

Diaspora drives Indian jewellers' growth in west

When Viren Bhagat announced plans to set up shop in London, he joined a growing number of Indian jewellers expanding into western markets, where the vast majority of the country's diaspora live.

Bhagat started to increase his exposure outside India through his participation in Tefaf, the European Fine Art Foundation fair held annually in Maastricht and New York. Most recently, his work gained attention when Nita Ambani, the wife of Asia's richest tycoon Mukesh Ambani, wore a striking set of his jewellery — comprising a headpiece, necklace, armband, two cuffs and a ring, all adorned with larger-than-life emeralds — at the highly publicised and lavish wedding of her son, Anant Ambani.

India has a long-standing tradition of crafting jewellery and cutting and polishing gemstones — 90 per cent of the world's rough diamonds are processed in the country.

Idiosyncratic cultural practices also set the country apart. For instance, engagement and wedding ceremonies involve exchanging gold jewellery, including a "mangalsutra" necklace for the bride and a bracelet for the groom; although the giving of an engagement ring ahead of a ceremony is rare. On festive occasions, jewellery sets are worn, and deemed incomplete without headpieces, armbands and anklets.

While such traditions have historically hindered the expansion of western jewellers in India, they have contributed to the growth of local talents and supported their expansion abroad — as Indians living outside the country seek to uphold their customs.

"At first, the Indian diaspora made up a significant portion of our clientele, as they already knew the brand and trusted its quality," recalls Sabyasachi Mukherjee, founder of Sabyasachi, one of the first Indian luxury brands to establish a retail presence at department stores Bergdorf Goodman and Saks Fifth Avenue in New York, in 2020.

In 2023, the brand then brought its jewellery to a British audience by showcasing pieces at London's Lancaster House and participating in the charitable Animal Ball, organised by wildlife charity Elephant Family and indigenous peoples initiative the Tintra Foundation. The event was attended by King Charles and Queen Camilla, who both wore traditional Shola masks designed by Sabyasachi.

"Branching out into the west was a natural progression in our quest to become India's first global luxury brand," says Mukherjee. "The understanding and consumption of jewellery is universal — it is the most accessible category to introduce India's traditions of craft, quality and authenticity. The west has always admired the richness of our culture, and I saw a unique opportunity to introduce an Indian voice to the global luxury market."

The growing global interest in Bollywood cinema and its stars, such as Deepika Padukone and Priyanka Chopra — brand ambassadors for Cartier and Bvlgari, respectively — has drawn the attention of western audiences. Also, global luxury brands, such as Cartier, organise ad hoc events to celebrate the Indian Diwali festival, underscoring the growing influence of Indian creativity abroad.



Clockwise from left: Nita Ambani wearing Viren Bhagat designs; a Sabyasachi necklace; a Bhagat brooch; King Charles and Queen Camilla at last year's Animal Ball; a ring by Karina Choudrie; an Ananya bracelet

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"Over time, our customer base has diversified," says Mukherjee. "Today, our western clients include individuals who value cultural authenticity, unique designs, and impeccable craftsmanship. Our jewellery resonates with collectors, art enthusiasts, and fashion lovers who appreciate the story behind each piece. Hollywood celebrities and international stylists have also embraced our work, helping us reach audiences far beyond the diaspora."

While Sabyasachi's designs remain distinctively Indian, a new wave of Indian creators have purposefully expanded abroad to break free from traditional aesthetics. They are targeting a public receptive to new motifs that, while informed by Indian heritage, are not immediately attributable to that particular culture.

This has been the case for Ananya Malhotra, founder of Ananya, who, by opening a showroom in London in 2022, has found a suitable audience and accelerated her brand's growth. Ananya's use of colourful gemstones and designs that reinterpret Indian traditions, such as the chakra bracelet, with a refreshing contemporary twist has gained favour with an international clientele, even beyond the UK. "London is a melting pot for so many cultures; it really offers a unique, wholesome exposure for a brand," she says.

This sentiment is echoed by Karina Choudhrie, who opened her first office in the UK in 2010 and an atelier seven years ago. Choudhrie has seen her business grow rapidly, attracting clients beyond the millions of Indians forming the diaspora and local British buyers. "We have had clients from Brazil, [North] America, Europe, and Asia," she says. "London has been the perfect base for us and we have seen the business progress organically, largely by word of mouth."

Outposts in Dubai and New Delhi have allowed her to navigate the challenges posed by Brexit and the removal of VAT refunds for tourists. "We manufacture in Valenza, Italy, and Jaipur, India, and have offices in Dubai, London, and New Delhi," Choudhrie explains. "Before Brexit, we could get deliveries much faster. However, since Brexit, the process has become significantly slower."

"Additionally, the inability of tourists to claim back the 20 per cent VAT has had a noticeable effect on our business in London. That said, having offices in both Dubai and London has helped us adapt to these challenges."

Valery Demure — founder of an agency representing jewellers and a regular exhibitor at PAD, the London design and art fair — says that, despite issues linked to Brexit and VAT, London remains a vital window for international jewellers. Prestigious art fairs, such as Frieze, that attract wealthy clients, and a lively sporting and social calendar — including events such as Royal Ascot and Wimbledon, attended by royal family members — all contribute to London's enduring appeal.

At last year's PAD, Demure showcased Studio Renn, by Mumbai-based couple Rahul and Roshni Jhaveri, which created a series of rings made from unconventional materials, including concrete. It made a strong statement that, whether by honouring traditions, updating them or breaking them entirely, Indian jewellers remain committed to changing perceptions, and expanding beyond their national borders.

