

**People
HEROES
AMONG US**

Anita at the Conserve office. She also runs a school-cum-shelter for her employees' children in the Madanpur Khatir slum and a food programme for over 10,000 poor kids in the area.

SHE TURNS RAGS TO RICHES

New Delhi-based Anita Ahuja is in the business of making fashion products from plastic waste

Going to waste It started 10 years ago as a noble neighbourhood movement. Today, Conserve, a non-profit organisation helmed by Anita Ahuja, 48, from New Delhi, is an example for others to follow. Anita's firm runs a successful export business of fashion products created from the unlikeliest of sources — trash. Discarded materials, mainly plastic or polythene bags, from across the city's wastelands, are used to produce high-end bags, fabrics, accessories and footwear.

Conserve's foot soldiers in this process are a team of 300 well-trained personnel, most of whom formerly worked as ragpickers across the city.

A scrappy start Two years after penning her first book, *Flames of Fervour*, Anita, who did her masters in political science from Miranda House, kicked off her first cleanliness drive, at the behest of some friends who were focusing on garbage disposal.

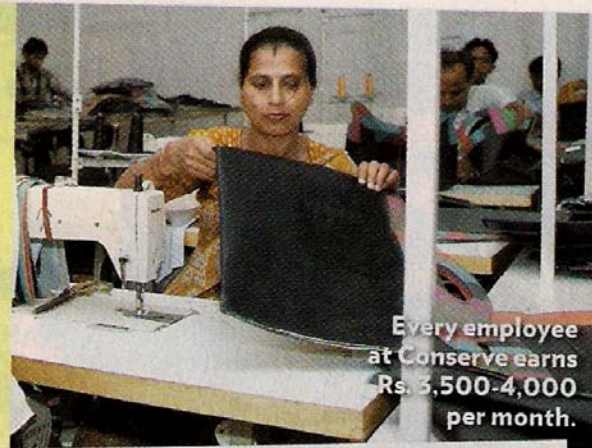
She says, "When we began, the motive was waste management and energy conservation. We started with a waste management project in one of the Delhi slums with the help of my family and some friends. Soon we branched to the Safdarjung area." Anita and her team collected garbage from 500 houses to make compost in a park nearby and mobilised ragpickers in the area to help. The compost generated was sold to residents and others in the locality. But Anita realised it was not enough.

"There really was not much of a market for locally produced compost. We needed something else which could effectively support the families of the ragpickers we had enlisted in our efforts," she says. Anita turned her attention to the one thing that cropped up more often than anything else when disposing garbage — plastic bags. "We decided to convert plastic bags into thick eco-friendly fabrics."

Conserve began to teach ragpickers to collect, sort and grade plastic bags, setting up a training facility in the slums of Narela.

Even garbage can! Conserve's modest, yet impressive, repertoire of products includes bags, fancy

“ We want big stars or trendsetters to adopt our products so that they get noticed ” — ANITA



Every employee at Conserve earns Rs. 3,500-4,000 per month.

Conserve trains ragpickers to collect, sort and grade plastics; Anita, seen here with a team member.



footwear and accessories. After successful initial showings at international trade and diplomatic events, Conserve built a loyal customer base abroad and expanded into an export business with an annual turnover of Rs. 1.5 crore.

Her products cost between Rs. 500-3,000 a piece and are sold in stores across Britain, France and the U.S.A. "The products are designed by me and other designers we have enlisted," says Anita. Last year, Anita's dream of making Conserve so successful that every team member became a shareholder, got a boost when her firm entered into a joint venture with Danish fashion retailer, Bestseller.

Plastic becomes fantastic Most of the plastic bags, collected from landfill sites by the ragpickers employed with Conserve, are then subjected to certain levels of heat and pressure to produce thick fabrics commonly known as Handmade Recycled Plastic (HRP).

The group relies on the natural colours of the plastic to create these products. "Because many people we employed couldn't tell one colour from the other, we attributed each colour with a Bollywood actor or actress's name," says Anita.

Trash as treasure A mother of two, Anita thinks she couldn't have come this far without help from family and friends. Now, she hopes that more famous names will support Conserve. "We want big stars or trendsetters to adopt our products," says Anita. ●

Ankit Jain

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A PEOPLE HERO is one who is elevated from ordinary to extraordinary by actions which are both noble and inspirational. Know a hero? Email suggestions to heroes@peplemagindia.com