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THE GROWING LURE OF UPCYCLED PRODUCTS

Entrepreneurs are converting scrap material into usable, fashionable and even desirable products



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ANTHILL CREATIONS

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At the 2018 World Economic Forum in Davos, Lego Foundation's chief executive officer John Goodwin said play is now an "endangered species." He was trying to convince heads of state and corporate honchos about the importance of play in life. Of course, he was talking about critical thinking and problem-solving skills. But before that, there is the joy of play itself.

It is common knowledge that children now are playing outside far less than earlier generations. There are many reasons for this, the most significant among them in India being a lack of access to safe play areas. Recent reports from panels on education in India have shown that more than 40% (the number goes up to 67% in some reports) of the schools do not have a playground. Even outside school, where children spend many hours of their day, there are few parks and playgrounds open to all.

Access to play areas is even more reduced for children who come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and attend government schools. Indeed, where leaky roofs, broken toilets and teacher salaries are regular problems, providing play spaces assumes lowest priority. Streets are crowded and unsafe, and public play spaces almost entirely absent.

That is where Anthill Creations steps in. Founded by architect Pooja Rai and a group of her friends, Anthill Creations is a not-for-profit agency that has been turning discarded tyres and industrial scrap material into playgrounds for children. Their aim, says Rai, is to make play accessible and affordable to all children. It began in 2015 when Rai, just finishing architecture course, saw children at a local school play with whatever material they had on hand, like broken cement pipes and torn rubber slippers. "Whatever the financial situation of the family, play should not be a luxury for any child," says Rai, who then came up with the idea of converting cheap and readily available scrap into something valuable for such kids.

With their limited resources, Anthill wanted to create playscapes that were cheap to build as well as durable. "We did

not want to cause any damage to the environment, and use something that was sustainable and easily available. Rubber is sturdy and versatile, and also safe, with no sharp edges that can hurt children." That is how old rubber tyres began to turn into swings and see-saws in the hands of the talented design team.

They work mainly with government schools, as well as some private educational institutions and community groups, to create complete play areas. Since 2017, they have built over 310 playgrounds in 20 Indian states, helping provide over 153,000 children a space to play. The playscapes are not just meant to improve physical health and spark joy but also to kindle imagination and strengthen creativity.

HELLO, UPCYCLING!

In the last few years, young Indian entrepreneurs have been converting scrap material that is cheap, available easily and abundantly—from plastic waste and broken glass to castoff clothes and wooden blocks—into usable, fashionable and even desirable products. Not surprising then that 'upcycling' is the new buzzword in the field of sustainability.

While recycling destroys and processes waste to create new products, upcycling is about creating new products from the

Worldwide, there is growing demand for ethical fashion, made with human and environmental considerations. The market for such textiles may total \$7.6 billion by 2027.

current state of waste materials. It prevents waste from accumulating more and more in landfills, which leads to soil degradation and increased greenhouse gas emissions. Not just that, upcycling increases the value of the waste products, and provides livelihood to artisans and craftspeople in the process. And this is happening across various sectors, from not-for-profit social agencies to high-stakes fashion houses.

Worldwide, there is an increasing demand for ethical fashion, that is fashion made with both human and environmental considerations. The global market for re/upcycled textiles has been valued at \$5.6 billion as of 2019, slated to reach \$7.6 billion by 2027, growing at a CAGR (compound annual growth rate) of 3.6%. The other major segment is upcycled food waste, with a recent research report by Future Market Insights suggesting that the industry is currently valued at \$52.91 billion. It is projected to touch \$83.26 billion by 2023, growing at a CAGR of 4.6%.

The upcycling market, nevertheless, is still nascent in India.

Delhi-based artist Molly works with wood that has been thrown away as broken and unusable or just plain old and boring, and converts them into exquisite functional art, or art that can be used every day. "I love trees," declares Molly. "I think it's a pity when people throw away broken furniture, because a tree died to become that chair or table. My work is to give that wood a second lease of life."

Her product range at Design5 goes from small earrings and home décor items, to bespoke dining tables and cabinets. Molly says that wood has a long life and can be easily salvaged or repaired, even if it seems to be in bad shape.

Meanwhile, in Chennai, Wasted has partnered with Tetra Pak, a food packaging company, to encourage people to return their used beverage cartons, through a campaign called 'Take me back.' To make it easier for people to think about recycling, there are drop-off boxes across the city. These cartons are then sorted, cleaned and upcycled into benches and desks for schools that need low-cost furniture. The Tetra Pak company itself has been involved in this green initiative in other cities too, helping crate 200 classroom desks and chairs with every 800,000 cartons collected.

But nowhere is upcycling a trendier word than in the world of fashion, with global luxury brands like Balenciaga, Stella McCartney, and MiuMiu promoting exclusive upcycled collections in the past few years. And so, it is with our home-grown fashion brands too. More importantly, there are now dozens of small businesses that have embraced upcycling as their primary value proposition.

Take Doodlage, for instance. The company was born out of the realization that upcycling is a concept deeply rooted in Indian culture—and let's admit it, as Indians, we throw away nothing that can be repurposed and reused. Doodlage works with factory waste and fabric scraps to create limited edition collections of a range of products including clothes for men, women and kids, zero waste toys, footwear, bags and wallets, and home décor items.

"Doodlage started with an idea to increase awareness about the need for conscious consumption among consumers and providing solutions in the form of products that allow for this lifestyle change," co-founder Kriti Tula says. Indeed, one of the exclusive collections presented by Doodlage at the Lakme



WHAT

'Upcycling', or creating new products from waste material, is the buzzword for sustainability now. It prevents waste from accumulating in landfills, which leads to soil degradation.

AND

Dozens of small businesses in India have embraced upcycling. Entrepreneurs are converting scrap material that is cheap and easily available into fashionable products.

BUT

The question: does upcycling have enough demand to make it worthwhile for brands that work for profit? Some founders admit people are unwilling to pay more for upcycled stuff.

Fashion Week in Mumbai a few years ago was called 'Purge' since it made use of unwanted material, in this case, denim.

There are others like Bombay Closet Cleanse, Refash, and The Second Life, who use a variety of discarded materials apart from clothing, like leather pieces, old newspapers, and even elephant dung (used by Goli Soda to make stationery). After all, one person's trash is another's treasure.

Another favourite item for upcycling brands is the old sari, a garment readily found in most Indian homes. Niki Gomez, director of marketing, I was a Sari, a fashion brand, says that they have been taking the sari global by turning it into contemporary wear. In 2021 alone, the brand gave new life to 168,000 square metres of sari that would otherwise end up as textile waste.

THE CLIMATE IMPERATIVE

All this comes not a moment too soon. Given that the fashion industry is known to have some of the most environment unfriendly practices, from using up 1.5 trillion litres of water to cutting down

70 million trees every year (some sources peg this number at 200 million). Stefano Funari, founder, I was a Sari, says in a TED talk that the industry also accounts for 10% of global carbon emissions and 20% of waste water. According to the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, garment companies alone will add 22 million tonnes of microfibers in the ocean by 2050, and will also increase their share of the carbon budget from 2% to 26%. And each season, the fashion industry overproduces to the extent of 30-40%—clothes that don't even hit the markets but head straight to waste-land.

However, the fault lies not with the fashion industry alone, but also with end users. Out of 100 billion garments produced annually, 73% of them go into landfills or get incinerated before their lifetime—quantified by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation as one garbage truck full of clothes every second—significantly adding to greenhouse gas emissions. India generates an estimated 960 million tonnes of waste a year, including over 1 million tonnes of textile waste and 8.5 million tonnes of plastic.

Research shows that extending the life of a single item of clothing just by nine months could cut the damage it causes to the environment by up to 10%. Or as Funari puts it, "If every consumer on the planet buys just one upcycled item of clothing a year, we would cut fashion carbon emission by roughly 7%, which is equal to the gas emissions of all the cars in India."

And that is where upcycling makes a difference, by creating something of value out of something that is considered waste. Upcycling garments effectively replaces the need to produce new fabric, thus saving a multitude of resources including land, water and oil. The other way in which such brands are effecting social change is by utilizing local workers, especially women from lower income strata, and training them to become skilled artisans in their own right.

IS THERE A DEMAND?

All this said, it is also important to see if upcycling has enough demand to make it worthwhile for brands that work for profit (unlike say, Anthill, which relies on corporate and civic donations to provide free access to play). Some founders

candidly admit that Indian customers are typically unwilling to shell out more money to buy things that have been made with waste material. But that is slowly changing.

A recent report by the Credit Suisse Research Institute suggests that younger consumers in emerging markets such as India, are willing to pay more for products with a sustainability angle. It also reveals that Gen Z and millennials account for 54% of the global population and 48% of consumer spending, rising to 68% by 2040.

Another report from Capgemini Research Institute states that sustainability has risen up in the customer's list of expectations from a product or brand, with 79% of surveyed consumers claiming to make their buying decisions based on factors such as social responsibility, inclusiveness, and environmental impact. Anxiety among young consumers about environmental issues has only risen with the covid-19 crisis, increasing awareness about the looming scarcity of natural resources and the need to spend and consume responsibly.

And then, there is also the feel-good factor. As Molly from Design5 says, "There are clients who come specifically looking for pieces that are being given a second life, for the story or the history behind it."

There are also some who are conscious about sustainability, and willing to pay a bit more for upcycled products. Basically, something they would feel less guilty about buying."

According to Tula, Doodlage's clientele is young, with 40% of them specifically looking for products made consciously; the remaining 60% consider the brand ethics as a value add. Most of these brands sell both within the country and globally through their website and local partners, with a few exceptions like I was a Sari that target only the international market.

Gomez of I was a Sari says that the company is trying to show a new way of working, with a focus on the triple bottom line (of profit, people, planet), where "business is not only about making a profit, but also about caring for society and the environment."

The need of the hour, she concludes, is to upcycle our own thinking. See how we can use everything for a longer time and in a better manner.