Fluttering of the butterfly

23rd June 1757 – a showdown took place between the armies of Siraj-ud-daulah, the Nawab of Bengal and the British East India Company on the banks of the river Bhagirathi, about 150 km from Kolkata in a place called Palashi. The British, worried about being outnumbered, formed a conspiracy with Siraj-ud-Daulah’s demoted army chief Mir Jafar. This led to a decisive victory for 3000 strong British East India Company soldiers and establishing British rule in South Asia for the next two hundred. One man’s treason led to the whole subcontinent being under foreign domination. This battle, remembered in history as the Battle of Plassey, is significant as being a watershed event which started the transformation of India which at that time was the richest country in the world to being one of the poorest today.

My dear Toastmaster of the day, President fellow toastmasters and guests, today I will share with you an amazing phenomenon called the butterfly effect which states that tiny variation in initial condition can lead to totally different outcome. The effect derives its name from the theoretical example of a hurricane’s formation being contingent on whether or not a distant butterfly had fluttered its wings several weeks before.

The term "butterfly effect" is related to the work of meteorologist Edward Lorenz. In 1961, Lorenz was using a numerical computer model to rerun a weather prediction. In the calculation he took a shortcut on a number in the sequence where he entered the decimal .506 instead of entering the full .506127. The result was a completely different weather scenario.

This phenomenon is not just restricted to weather pattern. We can see this in human psychology. Small actions, incidents or thoughts that get registered in our subconscious minds have a lasting impact in our lives. Mahatma Gandhi had stolen something small when he was a young boy. Later he realized his mistake and this incident was instrumental in shaping his character - and it was his character that led the world’s greatest freedom struggle. When APJ Abdul Kalam was a young boy he saw her mother sacrifice her own meal to share it with others. He recollects in his memoirs – ‘Wings of fire’ that it was this moment that instilled humility in him and he became an empathetic leader who inspired the team at Defence Research and Development Organization during the Agni missiles programme. There has been negative impact on people as well. For example – unfortunately, we often hear of some teenager who committed suicide for what we think was a small reason.

I am sure everybody sitting here could recollect incidents which changed the series of events that followed in a big way, such as – meeting a school teacher who removed a bad habit, losing a friend after a small fight, encouraging gesture from your parents that developed confidence in you to perform well in your board exams etc. Hence all actions in this world are related as even tiny events can have large repercussions – both positive and negative.

Let’s think of this effect in the broader perspective - think of the impact each one of us can make in a larger scale. Every action or decision we take matters not just for us but for generations to come. In Bangladesh, a man thought the unthinkable and started a bank that only lends to the poor. In thirty years of its operation, Grameen bank founded by Mohamum Younus changed the lives of 150 million
people. In our own country, we saw a 74 year old man going on a hunger strike, a gandhian method still finding reverence, which made us look within ourselves and forced the government to introduce anti-corruption laws. At Jantar Mantar, Did Anna Hazare possibly took the first steps towards a corruption free India? We don’t know, only time can tell.

Every steps that we take big or small, every role that we play big or small, every thought that we conceive big or small matters. Every inch we move closer to our goals, every drop of blood, sweat and tears that we shed, every second that we spend matters. Realization of this will make us a better person living in a better world. This is when the fluttering of the butterfly will result in a hurricane.