

Once homeless, Mumbai heroes revolutionise shoe industry

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(Editorial comment: The Alternatives framework is based on the idea of shared knowledge which is accessible to all, in light of which patents could be problematic in so far as they privatise knowledge. This is however not a comment on the usefulness of the technology itself.)

Two young men - one who used to be a homeless child, the other a businessman's son - launch a company that wants to ensure no Indian walks barefoot

Ramesh Dhami's life seems scripted from a Bollywood film. Starting out homeless and hungry, being found by a Good Samaritan, befriendng a rich boy and chancing upon an idea that is both conscionable and profitable, Dhami has come a long way.



[At the GreenSole factory at Mahape, a worker sorts through a pile of old footwear](#) Dhami (22), who is today the co-founder of GreenSole, a social enterprise that recycles discarded shoes, refurbishes them and makes comfortable footwear for the underprivileged, was born as Prachinti in a small village in Pittoragarh, Uttarakhand. The youngest in his family, he ran away when he was just 10 because of trouble at home.

For two years, he travelled across northern India and survived doing odd jobs. Coming to the city of dreams

He came to Mumbai when he turned 12 in 2006, with the dream of becoming an actor. He says, "I would roam from one place to another as the police would not let me sleep. I then got a job at a hotel in Ghatkopar."



Another worker puts new soles on old footwear for better use "But, I had worked for just 10 days when the Mumbai floods happened and the hotel had to be shut down. The owner gave me R1,000 and told me to leave," said Dhami. Dhami says, "I lived on the footpaths in and around Mumbai Central and did odd jobs. Many times, I was so hungry, I committed petty crimes and also did drugs. I did not want to do these things, but I had no choice," he said. One day, Sachin, a worker from the NGO Saathi, which works with street kids and runaway kids, found Dhami near Mumbai Central and invited him to the shelter. "Sachin told me he would give me a place to stay and food to eat and also educate me and make me self-reliant. I did not believe him at all, but went along out of curiosity." At Saathi, Dhami met others like him and realised he was not alone.



Old shoes refurbished by GreenSole "At Saathi, they taught me to read and write and I also learnt to make paper bags. Apart from that, the organisation encouraged me to take up a sporting activity such as running or adventure sports. They were getting the boys professionally trained in adventure sports and mountaineering. I tried everything, but decided I preferred running," Dhami says. **Marathon man**

In 2008, Dhami ran his first half marathon in 1 hour 31 minutes. Thereafter, he participated in competitive long-distance running events and started winning cash prizes. In 2012, at Priyadarshini Park in Napean Sea Road, where he practised, Dhami met Shriyans Bhandari. Bhandari came from a business family in Rajasthan and was in Mumbai pursuing his Bachelor of Management Studies at Jai Hind College. "I used to meet Shriyans almost every day while practising at the park and we started running together. We soon became good friends."



Ramesh Dhama and Shriyansh Bhandari It was during this time that Dhama hit upon his great idea quite by chance. "My shoes would wear off within 4 to 6 months. Once, I had bought an expensive pair of running shoes and those too tore in two months. While the soles of the shoes were intact, the upper portion would tear. I just could not discard them, and began to think of what I could do with the soles. I bought some glue and took the soles and some tyre rubber and fashioned a pair of slippers out of them. Shriyans saw the slippers and liked them very much." [A great idea](#)

The duo then began to think of what they could do with this idea. Having himself grown up with no shoes, Dhama decided he would provide footwear for as many of India's underprivileged as possible. Bhandari, with his business management and entrepreneurial leadership skills, and Dhama, with his idea of making refurbished shoes from discarded shoes, set up a full-fledged social enterprise, GreenSole in July 2015. They funded this with the cash rewards they got from participating in business competitions. Within a few months of establishing the start-up, they had provided footwear to 10,000 people in need across villages of India. This year they expect to provide footwear to more than 50,000 people in need. GreenSole also retails online through its website. They offer various schemes for buying and donating. The company also allows individual buyers or those keen on reusing their old shoes can order from GreenSole's website — www.greensole.in "If you give us an old pair of shoes, we can give you a new pair for R199-R1,499, depending on the design," Bhandari says. Those wishing to donate to the needy can buy a pair for R199. The price includes transportation to remote donation sites The social enterprise has tie-ups with educational institutions, companies like Rolls Royce, JLL, Tata Power, GOQii — the health and lifestyle Start-up, DTDC, Sports Authority of India, Maharashtra Police and even local sports clubs. "They collect discarded shoes and send them to us. We then send them to our workshop in Navi Mumbai to refurbish and make new footwear," says Bhandari.

Patented designs

GreenSole has received two industrial design patents for their footwear. "Our focus will, however, be on providing footwear for the needy," Dhama says. Dhama is clear what he wants to do in the future. "I want to work with underprivileged children. I feel sad when I think about my past. If Saathi had not found me, I am not sure where I would be today." Dhama is already counselling some young, runaway boys and helping them find a purpose in life. Dhama is also focusing on working in villages. As for GreenSole, Bhandari and Dhama want it to be a cottage industry that employs as many people as possible to make footwear and eventually eliminate the problem of having to walk bare feet.

Making of a shoe

GreenSole uses a heating process to remove the shoe uppers. This, too, is reused. It is sorted and used for patching torn shoes. The lower part is washed and cleaned with chemicals to make it pesticide-free. The whole idea is to make the process and the product environment-friendly.

The lower part is then coloured and the upper portion is made separately using rexine before the two are joined. The straps of the slippers are made from recycled trekking ropes. "GreenSole uses only eco-friendly paints and eco-glue. Once the shoe is made, it has to be completely biodegradable," Bhandari says.

Bare facts

> According to WHO and UNESCO, 1.5 billion people across the world are infected by diseases contracted through unprotected feet.

> Also, lack of footwear can cause wear and tear in the foot tendons, ligaments as well as bones.

> Additionally, hookworms, a leading cause of disease in developing countries, enter the body through the feet, usually when a person steps in infected dirt or water. The use of shoes is the best way to prevent infection by hookworms.

> Research indicates that more than 350 million pairs of shoes are discarded each year and an average pair upon incineration generates 30lbs of emissions.

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