

Upcycling used tyres to make footwear 'green'



Mumbai-based Jothsna and husband Jay Rege started Paaduks in 2013.

Shail Desai

Jay Rege first learnt about the world of social entrepreneurship through a newspaper article six years ago. He spent the next few weeks learning about various such profit-making enterprises around the world.

Rege soon came across an initiative in the US, which created footwear from used tyres. Having worked as a computer engineer for over five years, before turning to the field of education and career counselling, Rege, had always been open to new experiences and opportunities.

So, he told Jothsna, 42, his wife, about the footwear idea. She liked it, and mentioned how a similar idea could help the environment and provide job opportunities to the many cobblers around their home in Chembur, a suburb of Mumbai. Few months later, in 2013, they founded Paaduks (a Sanskrit term for footwear), a brand that uses old tyres to make shoes and sandals.

The journey of starting up

Getting the cobblers on-board wasn't easy, though.

"For the next few weeks (after starting Paaduks), we tried to speak with as many cobblers in the area as we could. Most of them had never worked with anything like this before, so were hesitant to be a part of the project. Finally, we convinced one of them to give it a shot," Rege recalls.

It took around four months to create the first prototype, at a cost of ₹20,000. But it turned out to be heavy, so it was back to the drawing board to improve on the design and material. One of the other issues the couple faced was separating the steel wire component from the rubber, which was a typical feature of radial tyres.

Their hunt eventually took them to a cobbler in Govandi, who had created Kolhapuri chappals from used tyres in the past.

"He gave us the idea of using the side walls of the tyre instead of the main surface. It didn't have the steel wires and was also very thin, making it easy to slice out and shape. It was also convenient to source it from a dealer and at the same time, economical," says Rege.

When the next design looked feasible, the two considered it to be enough reason to start commercial operations. Over the next five years, they invested about ₹10 lakh in the venture. "We weren't sure what the market was like, but it was something that we could afford, so we decided to give it a shot," he says.

They hired a full-time designer and another employee to handle operations,

while the founders decided to focus on marketing and sales. In the next few months, they put their products in retail stores and e-commerce websites. But they soon realized that selling through their own website was the only feasible solution.

"We had to put money in inventory, which often got stuck on the shelves. So even though the margins were high while selling through these shops, we made money only when they managed to actually make a sale. With other websites, the delivery deadlines were too tight and it just wasn't possible to get the product across in time," Rege says.

They also realized that there was only a small percentage of buyers who were invested in the idea of eco-friendly footwear. Though the concept was well-appreciated, when it came to making a sale, it was down to the design and comfort of the footwear.

"After recording feedback from various customers, I realized that the concept alone wasn't enough to sell. So we started focusing on ethnic designs, which appealed to the buyers," Rege says.

Over time, they found supporters in places like Hyderabad, and Dubai, who would source their products in bulk and resell

them. Besides targeting the premium segment, Paaduks also started creating more affordable footwear. They moved to a smaller workshop and instead of getting full-time

employees on board, they hired interns as per the needs. While there were two cobblers on the payroll, others would be hired whenever they had bigger orders. The business picked up soon after the corrections were made. "We made a conscious decision to scale down operations. At the start, we even worked on the social welfare of the cobblers—medical help and education for their kids—but realized it involved a lot of complications and soon brought an end to it," Rege says.

One of the major issues cobblers face, he adds, is the delay in receiving payment once they make the delivery. "So our focus these days is on compensating them well, and more importantly, paying them on time."

Each year, Paaduks makes sales worth ₹20-25 lakh. Their designs change every few months, and the entire operation is managed by Nasim Mohammad, who works out of their workshop in Kurla. "There's been a lot of learning over time, but we have finally managed to settle into a system that works for us," Rege says.

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