



Recycling – and rebuilding lives – in India

Power over plastic

Political writer Anita Ahuja found a way to make good use of the plastic bags thrown away in Delhi. **Winsome Lane** meets the environmentally friendly bag lady

Some 200 pupils in a small school in a New Delhi slum watched while the national flag was hoisted above the school on India's Independence Day in August last year. They cheered as the flag went up and joined in singing the national anthem.

The children had reason to be cheerful. Their parents are from the lowest caste in India, the "rag-pickers" – people who make their living picking through the garbage dumps of the city to find anything that can be sold. Most of these people are illiterate and there is no way they could

have afforded to give their children an education were it not for a compatriot who thought about turning plastic rubbish bags into fashion accessories.

Anita Ahuja was a political writer, fond of taking up public causes, and she was very concerned about the growing plastic plague in her country. "It's a self-sustaining plague. As incomes rise, India is manufacturing like crazy to meet the demand for more TVs and stereos and packaged food, and they all come wrapped in plastic," says Ahuja, who is famous for her book, *Flames of Fervour*,

about the dispute over a religious site in Ayodhya where Hindu extremists demolished a 16th-century mosque.

India is the world's third-largest consumer of plastic products, just behind the US and China, and its demand grows by 12% a year, according to official figures. The discarded plastic clogs up drains, leads to flooding in the cities and even gets into the stomach of domestic animals. Studies have shown that the average cow in India has at least 100 plastic bags in its stomach when it dies. Ahuja was determined to do something about it.

WHITE WASH: Women wash plastic bags gathered from Delhi's streets. At Conserve, the non-profit organization formed by Anita Ahuja, members of India's lower caste earn some cash by turning the rubbish into fashion accessories for sale around the world.

Rubbish collector

It all began in 1998 when Ahuja decided that the plastic bags clogging up her city could be recycled into something useful. Over the next two years, she experimented with various things. During these tests, she collected used plastic bags herself, and her friends and family had to get accustomed to her suddenly leaving them, or stopping her car to rush across the street and pick up some filthy bags from the gutter.

She soon discovered that the bags could be pressed together and made into a strong yet light material. The existing colors of the bags could be kept for the new fabric, so no dyeing was necessary. Purely as an experiment, she made up some tote bags, file folders and pen-holders from the fabric and took 15 pieces along to a trade fair at the US embassy in Delhi. To her surprise, they sold out within an hour and she realized she might have hit on a good idea.

With the help of a designer friend, Nandita Shaunik, she began to make fashion bags and belts. Meanwhile, Ahuja's engineer husband, Shabalha, had invented a machine – with patent pend-

IN THE BAG: Workers at Conserve's Delhi factory put together the handbags. Buyers now come from abroad to visit the modern 15,000-square-foot factory, which opened in November. Conserve employs 300 workers and there are plans to expand.



Rani day bag



Zinta day bag

ing – that takes the used plastic bags and compresses them into the new fabric, called polyethylene. The couple formed a non-profit and non-government organization called Conserve to produce and market the fashion accessories. Then they hired members of the lowest caste to forage for used plastic bags and taught unskilled workers to make the new bags in their living rooms.


"As soon as people knew what we were doing, we got a lot of help," Ahuja says. "Some international designers volunteered their services, the Asian Development Bank gave us funds to carry on, and trade fair organizers helped us with attracting buyers and designing booths."

Using her contacts in government, Ahuja secured Conserve IDs for her rag-pickers so they would not be harassed when they were collecting bags on the streets and she also got certificates of endorsement from Delhi's chief minister.

When Conserve applied to the Indian ministry of culture to categorize what they were doing as craft – which would have exempted the group from certain export payments – officials turned them down, saying a craft had to be at least 500 years old. ▶

FAIR TRADE: Left, Anita Ahuja, at the Asia Pacific Leather Fair in Hong Kong, with Harsha Chauhan, who represents her company in the city. In October last year, Ahuja won an award for the Best Eco-Friendly Collection at the fair.





"India is the world's third-largest consumer of plastic products, just behind the US and China... Studies have shown that the average cow in India has at least 100 plastic bags in its stomach when it dies."

REINCARNATION: Washed plastic bags are hung out to dry in the heat of India. The existing colors can be preserved, so there's no need for dyeing. Ahuja's engineer husband, Shabalha, invented a machine that compresses the used plastic bags and turns them into polyethylene fabric.

► Right to learn

Despite the setback, the novel creations proved popular, with buyers from all corners of the globe. Ahuja put the profits back into the enterprise to benefit her workers, who lived in the poorest slums of Delhi, and she opened a school near where they lived, with nominal tuition.

"I didn't want them to think of this as a hand-out," says Ahuja. "I wanted them to realize the value of the education we were giving their children, so we have fixed a very small fee for those who can afford it."

Still, if parents have any problem with payments, they are exempted.

Ahuja says Conserve is paying the workers enough to live on and to afford the small school fees. Traditionally, India's low-caste people had no hope of ever rising to something better as their status was deemed inherited, but now, with a steady income from Conserve, there is hope for them and their children, at least for those living in Delhi.

"The school was opened last year, and our Independence Day celebration was the first official function," Ahuja says. "It was a sweet moment for me, to see all those happy faces of children who have been given one of the greatest of human rights – the right to learn."

Conserve currently employs 300 workers and there are plans to expand. A 15,000-square-foot factory in east Delhi was opened in November. "We are just getting used to having so much space,"



Flying Blue necklace

Ahuja tells *ReviewAsia*. "Since we began in 2000, our workers have been making the bags in the small living rooms of their houses, but now we have plenty of space. It is a modern factory with areas for design, a sampling unit, production unit, quality control, inspection and packaging.

"We are now inviting buyers to come and see us in Delhi," Ahuja adds. "We have a spacious modern factory to show

them and we can demonstrate how the fabric and the products are made. This is much better than expecting them to visit us at trade fairs in other parts of the world. And previously, buyers were reluctant to go into the worst slum areas of the city to see the workers in their living rooms."

Award-winning goods

Exhibiting these products at various trade fairs also helps stimulate sales. In October last year, Ahuja presented her goods at the Asia Pacific Leather Fair (APLF) in Hong Kong and won an award for the Best Eco-Friendly Collection. She will be joining the APLF again later this month.

"Conserve won the award for the effective use of throwaway plastic bags, renewing them as innovative material with great visual appeal and translating them into fashionable products. Anita Ahuja is a remarkable woman and a great fashion innovator," said Perrine Ardouin, events organizer for APLF.

Ahuja also conducted a seminar for buyers during the Hong Kong show, talking

Maya sandals



Gulbadan evening bag

Saraswati tote bag



on the recycling of waste materials for fashion production.

Today, Conserve sells a range of accessories – from handbags to tote bags and sandals. The jewelry collection is a new addition, with a bit of assistance from German designer Claudia von Hausemann, who discovered how to make necklaces, earrings and bracelets from odd pieces of plastic found among the garbage.

Conserve designer handbags can be found in boutiques all over the world where they sell for around US\$40 each. Smart boutiques as well as chain stores in France, the UK and the US are now selling Conserve products.

During their first year of operation, Conserve reported a turnover of over US\$100,000. At the end of last year, it sold products worth US\$375,000 – more than double the previous year's tally.

With the opening of Conserve's new factory in Delhi, things are looking good for the coming year. So far, several European chain stores have made enquiries and the products are being taken by lifestyle chain store Habitat in the UK while a big New York retailer has given

Conserve a firm order for 50,000 bags, according to Ahuja.

However, despite the retail success, Ahuja feels she has yet to solve the plastic bag problem. "Recycling plastic bags in this manner is a motivation to dispose of them correctly. It is not a whole solution and should not be accepted as an endorsement for continued use of plastic bags," she says. "They are an enormous nuisance and hopefully, one day, the need for them will no longer be felt. Until then, every effort must be taken so that these eyesores are collected from the garbage dumps and recycled appropriately." ♦



Check it out.

Catch Anita Ahuja at the Asia Pacific Leather Fair in Hong Kong from March 31 to April 2. Check out www.aplf.com for more details.



Value-added views.

Visit www.conserveindia.org to learn more about the non-profit organization and order some of the Conserve fashion accessories and jewelry at the online store.



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