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# ***More than Simple Living: A Cultural Perspective on Sustainable Living***

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## **Abstract**

This paper provides a cultural perspective to the sustainability research within HCI. I draw on the results from an ethnographic field study of sustainable household practices of ten women belonging to the *so-called* middle class in India. Focusing on their reuse practices, I provide examples of domestic artefacts that are creatively and resourcefully reused from worn-out artefacts. My initial findings show that the rationale behind creating such artefacts is not limited to the practicality and usefulness, but how cultural and religious beliefs are incorporated into such practices.

## **Author Keywords**

Design; domestic settings; sustainability; developing countries

## **Introduction**

The majority of work towards dealing with sustainability in household matters, as seen in the CHI and UbiComp literature, focuses on developing technologies that can make home residents aware of their 'moral choices' on energy consumption and persuade them towards more sustainable behavioral patterns. However, in recent times sustainable HCI has broadened its focus from studying individual behaviors to everyday social and cultural practices of people.



**Figure 1. Reuse of a gunny sack as a doormat.**

\* *"It is very important to enter the kitchen without shoes and with your legs clean. Similarly, in places such as the bathroom, storage room and toilets, one has to clean one's legs before leaving and entering. So, rather than buying new rags I just use these gunny sacks inside the home. Of course, for the main entrance a gunny sack would not look so nice. So, I have a nice welcome doormat there that I bought from a shop."*

\* *"In Hinduism, we do not use cotton materials as our doormats. Since, gunny bags are made from jute, it is natural and much holier than the cotton materials."*

\* *"This gunny sack is useful in all kinds of weathers. In monsoon, it soaks up water. So wet shoes and legs can be easily cleaned, and in a way useful to keep dirt away from entering the house. And because it is made of jute, it gives warmth in the winter..."*

Researchers have increasingly realized that the environmental crisis is as much a cultural problem as a technical one [1, 6, 8]. It is important to understand people's attitudes [2], rationale [5], and their current efforts [9] towards sustainable practices, in order to guide the design of sustainable technologies. I believe that a deeper look into cultural practices and the role of individuals in household matters could lead to a much better understanding of sustainability.

I carried out a small scale field study of sustainable household practices of ten women belonging to the *so-called* middle class in India [7]. Focusing on their reuse practices, I attempted to understand the underlying reasons and motivations for reusing worn-out and old things. I collected a set of examples from the field, which showed that these reuse practices were not limited only to practical uses. They showed how cultural and religious beliefs, family care and intimacy and personal interests were incorporated into them. In the following I provide two examples of such reuse practices.

#### *A doormat*

It is very common in Indian homes to see gunny sacks lying in the storage rooms. Gunny sacks are traditionally used for transporting agricultural food products such as wheat, rice and onions. A gunny sack is an inexpensive bag made from jute or other natural fibers. Gunny sacks can hold 20 to 50 kg of food products and are typically bought in a particular season (e.g. avoiding monsoons) to have them safely stored in homes. People in the Indian middle class tend to buy

things in bulk, and they end up collecting several gunny sacks. Because of their strong, thick and dry texture, these gunny sacks are reused as a doormat, as a container for other things, and for other purposes in the storage room. During my field study, I saw highly creative uses of these gunny sacks as fashionable carry bags and artistic show pieces for homes. In the following, I discuss an example of a reuse practice of gunny sacks by one of the participants from my field study. Figure 1 shows the images and some quotes from her interview.

Kinal is a housewife. She lives with her husband – who runs a business of engineering tools – and two university going teenagers. The family buys a good amount of food products in bulk and stores it in a safer place in the home, to be used for a long time. Kinal saves gunny sacks after putting food products such as wheat and rice away safely into large containers in her storage room. She uses some of the gunny sacks as a doormat at different places around her house. (Figure 1). She has kept these doormats at the backdoor entrance of her house, in her kitchen, in the bathroom entrance and at the entrance of the storage room itself.

The kitchen is seen as a sacred place in middle-class Indian homes. One should to be clean before entering a kitchen. Kinal tries to keep a disciplined atmosphere in her home for her university going teenagers. With the use of gunny sacks as doormats, she keeps her house clean and as hygienic as possible. She also provided other useful insights into using this kind of doormats.

Religious beliefs are important in Indian middle class homes. It is important that one enters the home clean. Normally, household members would clean their legs on



**Figure 2. A Dress, refurbished from a sari.**

*\* "Over the years, I have bought several saris. I have a large collection of them in my cupboard. Sometimes the fashion goes away or a sari gets damaged after using it for years. Then we can either renovate the old sari with a professional tailor's help or make something else out of it. When I got married and came to live with my husband and in-laws in a joint family, my mother-in-law gifted me a very expensive brocade sari - [a sari used during marriages]. I have used it for 20 years for different celebrations and occasions and even though it is old I don't want to throw it away as it is part of our family tradition and family values. Now when my daughter is old enough I want to pass this on to her."*

these gunny sacks and then enter the house. Scientific literature has shown how different aspects of Hindu cultures and beliefs intersect with environmental values, and behaviors, with varying environmental consequences[ 3, 4]. The example of a gunny sack as a doormat points to how sustainability and religious beliefs coincide. From Kinal's second quote, one can read the multipurpose character of gunny sacks. Climate plays an important role in people's everyday lives. In India, the climate is generally warmer compared to Europe and North America. Gunny sacks are seen to be very useful in these different weathers. Lastly, Kinal shows how purposefully she uses her gunny sacks to avoid dirt and keep herself warm while she cooks for her family.

#### *A dress*

Traditional clothing has a significant value in Indian households, in particular, during marriages, religious gatherings, and other types of celebrations. For women in India, the sari is one of the traditional dresses. In the following, I provide an account on the reuse of an old sari by one of our participants. This is a particular example of how a mother's intimate and care-giving activity towards her daughter is intertwined with sustainability. Figure 2 shows the image and some quotes from her interview.

Mala works fulltime at a local bank as an officer and lives with her husband and two daughters. Her husband also works fulltime in a school as an administrator. Her elder daughter is about to finish her medical education and her younger one studies in a school. She reused her old sari to make a dress (Figure 2) for her daughter who is about to graduate. The following is Mala's

account of how and why she reused her saris to make a dress.

What we see in Figure 2 is a dress made of Mala's old sari and other materials that could no longer be used. But as she suggested this sari is so important and valuable that she does not want to throw it away for recycling. Mala did not make this dress herself; she got help from a professional tailor in sewing the dress. (Unlike in the Western countries, tailor-made dresses are not expensive, because of the cheaper labor and skills). Mala selected a set of her old saris, including the gift from her mother-in-law, with different color combinations and explained the design to the tailor. The reason behind getting help from a professional was that the material of the sari was very expensive and the type of sari and its material was no longer available in the market. So, she wanted to make sure that the dress was made by a professional.

Importantly, the 'new' dress signifies both a family tradition of gifting an important object to the next generation and at the same time intimacy and love for a daughter by her mother. In Indian marriages, saris are commonly used for exchanging gifts between families. A gift of a sari to Mala from her mother-in-law was considered as a blessing and an auspicious object for beginning a new life in the hope of a long lasting marriage, when she joined her husband after the marriage. This was a family tradition to pass on such an auspicious gift to the next generation (with the same hopes and blessings). So, following the family tradition and taking into account her daughter's choice and the current day fashion, Mala chose to make a dress out of her old sari.

## Discussion

This paper provides a motivation to look at other communities and cultures for getting inspirations on sustainability research. I only presented two examples here, [7] has more of such examples. However, these two examples show how sustainability is closely related with cultural practices. In the context of Indian middle-class, the reuse of a gunny sack as a doormat, for example, supported religious beliefs and the appropriation (or refurbishment) of a mother's old sari into a dress for her daughter supported an ongoing family tradition, in addition to supporting an auspicious belief. These cultural beliefs and traditions are not limited only to the families in question. Such beliefs at large affect people's domestic lives and cannot be ignored while designing interactive technologies.

Recognizing the smaller sample of this field study, I do not wish to provide any concrete 'implications for design'. My aim here has been to provide a view on sustainability from the developing world's perspective. By engaging with a small set of middle-class Indian women, I provide the following insights that might be considered useful for the sustainability research:

- Religious beliefs are considered in the reuse of objects.
- Specific areas in homes (e.g. kitchen) are treated differently while reuse of old objects.
- Emotional objects pass through generations and original objects are remanufactured to convey family intimacy.
- Auspicious practices related to certain objects may enhance their sustainability.

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