

Fighting Poverty through Fashion A Case Study

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The name Bahadurgarh, would in all probability, not ring a bell with most people. It's just one of those places that happen to exist: unseen, unrecognized. The same would've been said of its people until recently. So the question arises, what's special about Bahadurgarh? And about its people, its residents? The answer lies in the shunned, socially "unfavourable" employment of rag pickers, which is what most residents of Bahadurgarh, in an attempt to earn their bread and butter, are engaged in.

Everybody understands that cleanliness is important, and that the city's waste must be going somewhere. However, what most people don't stop to think, is where the city's waste disappears and who facilitates the process of ensuring city's cleanliness (or to whatever extent cleanliness exists).

It's the rag pickers who play an extremely pivotal role in the city's system of maintaining cleanliness. It's through the waste collection efforts of the rag pickers that the big industries also thrive on.

According to available statistics, in 2011, India generated a whopping 1,85,132 tonnes of waste. This number is expected to see a 50% increase and reach an even more mind-boggling 25,18,515 tonnes in 2021. Each person in Delhi generated 0.650 tonnes of waste in 2011, out of which less than 30% was treated and under 60% reached landfill sites.

The capacity of the waste management systems of Delhi is insufficient, with the city generating more than double the amount of waste the system can actually dispose appropriately. The result is an ever-rising amount of non-biodegradable waste, especially plastic materials that not only adds to the filthiness of the city but also plays a major role in the rising pollution levels, the degradation of the soil quality, impairment in the movement of water, etc.¹The plastic material not only harm the environment in general, but even the marine life forms supported by it that one wouldn't imagine could get affected.² The degree of damage caused is enormous and, the organisation Conserve strives to alleviate some of it with its effects.

¹ Anonymous, *Soil Pollution*, [Http://NsdL.Niscair.Res.In/Bitstream/123456789/990/1/Soil_pollution.Pdf](http://NsdL.Niscair.Res.In/Bitstream/123456789/990/1/Soil_pollution.Pdf), Last Visited To 10Th September 2012.

² Anonymous, *Marine Litter*, [Http://Www.Unep.Org/Regionalseas/Marinelitter/Publications/Docs/Anl_oview.Pdf](http://Www.Unep.Org/Regionalseas/Marinelitter/Publications/Docs/Anl_oview.Pdf), Last Visited On 10Th September 2012.

Industries depend on rag pickers to a large extent, for as they play a major role in collecting waste that is useful for industrial purposes. The waste provides a major share of the raw materials to the factories. So one doesn't have to think too much to figure out that the city's industries would come to a standstill if there were no rag pickers.

Given the role played by the rag pickers is, one would assume that their work is recognized and they get due credit for their efforts. Unfortunately, that assumption by is incorrect. In spite of all the work put in by the rag pickers, the long distances travelled by them under scorching summer sun or cold winter, they have no rights that one would assume, everybody living in a country with a Constitution as comprehensive and progressive as ours, would possess. Naturally, this lack of recognition leads to numerous problems for the rag picker communities. A lot of them are migrants, not only from other states, but also countries like Afghanistan. Since most of these workers are considered to be illegal immigrants, they aren't recognised by the government, let alone be provided any support. They possess no proof of identification, which disenables them from gaining access to simple necessities like ration cards, bank accounts. According to the NGO Chintan, rag pickers "are unrecognized and have almost no right to work, despite the fact that they save almost 14% of the municipal budget annually. In Delhi, an army of estimated 80,000 waste pickers save the city at least Rs. 6 lakh daily through their work."

In spite of the support that these workers lend to the government and municipality and the huge amounts of funds that they help in saving, the conditions that they have to survive are abysmal.

- 1) **Issues faced by rag pickers (level 2):** The average income that a rag picker receives is a mere Rs. 50 a day, not at all sufficient to make his/her ends meet. In this scenario, the rag pickers have to send their children to work, or even sell them to exploitative workers for some extra income.³
- 2) **Health care issues:** Lack of resources naturally leads to lack of access to health care facilities. But it's not just basic health care that eludes these workers. Their working condition is most appalling. The workers spend most of their time in filthy environment, searching through the garbage without any gloves or shoes. They often have to handle medical waste like used syringes, condoms which further impacts their health adversely. Health problems like worms, anaemia, respiratory ailments are common with rag pickers.
- 3) **Lack of education for the children:** Since the children are forced to help their parents and siblings, they're unable to go to school.

³ Anonymous, "Causes Of Child Labour", [Http://Www.Childlabour.In/Causes-Of-Child-Labour.Htm](http://Www.Childlabour.In/Causes-Of-Child-Labour.Htm), Last Visited On 19Th February 2012

- **79% children are out of school because** neither their parents nor the contractor [for whom they are working] see the benefits of sending them to school. Moreover, since the children earn additional income by working, they fail to recognize the importance of getting an education, as it would be at the cost of that income.
 - **5% children drop out of school because** they don't find the school engaging enough. There could be many reasons for this like uninteresting teaching methods, and inability to afford the cost of better quality private institutions.
 - **4% of the children attended school but** did not find a favourable atmosphere. Both they and their parents experienced discouraging discrimination at the hands of the teachers and other students.
 - **10% children found** that they could neither understand nor recall what they had been taught. These symptoms will have to be studied for identifying possible learning disorders. Language is also a big barrier, as migrant children often don't speak the language of the city they work in.
- 4) **Threat of abuse:** To make matters worse, the community is vulnerable to abuse, including sexual abuse. They often end up suffering from drug and alcohol addictions. With lack of support from law enforcement authorities, they have very few sources to depend on for assistance.
- 5) **Prevalence of child labour:** India has the highest number of child labourers under the age of 14 years in the world, with children working in many industries like footwear, garments and other hazardous industries like glass blowing, match works etc⁴. This is in spite of The Child Labour (Prohibition) Act, 1986, which was enacted to eradicate child labour.⁵ Due to inadequate implementation of the act, the problem still exists and it leads to a vicious cycle of illiteracy and consequent unemployment.

This part discusses, at length, the initiatives taken by Conserve India to help this rag pickers and the impact of their efforts on the workers' lives.

Conserve India's many initiatives are based on a single innovative idea - converting non-biodegradable waste into consumer products. The sale proceedings are then used to fund the rehabilitation of the workers. This unique method is more energy efficient as compared to recycling and results in fewer carbon emissions.

⁴ Priyanka Khanna, "Combating Child Labour", [Http://www.unicef.org/india/child_protection_1726.htm](http://www.unicef.org/india/child_protection_1726.htm) Last Visited On 19Th February 2012

⁵ Anonymous, "The Child Labour (Prohibition) Act, 1986", [Http://www.tnchildlabour.tn.gov.in/prohibition.htm](http://www.tnchildlabour.tn.gov.in/prohibition.htm), Last Visited On 10Th February 2012

This idea thus addresses waste management issues in New Delhi, especially disposal of plastic waste, while simultaneously providing better job opportunities to the millions who work as rag pickers in the city. By converting waste plastic materials into useful consumer products, it also tackles the environmental threat posed by the non-treatment of the non-biodegradable wastes.

Conserve India has adapted an innovative technique converts waste plastic into raw materials, which then is used to design high fashion products. This method of converting waste material into useful raw materials is also known as up-cycling. Up-cycling of plastic bags into consumer products is a relatively new activity which has excellent potential given the increasing environmental awareness in the contemporary urban society.

Technology/production detail: The process involves the use of heating and pressing waste plastic materials to transform it into raw materials that can be turned into high fashion products. The technology can also be used to create low cost building tiles, wall papers amongst other products.

What is novel about this innovation is that it uses lesser amount of energy than regular recycling methods. Also, it retains the colour of the plastic



bags, thereby eliminating the need to add colour dyes to the products. The desired colour of the raw material depends on the colour combination of plastic, allowing flexibility in variation of colours and patterns.

Meeting consumer needs: The common practice of treating waste plastic materials involves recycling and smelting processes to create plastic chairs, etc. This consumes a large amount of energy and the result entails a loss of the original physical properties. This process, on the other hand retains all the original properties, especially the colours which can be used to develop creative aesthetic designs.

Conservation of the environment: The innovation helps in conservation of the environment since it uses existing non-biodegradable materials instead of using the dwindling natural resources.

Nature of engagement, support and strategies offered by Conserve:

- 1) Providing extensive knowledge and training to workers- Conserve works with several external fabricator groups. Majority of these groups began as Conserve employees and were then trained to set up their own small businesses. Conserve conducted multiple skill-training workshops and provided small amounts of capital for equipment purchases. This support for the small entrepreneurs is fundamental to Conserve's vision for employment creation as each fabricator employs 10 workers. These groups are able to work both for Conserve and other firms they can tie-up with. The system of external fabricators provides Conserve with the benefit of flexibility: it helps to maintain the number of full-time employees at a manageable level but ensures availability of extra resources when orders exceed in-house capacity. Conserve supports the fabricators with all necessary training and closely monitors their compliance with fair-trade principles.
- 2) Hamara School- Hamara School (slated to start in July) is a major element of the strategy to tackle the problems faced by working children, especially those who work on the dumping grounds. It is a non-controversial entry point programme designed to facilitate their reintegration into mainstream education system. These children, as explained before, are forced to work in the occupation themselves due to the inability of their parents to send them to schools. They're unfortunately at the very bottom rung of the social hierarchy, with no access to education or healthcare whatsoever. The main objective of Hamara School is to provide the children with a better alternative to keep them away from work on the dumping grounds. The school hopes to bridge the gap that exists between the children and the path of success and their dreams. It will be the child's first contact with

Conserve, wherein the child will be provided with an opportunity to do what he/she feels like doing yet be gradually introduced to the educational processes. Once the children attain their age-appropriate competencies, they will be encouraged and convinced to join a mainstream school. The services offered by the school will include not only educational, but also recreational, pre vocational, counseling and medical services that will cater to the child's every need. It shall be a low cost and replicable model which caters to the immediate needs of those children, and be their first step toward a better future.

- 3) Medical services- Conserve strives at not only improving the economic conditions of the rag pickers, but also to eliminate the various health dangers that they're exposed to on a daily basis. It has implemented many healthcare projects like funding a health care check-up van to visit the slums, children's de-worming clinics, educational sessions on family planning, sexual health and hygiene, clinics with gynaecologists, eye specialists and general physicians.

This community has seen a significant change thanks to its own and Conserve's efforts and initiatives, where otherwise they would have continued to suffer due to the ignorance and negligence of the city.

The third part of the case aims to highlight the various ways in which Conserve's initiatives and support strategies have directly created the possibility for sustainable livelihoods for the rag picker communities. Building on the successes of its initial projects, the new vision of "Sustainable provision of skills, services and advisory to groups of urban and rural poor" enables Conserve NGO to channel the key skills of Conserve into impactful projects across the base of the pyramid.

Major impact by Conserve's efforts:

- 1) Providing expert knowledge and advisory: Conserve passes on the knowledge it possesses in the area of export markets and its business relationships to small artisan groups set up all across India. The NGO has associated itself with self-help groups, which it trains to facilitate the selling of the products they create. In 2010-2011, Conserve NGO conducted 199 group training sessions. Technical training is critical to ensure them mainstream employment opportunities. They undergo a one-year training program to become a factory worker and a five-year training program to become a small-scale entrepreneur. Conserve not only trains them, but also provides internship programmes to introduce them to the factory union. The union teaches them to demand their rights, negotiate their salary and other benefits that they're entitled to.

- 2) Environmental Performance- Delhi generates 8000 tons of garbage every day. The local municipality has the capacity to collect only 4000 tons. Over the years, this has led to the build-up of huge “plastic mountains”. Lack of technology to dispose them appropriately has led to widespread pollution. The government has run campaigns in recent times to discontinue use of plastics. While the initiative will take some time to be fruitful, Conserve, by purchasing these waste materials and supporting rag picker communities, decreases the volume of material destined for landfill or incineration.
- 3) Employment Creation- Having initially worked with only rag-pickers, Conserve now creates employment for people from the bottom of the pyramid in 3 ways, namely, full time employment in Conserve’s factory, support for external fabricators and an increase in the average daily earning of rag pickers from Rs. 50 to Rs. 200 – 300 which cumulates to form a minimum monthly wage of Rs. 6,000. In the year 2010-2011, Conserve had 55 people under direct employment and 86 people under indirect employment. Since its inception, Conserve NGO has excelled in providing skills’ training that enables un-skilled rag pickers in establishing themselves in paid employment, with rights.
- 4) Improving access to healthcare- Conserve has always put concerted effort to combat the health problems that the workers face. It has initiated many projects, as mentioned earlier. The result of these projects has led to over 1,200 successful medical screenings in just the year 2010-2011, which means that over 1,200 people are leading healthier lives, due to the sensitive approach of Conserve.
- 5) Improving access to education- Bahadurgarh is one of the many slums on the outskirts of Delhi. The dwellers relocated here after the demolition of many of the slums in Delhi for the Commonwealth Games in 2010. But what was demolished was not just the slums, but also the schools that catered to the educational needs of the children living there. The schools were the children’s one shot at gaining the education they deserve, and it disappeared along with their homes. Families, in order to gain additional income, either send their children to work or worse sell them to exploitative workers. 98% of children can’t go to school as it is unaffordable while 79% are out because their parents don’t see the benefits of education. 5 % drop out because of lack of proper teaching methods and inability to go to private institutions. Language also poses to be a big barrier. The children have to engage in rag picking instead of attending school, sometimes completing 2-3 shifts a day. The working conditions are hazardous to say the least and the children have to sometimes eat the filthy remnants they find at the garbage dumps. Conserve has started Hamara School to help these children to gain an education which

would help them get out of the vicious circle of poverty and resultant no education. The school will take around 200 children during the course of the entire project. The first part of the project will be aimed at convincing them to leave the dumping grounds, come to the school regularly and get acclimatised to the surroundings. They'll be allowed to play, rest, etc and once they're comfortable, they'll gradually be drawn into the education process, based on their needs and capability. Conserve will be a vital facilitator in shaping a better future for 200 kids who'll be able to lead independent, satisfying lives, far removed from the dumping grounds.

Every process that is initiated with the aim of achieving a goal or an objective faces at least some challenges. The larger and more comprehensive the goals, the larger are the challenges met. Conserve is no different. The organization, whose work spans 3 different areas that affect society deeply, faces challenges with respect to each of these areas.

- 1) Social challenges- Conserve strives to gain recognition for the rag pickers but is faced with obstacles right from the beginning. The idea of "waste being impure" is not a new notion for the Indian society. Indians are taught from a very young age not to handle any sort of waste due to many reasons, a lot of which is based on superstition. These superstitions and narrow beliefs, such as the caste system which started out as a system to divide society in the order of the occupation performed, unfortunately spread in such a fashion that has resulted in generations of exploitation and ill treatment at the hands of the so-called "upper castes" for those who had to handle waste as they belonged to the "lower castes". This belief still a long way from disappearing with continues, and has led people viewing rag pickers with suspicion. This in turn kept them firmly rooted at the bottom of the social ladder. Conserve strives hard to change this mindset, but it is accompanied by its share of challenges.
- 2) Economic challenges faced by the rag pickers- Economic problems faced by the rag pickers results in their children being forced to work as rag pickers instead of attending school and attaining education. Though Conserve has started a school for the children of rag pickers, it has been difficult to draw the children and their families out of the habit of working rather than schooling. Most parents and children alike don't see the benefits of schooling or attaining proper education, and it takes a lot of time to convince them of the same. The children who do end up attending schools also drop out due to their families' needs, and problems faced by them in coping with the curriculum.

- 3) Challenges faced due to competitors- Conserve's most comparable competitors are ethical brands that focus on recycled products, with or without a social mission. There are small companies across the globe, some examples are:

Europe

- Freitag – Swiss recycled bag brand, using truck tarpaulin, bicycle tube and seatbelts
- Kultbag – German recycled bags, using truck tarpaulin and airbeds

South America

- Ecoist - Peru/Mexico - Bags made from recycled candy wrappers, food packages, newspapers. Fair-trade, Socially responsible and eco-focussed: plants a tree for every bag sold

America and Canada

- Trashedbags – Canadian recycled bag brand that invests profits in micro-enterprise in Liberia
- Sarah*Bella Upcycled bags – Bags made of plastic waste in the US

India

- Handmade expressions – US-based company that works with artisan groups in India to make responsible, sustainable, and Fair Trade products

- 4) Challenges faced due to problems with the material used- Although Handmade Recycled Product (HRP) has so far done well in the market, its uses are constrained by several weaknesses:

- The material cannot be folded
- The material is prone to tears
- The material is susceptible to cracks
- The material has a rough texture
- Low adhesiveness means expensive adhesive is required
- Material can only be produced in 1m sheets

- 5) Other constraints- Conserve's business has grown steadily (average turnover growth 23%) but has been constrained by:

- Limited factory space
- Small management team
- Longlearning curve for new entrants to manufacturing and export market.

These factors have meant that growth has largely been driven by external factors, with Conserve responding reactively to market and customer pulls.

Conserve is managed by a small but dedicated team. Founders Anita and Shalabh continue to have oversight of both the company and the NGO. The COO, Gaurav Dhingra, who has been involved for many years. The management can be characterised as entrepreneurial and creative - continually pushing Conserve to try new materials, processes and products. The team is also recognised within the industry for their strong relationships, building long-lasting working relationships with key buyers. Conserve's team has proven (over 4 years) its up-cycling expertise and its business acumen in making Conserve's dream a reality. They all share a common passion for social enterprise and contribute towards it. The CEO's technical and entrepreneurial skills are complemented by the Creative Director, Anita Ahuja's design and creative skills while the COO, Gaurav has worked with people and materials all his life and brings this valuable experience with him. The second tier of management has over 30 people with years of experience in production, training, quality control and export. Apart from this, Conserve also employs various interns throughout the year who help the Creative Director with designing the products, research work, etc. Conserve has a contingent of semi-skilled and skilled crafts persons who produce up cycled products.

Conserve has been growing at an average rate of 35% every year and has built the export markets of the US, Europe and Australia. Apart from the team's consistent and continuous efforts, factors like increased social consciousness and the ever-increasing environmental awareness have all combined to ensure that Conserve's efforts are recognized and appreciated across all arenas, whether governmental support, markets, or people at large.

Henry Ford's famous quote, "Coming together is a beginning, keeping together is progress. Working together is success" very effectively sums up the entire idea that Conserve emulates. It is hoped that with reflected in Conserve's motto, "People, Planet" will continue to fulfil its mission through the organization's efforts and set an example for others to follow.