



Charukesi Ramadurai

Writer, photographer and blogger

THE LOUIS VUITTON BABY

There's a new fashion accessory around, besides the designer bags and Chihuahuas. They're babies, and having one on your arm guarantees attention, appreciation and upward social mobility.

It turns out that Angelina Jolie did not stop with giving the world her famous pout and a reason to travel to Cambodia to see where her Lara Croft avatar was shot. Once upon a time, she had Brad Pitt and just when we thought that was all the embellishment she would ever need, she emerged with another. One perched on the hip, one led by the hand. And countless others of myriad ages and skin tones scattered around.

As accessories go, babies can be quite useful. Think great PR. The buzzing trend is for celebrities to collect babies from all over the world, like more humdrum tourists would pick up fridge magnets or face masks. Some brave ones like Posh Spice also manage to pop them out themselves at regular intervals. They help these famous people stay famous, or at the very least stay in the news. They form the *raison d'être* for gratifying titles like hottest mom and yummy mummy. They allow these stars to indulge their inner children by bestowing whacky and embarrassing names. Blue Ivy. Harper Seven. Maddox. Apple.

Among mere mortals, they make for great conversation starters at social occasions, as many doting mothers know to their delight; Oh, did I tell you, Coochie ate her first banana today? More often than not, they are also deadly conversation stoppers but mothers who discuss their baby's burping schedules over cocktail samosas rarely ever seem to realise that.

The baby is also an unbeatable status accessory. In the mommy wars, she who speaks loudest and oftenest about her baby's achievements is the clear winner. It could be anything from a 'chubbiest baby in class' award ("everybody says she is so cute") to a 'takes-every-object-apart' tendency ("he will grow up to be an engineer"). Then there

is the number of classes the child goes to (swimming, karate, ballet, piano, creative art, Mandarin, mud wrestling...) and how busy the mother is (childcare is a full-time job, you know – never mind the losers who balance work and home).

It is not just the overtly pushy tiger moms. There are enough momzillas around who don't just talk incessantly about their offspring but also tweet, update Facebook status messages and if possible, would distribute fliers with newspapers every day, filled with the latest baby news.

And don't forget the baby as a fashion accessory, the entire look perfectly coordinated with the mother's. Baby Dior. Little Marc. Diesel baby jeans. Or if you are so inclined, Fab India for kids. Here the baby is often just an extension of all the other labels and brands that the mom sports. Why, I can just see baby Aaradhya making public appearances in Manish Malhotra frocks any day now.

My own experience has been that of the baby doubling up as a cloak of respectability. Whenever I have set out to explore the badlands of this country with other women, there has always been a slight edge to our travels, a nebulous feeling of unease. But recently, when I travelled with a friend and her infant, the world suddenly seemed a friendlier place. In place of dismissive gestures and leery glances, there was a rush to help as said friend struggled with the baby, the stroller and assorted bags stuffed with diapers and mushy foods. We were no longer two single women travellers with AVAILABLE lights blinking overhead; one of us was a Mother and therefore immune to everything that is improper.

Welcome to the world of the baby as an accessory. Carry them, hold them, clutch at them – but don't forget to flaunt them. ♣

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Angelina Jolie with three of her six kids