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OPINION

Small Steps for a Cleaner, More Responsible India

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[mbjesq](#)

Plastic carry bags, given and taken thoughtlessly at retail establishments around the world, are the purest of pure evil. They represent use of a non-renewable resource (petroleum) and energy to create an absolutely inessential, single-use product, with an active life-span of minutes, which becomes garbage almost as soon as it has seen the light of day. In India, where most people discard their trash wherever they happen to be standing at that moment, the problem is even worse, with littered bags proliferating in the streets, open-spaces, and waterways like weeds.

What can we do? Take one small step: carry a reusable cloth bag for your groceries and other purchases.



Small Steps bags make it easy, and stylish, to be part of the solution. The strong, lightweight, colorful bags come in two ultra-cool designs - a backpack and a shoulder-bag. They clip to your belt or backpack with a small carabiner, so you can carry it all the time, hassle-free.

Small Steps is a project conceived and executed so beautifully, it is no surprise that it came from Uma Prajapati, Manoj Pavithran, and [Upasana Design Studio](#). Their goal is to produce 10 million bags by hand, creating 1,000 jobs for 1,000 people for 1,000 days. In fact, because the tiny carabiners are not manufactured anywhere in India, Uma just launched a new cottage industry in a village near Pondicherry to make the 'biners for the Small Steps bags.



Like Upasana's remarkable tsunami commemoration/relief project, [Tsunamika](#), the Small Steps bags are distributed in the gift economy. In other words, anyone may take a little bag, and it is up to them to pay what they wish or what they can. This, of course, has been quite baffling for people accustomed to the profiteering economy in which supply and demand operate to establish the price of goods and services. The gift economy is the ultimate "free market", where each consumer directly decides the value of goods and services, on the spot. For products like Small Steps bags, the gift economy "pricing" assessment involves question like: What is the value of the bag to me? Does the Small Steps project have social benefits which I want to support? Do I want to give enough for my bag so that Upasana can afford to give away one or more additional bags to those who perhaps cannot afford to support the program?

Small Steps is, perhaps, ideally suited to the gift economy distribution model because it is not so much a product as an opportunity to participate in a movement of positive social change. Upasana puts it this way: "It is not only about making a better world, it is also about changing ourselves, learning new values, taking responsibility, loving our mother earth ...It is our love in action."

The program cost of each little bag is approximately Rs.75. Many bags are distributed without any donation made; many others result in hefty donations to keep the project operating. Uma half-acknowledges the risk of running an enterprise on such a precarious cash-flow situation, although she dismisses it as essentially theoretical. "You have to have faith that people will see the value of what you are attempting to do," she says, "and that they will want to be a part of it."

Small Steps Reusable Carry Bags

Do you want to join the *Small Steps* movement? There are any number of ways for you to participate, including carrying a little bag of your own. Contact Upasana if you have other ideas or questions.

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