



Soruka has found a way of putting waste from the leathersgoods sector in India to good use, sourcing scraps and employing skilled local artisans to turn them into colourful, fashionable accessories.

CREDIT: SORUKA/JON HERNANDEZ



WASTE-FREE



SMEs



RECYCLED



GREEN JOBS

Waste squared

Producers of bags and other finished products made from leather abound in Kolkata in the Indian state of West Bengal. India's Council for Leather Exports (CLE) lists thousands of operators there, mostly small companies that rely on the skills and knowledge of artisans. Their output is valuable. CLE's figures show that the entire Indian leather sector achieved export revenues of nearly \$2.3 billion in the first five months of the current financial year and that more than 25% of the total came from exports of leathergoods. Kolkata's leathergoods manufacturing sector is busy and it is consuming a high volume of leather.

As a direct consequence, its factories generate substantial volumes of leather waste, for which demand is, at best, informal and irregular. This material is often dumped in landfill or even burned. "I have seen that happen," says Josep Riera, founder of Barcelona-based brand Soruka, which produces bags in India from some of this scrap material. "This is waste," Mr Riera says. "Waste has always had value in India. There is, for example, a healthy market in gathering up unwanted saris, for which the buyers go to people's homes to buy garments from the previous season. They sell them on to distributors, who wash the saris and then sell them to new owners. They are very popular."

With the bags Soruka makes, however, the market is aimed more at Europe than at India. It sells to wholesalers only and says buyers are responding well because the bags are eye-catching and the circular story behind them, which wholesalers can share with consumers, is compelling.

New lease of life

Leather uses waste material from the meat and dairy sectors, but Soruka's business is based on taking waste from the waste, waste squared—so to speak—and putting it to good use. The material it acquires is often dead stock, leather that is no longer useful to the companies that originally made or bought it. Overstocking is a typical reason for this, and sometimes the leather fails to meet the aesthetic requirements of the original intended customers. Other reasons can be that the volume is too small or the colour no longer in season.

Inventory represents money to most companies, so it is not untypical for manufacturers to keep these stocks of leather for a number of seasons in the hope that they will find a use or buyer for them. In time, of course, they run out of storage space and earmark the material for dumping. What Soruka aims to do is to rescue this dead stock and give it a new lease of life before it is discarded.

It aims to have zero waste at the end of its own processes and tries to use every scrap of material it acquires and it now has bracelets, key-rings, jewellery and other small objects in its range too.

Traditional skills

Bags are the big deal for this small company, though. It is

Barcelona-based entrepreneur Josep Riera has no personal history in the leather industry, but he has been travelling to and doing business in India for years. During a visit to Kolkata, he noticed piles of leather scraps going to waste and decided he could put some of them to good use.

committed to fair-trade principles and to alleviating poverty and has built up a network of skilled, independent artisans who have, nevertheless, become "disadvantaged or marginalised by the conventional system" and are living in a low-income environment. They use traditional techniques and make Soruka bags by hand, or with minimal use of machinery, so the operation's energy consumption is low and ancient skills are being preserved. The brand works directly with the artisans, strives to maintain good relationships with them and, while it insists its direct approach allows it to offer its products at reasonable prices to the consumer, it makes sure the artisans receive a fair wage.

Long-lasting products

Josep Riera's aim is to design bags that will outlast short-lived trends, another way of keeping waste to a minimum. However, the scraps the artisans have to work with come in all shapes and colours and this means no two are identical. For some buyers, having a one-off bag is attractive, but there are also techniques for fulfilling requests and orders for larger numbers of products. In these cases, the bags it supplies are close to being identical. For example, the flaps on some of its designs can be coloured to look almost the same from bag to bag, even if scrutiny of the body of each one reveals differences.

He says managing the all-import fair-trade aspect of Soruka's work has become easier since it set up an Indian division of the company last year, giving the Barcelona-based company a management team in India that can keep the supply of leather pieces flowing and keep the ties to the artisans it works with.

What Mr Riera saw in Kolkata was waste material that had value. By adding a European eye for product design and the confidence to bring the products back to Barcelona and tell their story, he has opened up a much wider market for the scraps and unwanted leather cuttings. 🌱