CACHET CARRY

Fashion victim or heretic? The secret lies in the handbag.

by **Shefalee Vasudev**

MAYAWATI'S statue in the controversial Ambedkar Memorial park shows her carrying a handbag. She holds it down from her wrist, not like socialites who hold luxury handbags like temperamental pet dogs on a leash (with the dog leading the mistress). Behenji's bag is neither a Hermes Birkin, nor a Fab India jhola. Brandishing what's possibly a Made in UP rexine, Mayawati is the new heroine of urban India's bag wars.

It was only in the 1980s, with women storming the workplaces in larger numbers than ever before, that the handbag became such an important accessory for Indian women. Grandma's potli was okay for a powder compact, keys and a hanky, but it could not suffice for a tiffin box, a pen or few, and most of all: a wallet. The financially independent Indian woman had arrived. To her, the handbag—in those days a strictly utilitarian, Made in India item—symbolised what the pantsuit did to her power-woman sisters in the West.

Now look at Mayawati's statue again. See the ambition and assertion she has packed into that handbag. Money, ability and mobility too. With all these resources, she has bought a dream that has taken her to the top of her luxury pyramid. Quite like the society woman who believes that sporting luxury brands is the only way to make a statement about her wealth, style and social status. Indians have always been staunch believers in visible signs of status. Remember how Brahmins wore the tilak and the sacred thread to distinguish themselves in the past? Only they could learn Sanskrit; only the village head could use the parasol; only royalty could wear gold on their feet. In modern, urban India, wearing branded bags is the new, highly visible insignia of social and economic superiority. Smart advertising has sold these bags as the entry point into a luxury lifestyle, and fashion magazines and Page 3 happily add to the hype.

Quite a few Indian girls today fulfil their ambition of owning a luxury handbag, even if they have to buy it themselves. "A man may let me down, but a luxury bag will be with me forever," my colleague Monali Banerji said to me recently, when I was doing a story on the influence of luxury brands in India. She saved her salary for three months to buy herself a Dior bag. Bright young writer Latha Sunadh, who covers the celebrity circuit, tells me that luxury bags are the young Indian woman's new jewellery. "I must carry a Birkin to my grave. It is the symbol of an ultimate fashionista and that's who I want to be," says Sunadh simply. These two can afford it, but so intense is the craze for branded handbags that some college girls who don't have the means are finding desperate ways to acquire a Gucci, a Louis Vuitton, a Fendi.... "Become flexible with your attitudes and your moral hang-ups and acquire a bag. I do it and will do it again," says a 20-year-old Delhi University student. She claims her friends do it too. The saner of the wannabe lot may decide to go on to bagborroworsteal.com, a portal that helps you hire a genuine luxury handbag for a week or a month at an affordable price (there's apparently a similar service on offer in Mumbai, the address a closely guarded secret known only to select socialites).

Bag warriors Left, Kalyani Chawla with Lady Dior bag; Ayesha Thapar with her Hermes

Photographs: RAJWANT RAWAT/PEOPLE

It is a Page 3 side effect, where bags and shoes enter a party before their owner does, with photographers following the 'item'. Bollywood's endorsement has fuelled the luxury brands craze even more effectively—actresses are constantly chased by representatives of luxury brands in India, to carry sponsored, gifted, discounted, even returnable handbags, on red carpets, at premieres, IPL matches, in films and off them. The subliminal message in the captions to the photos that flood the press the next day—without a Dior clutch or a Tod's tote, forget about being part of the In Crowd.

So complicated is handbag politics that it necessitates a crash course. Like cars, watches and designations, bags are about hierarchy. From nylon to crocodile, with cowhide, ostrich, canvas and silk in between, they are the engines that drive luxury companies. On the top sit Hermes Kellys and Birkins (starting price approximately Rs 4.5 lakh in India). At the bottom sit the lowly Made in China fakes. On the one hand are the It Bags, the seasonally trendy ones which you must keep updating. Then there are those that will never go out of fashion, like the Lady Dior, the Hermes Kelly, the LV Speedy, the Chanel 2.55, the Prada Bowler, the Bottega Veneta knotted clutch. Now that money itself is a tired jogger, It Bags are being given a run for their money by Me Bags—individualistic, stylish, preferably unbranded. They must be luxury but not fashion. The Indian jhola, stuffed away for a while, is a Me Bag, chosen because you don't want to flaunt a brand. You could pick stylish ones from Good Earth, Anokhi; carry a Manish Arora one with gold handles or a discreet, origami one by Issey Miyake, where the brand won't scream, but the design will.

NIRALA TRIPATHI

Made in UP Mayawati's statue holding a bag

Whatever you do, don't carry a fake. The Made in China ghost haunts manufacturers of all luxury handbags, but the fact is that even the priciest branded bags are partly made in China. As Dana Thomas wrote in *Deluxe: Why Luxury Lost Its Lustre*, "The luxury handbag is a study in globalisation. Hardware-like locks come from Italy and China (primarily Guangzhou); the zipper from Japan; the lining from Korea; the embroidery is done in Italy, India or northern China; the leather is from Korea or Italy and the bag is assembled partly in China and partly in Italy.... When you buy it, it carries Made in Italy, Made in France."

Before you enlist as a bag warrior, choose your battles well. Here's what senior lifestyle writer Kanika Gahlaut says, "It's no longer fashionable to carry an It Bag. Fashion now is about individualism, not about brands. I won't even call the handbag socialites victims any more. I think it is completely wannabe. At one point of time it was a fashion forward trend. Now it has become fashion forward to question it."

Now we know who is the most trendy of them all. Mayawati, my dear. It is about her, not her bag. ◘

TRIBHUVAN TIWARI

The bagless Sonia and Priyanka

THE POWER STATEMENT

Like ma-in-law, Sonia never carries a bag. It's her style.

MAYAWATI'S handbag, like Margaret Thatcher's, is an indispensable part of her political armour. She brandishes it not just as a symbol of her sole control over the purse strings of the BSP, but also to underscore her metamorphosis from Behenji Mayawati to Maya Memsahib. Mamata Banerjee always flaunts her sturdy cloth jhola—it was with her when she presented the railway budget in Parliament—to reinforce her grassroots, daughter-of-the-soil image. So what statement is the impeccably groomed Sonia Gandhi making by never ever carrying a handbag? It's a question that has spawned several speculative theories. Some interpreters of political behaviour say that by conspicuously omitting to carry a handbag, Sonia ji is setting herself apart from other women politicians and signalling that she is above the fray. Others argue this is typical of the really powerful, like the tycoons who never carry money—why should they, with minions around to supply everything from a handkerchief to a Rs 500 note? The most likely explanation is that in this, as in many other matters, Sonia's role model is her mother-in-law Indira Gandhi, who never carried a handbag either. ◘