



Volume 2, Issue 1 (Spring, 2019)

What do carrier bags say?

Runa Das Chaudhuri

Keywords: Plastic carrier bags, middle classes, packing, homemakers, conversation analysis

Recommended Citation:

Das Chaudhuri, R. (2019). 'What do carrier bags say?', *entanglements*, 2(1):16-21



Licensing

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)



What do carrier bags say?

Runa Das Chaudhuri

Abstract:

This récit accounts for the many interesting biographies of plastic carrier bags with and without brand logos in the Indian city of Kolkata. It maps where these bags travel as mobile objects and the uses they are put to in the public everyday lives of the Bengali middle classes. For this purpose, it focuses on an ethnographic episode concerning the Bengali pre-wedding custom of *tattva-sajano* where packing and unpacking of gifts are ceremonial. The conversation analysis of women engaged in this occasion render a distinct sense of 'bagarchy' i.e., a stratified world of carrier bags where the disposition of each depends on its label tag, if any and the subsequent uses and reuses which it serves.



Throughout his working life, my father, now a retired professor, has had an atypical habit: he carried to his office a leather shoulder bag. On days he had to carry some extra stuff, he would put those in a plastic carrier bag which he always folded inside out. When I was much younger I remember asking him once why he did so. To it he had tersely replied, 'I don't advertise brands.' I did not catch what he meant and chose to ignore my father's action as yet another of his idiosyncrasies.

This récit accounts the careers of many plastic carrier bags mapping where these bags travel as mobile objects and the uses they are put to. Some with brand logos, liberally dispensed by a range of retail outlets in shopping malls come at a price with shop-owners arguing that they are following the ministry of environment and forests' go-green initiative which disallows them to give away plastic bags for free to buyers. But with buyers willing to pay a price for these, their consumption holds the promise of interesting biographies. This is evident when customers shopping in malls belonging mostly to upper and middle classes opt for plastic carrier bags over the payment counters without batting an eyelid over environmental concerns. There are other outlets which display heightened sensitivity to such causes and offer paper carriers bags to shoppers for free. I seek to profile the ramifications of such differential endorsements, tracking the roles that carrier bags play in public everyday lives in the Bengali¹ middle class universe.

Finding out what exactly was happening to these carriers proved an intriguing trail. The plastic carrier bags debut in public life with shoppers carrying their purchases. But the bags show up again often having a second or third reappearance. People are very often seen carrying these in fleeting spaces, in the streetways, in public transport i.e., in sites of mobile togetherness (Bauman, 1995: 44-5). This led me to rethink where I could account their many journeys. For the purpose, I choose an occasion where packing and unpacking were both ceremonial. This was around the pre-wedding custom of *tattvasajano* (decorating gifts in trays) in a Bengali middle class household in Kolkata. Shipra, my school friend Nandini's cousin, who resides in a neighbouring locality, I learnt was about to get married around the end of November, 2018. When I contacted Nandini and with Shipra's family readily agreeing to allow me to be part of the occasion, I was more than elated. As women from the bride's family were engaged in re-packing presents to be passed on to the groom's side, decorating gifts in attired trays wrapped with bright cellophane papers, I closely observed, collected notes, took photographs and helped the bridal party in packing gifts. I also conversed with five women of the *tattvasajano* party about shops they had visited to buy the gifts, their favourite brands intending to manoeuvre the discussion to the topic of carrier bags. The analysis of these conversations helped me in identifying their attitudes and preferences, if any, for 'certain bags'.

Branding by deceit

It was my first visit to Shipra's place and I was eagerly wondering what would unfold. On my arrival around afternoon, Shipra's mother, Sreelekha led me through the hallway leading to a big bedroom, my field site. On the way she informed me that Shipra was away at a beauty parlour. In the room several decorated trays caught my attention, as did some empty plastics resplendently red bearing the brand logo of



Simaaya (fig. 1). I also noticed a relatively senior lady (later referred as Mrs. Gopa Basu) seated in a chair overseeing the preparations. A small group of some five women equipped with necessary tools of *tattva-sajano* – wrappers, cellophane paper, cellotapes, ribbons and trays were engaged in animated banter which slackened a bit as I entered. Sreelekha introduced me to them as her daughter's friend researching on Bengali wedding customs. The proximity of the fictive relation would help, I felt reassured. A petite blabber ensued. Here was I, an 'enlightened, educated woman' in the midst of several middle-aged homemakers. Perhaps to make me feel welcome, one amongst the ladies introduced herself as Balaka aunty and invited me to sit beside her. Keen to strike a rapport, I offered help in what she was doing. To this she asked me to take out the tags from the sarees and push those inside the Simaaya plastics. I spontaneously blurted out 'Why?' Balaka aunty calmly replied that it was only that they had got a few extra plastic bags from Simaaya so that 'other' sarees could be tucked in them. Simaaya, she added, was a 'big name' which 'counts'.

The stage was set. The removal of the price tags and the accompanying gesture of enveloping second best buys in plastic carrier bags with logos of a high-end saree brand like Simaaya spoke of a calculated deceit. A trivial object like a plastic bag became a token of class exhibitionism. The carrier bag began to speak and with an élan at classifying the brand worth of the content which it carried. This was one exciting possibility of the use an unused plastic carrier bag was being put to. There were other likelihoods too.



Figure 1: 'Tattva-sajano' in progress



Classing carrier bags

As I was being trained into the art of deceit, one Mrs. Rita Mukherjee playfully chirped, that when she had been to her neighbour Mrs. Samanta's place, she had noted how her eyes almost came popping out when she caught a glimpse of her carrying a nice paper carrier bag from Micheal Kors². Waggish as this comment sounded, it revealed the class association that the mere act of sighting a paper carrier bag with a foreign brand logo invites.

I sensed a tension. Balaka aunty was exceptionally quiet for a moment. In name-dropping a foreign brand and by corollary claiming an enviable status position, Mrs. Mukherjee had inched further ahead of her. She had set a benchmark. Balaka aunty had to do something to smother her ambitions. To make a point that Rita was only showing off, she retorted saying that the only plastic bags of use were those dispensed by the *mudiwala* (grocery shop-owner), great for 'disposing garbage.' She was referring to the naked, faceless, plastic bags banned by the government (since these do not follow the approved thickness standard of 20 microns) which comes free with purchases made in local markets. Mrs. Mukherjee gravitated to a truce, mildly saying that paper bags, after all, look so beautiful. Balaka aunty agreed to this but not without opining 'only people in cars carry their itsy bitsy stuff in paper bags...and buy a name as saviours of the earth...'

Balaka aunty couldn't care less for the ethical concern of consumerism. For her, it is only the utility to which a plastic bag can be put to which counts. However what is instructive is that the hierarchy of reuse value vis-à-vis the stake of classism gets caught up in a twisted dialectic. Illegal plastic carrier bags which circulate for free in the local market are the lowest on the ladder not because they are a danger to the environment; rather their plebeian abundance and ready use as waste bags amongst the upper and middle classes render those ordinary. Paradoxically Balaka aunty uses these nondescript bags in her defence when trying to downclass her rival Mrs. Mukherjee bidding for a higher class status.

Plastic bags with brand logos which ask for a price are placed higher up edging towards the middle order in the 'bagarchy'³. The homemakers in the study nominated plastic carrier bags from apparel chains like Pantaloons, Shopper's Stop, Lifestyle, Westside as serving personal utility. They noted that these could be used for 'carrying an umbrella or food items', or 'children's stuff' if they had a baby in tow or just for 'a shopping spree down the lane.' These carrier bags which come at a standard size are handy, spacious, strong and are just perfect for a reuse. It is instructive that none of the homemakers reasoned that the reuses of plastic bags were serving a purpose towards environmentalism. Rather the branded bags were appreciated since these served the carrier's purpose as also their latent intent of giving off their purchasing capacities. Paper carrier bags occupy the apex position. Their stake in classism is directly proportional to their low reuse value. Neither are they quickly disposed off as non-branded plastic bags nor do have protracted careers like their foster siblings in branded plastic bags.



Like many foreign brands, a few Indian fashion brands like Fabindia, Titan, etc. also offer only paper carrier bags to their customers. This strategy not only demonstrates the brand's increased sensitivity on the ethical dimension of business; it also steeps their businesses to a lofty height because of their very awareness of the global ethos of marketing. Incidentally, gifts from both these brands featured in Shipra's *tattva*. Unpacked from their paper bags, the gifts from these brands made their way to the glittering trays. After all paper bags would come of little practical use. For the middle classes therefore, the concern for environmentalism is one of luxury and for the ones who can afford it.

Plastic bags on the haul Is every one of you re-used for all?

As the trays containing the gifts were getting all decked up, I saw a number of plastic carrier bags from food shops being shoved aside. Curious to learn about their fates, I asked Mrs. Gopa Basu whether I could help her tidy up the space. Gopa aunty gleefully consented. While cleaning up, she indicated that the future destination of foodshop plastics was the kitchen since these could not, after all, be used for any other purpose 'other than carrying food'. As I nodded my head approvingly, I understood that the reluctance in reusing these particular plastics for carrying non-food items was plausibly out of fear of contamination. On my part, tracing their journeys any further seemed a non-possibility. But what became amply clear was that the destiny of any plastic carrier bag is decided by its initial use and respective brand respectability.

Not all plastic carrier bags are re-used for every other purpose. Of course, some are randomly used. Yet each has its own specific journey. Unbranded plastic carrier bags have a much shorter public life compared to those which carry brand logos. Yet again an instance of unbranding a plastic carrier bag by folding it inside out is richly suggestive of a tampering with the bag's own identity. I can now fully understand that my father had adopted this idiosyncrasy to avoid appearing cheap in promoting brands. More importantly, his gesture and the gestures of many other users of plastic carrier bags tell us that each carrier bag has a disposition of its own. More expressly, a carrier bag does in some way mark the habitus of the one who hauls it and indeed has a lot to say.



Notes

[1] The Bengali Hindu population is an ethno-linguistic group native to the region of Bengal, speaking Bengali (Bangla), an Indo-Aryan language of the East Indian subcontinent.

[2] Michael Kors, one of the world's renowned designer label of luxury accessories has a single lifestyle store outlet in upmarket Quest Mall in Kolkata and is considered a brand which can be afforded by a select few.

[3] I use the term 'bagarchy' to refer to the stratified world of carrier bags.

References

Bauman, Z. (1995). *'Forms of Togetherness' in Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality*. Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers.

Runa Das Chaudhuri is trained in sociology and has a Ph. D. degree having worked under the Doctoral Programme at Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta (CSSSC). She presently teaches in the Department of Sociology, University of Calcutta, India. She has published in journals including *Society and Culture in South Asia*, *Contemporary South Asia* (accepted and forthcoming), *Journal of the Asiatic Society* and more. Her areas of specialization include the sociology of urban consumption in India and the histories of spiritualist practices in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal.