to have weekly check-ins. It's very important to be clear with the deliverables that are happening, instead of, not being aware of what the freelancer's doing and knowing that the freelancer is adding value to your work but then not really being clear on the deliverables. So clients which are not clear on the deliverables, I've had a huge problem with them because they don't know how to like quantify their impact. And I'm someone as a freelancer, because I'm so social media driven, I really, on a weekly basis, I'm checking as to, - okay, has the team learnt something? Is there direct impact? Is the client earning money back from investing in me? Is the client getting the right impact that the client wanted? Are they getting returns on it? So if that doesn't happen, and that can only happen when you have clear, quantifiable deliverables. If the client's not clear, then there's a huge problem for me on that. And that's something that I've faced initially. And now because of the kind of clients that I'm choosing, because I have the power to do that, like, I'm not facing that much.

*Interviewer: But also, I mean you had experience of working in other countries than India. So you can kind of compare, but I mean, Indian working culture is also a very specific working culture, where it has a reputation of being very vague, approximate, people are late, you know, it's not a very...*

**[47:07]** Yeah. I've become more punctual after freelancing.

*Interviewer: No, but what does that mean for freelancers. How is the Indian working culture for freelancers? How does it translate?*

**[47:18]** I have more experience in working for companies which are more influenced by Western working culture. So for me, I had to really bring down my expectations when I was working with Indian, this thing. What I've noticed specifically is, nonprofits are difficult to work with, because they suffer from a typical clarity of targets, knowing what they want, how they want, why they want it, how is it going to immediately impact them. Also, after the government's FCRA takedown, it's become even more vulnerable for them. But when it comes to working with, other people, I think there's more clarity and I feel like it's more connected. They adhere to the values that I have, like being on time, or making sure the tasks are credible and clear, having numbers for deliverables, and also continuously calculating impact. So one of the biggest

things I've realised is, when I work with a nonprofit it's tough to do it, and they require a lot more work and a lot more learning curve as compared to other organisations.

**[48:22]** Because also, again, like I mentioned earlier, it's about the credibility you establish. If you're a newbie, you're obviously going to have to dirty your hands and do extra work initially, to prove that you're a good freelancer or the skilled person in your field. But if you're an established person, the clients themselves want to ask you for new things, you have the right to say no. I mean, as I mentioned, you should be strong enough to be like – hey, I don't want this – get out from the meeting and leave. It comes with credibility and the amount of financial reserves you create.

**[48:53]** I think, five years later, I would want to be responsible for the largest network of mobile storytellers that are there in the world, who know how to use their mobile phones, and are increasing accountability of institutions, and individuals, through the mobile phones. That's something that I want to be responsible for, and see that change through my eyes. And through my work.

**[49:22]** I think in the field that I am, I need to constantly be updated, everyday there's something new happening. Technology platforms are competing with each other and coming up with new technologies, they're copying each other, data is becoming less private, there are more people coming online, and I think it's as a responsibility, I need to be updated on the policies and the changes happening at every platform every day, and provide that knowledge, and that creates the niche for me. And just because I'm cross-pollinating, between different fields, I get to know exactly what's happening in politics, what's happening in technology, what's happening in the policy world, what's happening on ground, what's happening with young people, so that way I feel empowered, because, I at least spend 20% of my week, or 15% of my week, literally, reading up and knowing more and more about what's new. And it's like a constant practice. I treat learning as a constant practice, like, constantly learning. I don't know if I have to quantify it in the day, but I would say at least 50% of the day is about learning new things.

**[50:24]** If we're not building new skill sets, there's no such thing as a social media expert, there's no such thing as a technology expert, there's no such thing as a coder. You can literally learn all these skill sets on your own. And I feel like, if you're keeping yourself confined to one community, one network, one skill set, you're losing out, not only as a freelancer but as an average human being who's a working professional in the world.

**[50:45]** So I usually work, I mean, initial days I was working only out of cafes, where we're sitting, Cafe Perch, and a lot of times Social and all these other cafes. But right now it's divided between --- most of my time is spent on the road travelling, to different clients' offices, and the second is I work, strictly, a lot, remotely. Because my work is mostly monitoring and evaluation as well, towards the end. So it's going to clients' offices, cafes, and remote working. I think Wi-Fi in coworking spaces is really good, but the 3G and the 4G connectivity of mobile phones is a huge pain, especially ever since Jio has come in, and the competition with Airtel has increased. But I think coworking spaces as a culture and infrastructure is amazing, and I love how they're

taking over the city. And, yeah, I think, internet can definitely improve, but these coworking spaces have some really amazing fiber optic lines, which is really good.