

Indian perfume brands scent global success

Beauty | After years of inspiring western perfumery, south Asian fragrance houses are finding a growing international audience of their own, writes *Anwesh Banerjee*

For decades, the luxury fragrance industry has borrowed scents from India to sell to the rest of the world. Guerlain's 1925 Shalimar took its name from the Mughal gardens of Lahore, while Samsara in 1989 was built around the subcontinent's native sandalwood and jasmine. More recently, Mugler's 2014 unisex scent Oriental Express took inspiration from the region's sacred basil and sandalwood, while Dior's 2018 floral Souffle de Soie looked to jasmine and tuberose for its middle notes.

But now a shift in the global market has seen south Asian fragrances winning over shoppers both at home and abroad.

"The problem with legacy [western luxury] fragrance houses for Indian shoppers was always that the story was told from the outside looking in," says Priya Bhatia, founder of Rasa Partners, a London-based consumer advisory firm. "Fragrances were made using Indian ingredients, and given an Indian story or a Sanskrit name. The disconnect lies in expecting Indians to fall in love with these fragrances because of that inspiration alone."

Indian beauty brands — collectively dubbed "I-Beauty" — have had fans among health-conscious consumers who appreciate the incorporation of ayurvedic ingredients and rituals. Now, proudly homegrown fragrance labels are being sold outside India too. In the past year, Indian fragrance brands Rahasya

and Ruhveda became the first Indian fragrances to be launched at Selfridges and Sephora respectively. Store buyers are betting these brands have products with stories that feel recognisable and relevant beyond the Indian diaspora.

The increased global recognition for Indian perfumes comes at a time when niche fragrances are emerging as one of the beauty industry's fastest-growing categories, fuelled by an appetite for distinct, original perfumes, alongside a younger demographic that is passionate

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about scent discovery, layering and "fragrance wardrobing". The rise of dedicated social media communities has also created a platform for regional brands to find a global audience by overcoming geographic constraints and the boundaries of traditional distribution channels.

Hailing from a subcontinent whose perfumery traditions predate those of Grasse by centuries, the three founders of Rahasya, which launched in 2024, began creating their brand by reflecting on their own perfume collections.

"All three of us were avid perfume collectors, and realised we did not have any south Asian brands in our collection," says co-founder Sai Pogaru. "The conversation eventually turned into the idea of coming up with our own brand: we wanted to tell the south Asia fragrance story for a contemporary, global audience but without falling back into the tropes of palaces, elephants and maharajas." The brand's seven scents (each priced at £132) are inspired instead by memories of growing up between India and Singapore. From the scent of old independent bookshops in New Delhi's Khan Market to the smoky sweetness of Alphonso mangoes ripening in the summer heat, Rahasya bottles the intangible elements of lived experience in the region.

The approach has resonated with consumers, who are evenly split between Indian and diaspora shoppers and international ones. Many travelled from



Rahasya Love Marriage and, below left, Ruhveda Mughal Majesty

Manchester and Leicester to attend the brand's pop-up in Selfridges, which included a rickshaw with DJ music blaring from it. "People raved to us about seeing aspects of their lived realities reflected in contemporary perfumery," says Pogaru.

London-based Sudanese film-maker Basma Khalifa says that the appeal of brands such as Rahasya lies in their ability to evoke cherished memories. "I grew up in the Middle East, and am used to the smell of oudh and oils. But the first time I smelt Rahasya's Hill Station perfume, I was transported to the smell of rain-drenched soils from my own childhood," she says.

For Navneet Kaur, the Los Angeles-based founder of Ruhveda, the question was why south Asian ingredients remained central to the fragrance industry amid the conspicuous absence of south Asian entrepreneurship. "It is something we are addressing headlong as we work directly with generational perfumers based out of Kannauj," she says. Each of her scents is priced between \$32 (for a travel-size bottle) and \$175 and is inspired by the ancient learnings and philosophies of ayurveda.

Accepted into the 2025 Sephora Accelerate programme, an annual incubation system designed to help indie beauty founders scale their businesses and

prepare for retail, Kaur was surprised by a shift in the attitude of global retailers. Rather than softening the brand's cultural positioning, buying teams actively encouraged her to foreground it.

"The global success of brands such as Indē Wild, Kama Ayurveda and Forest Essentials has made it evident that there is a market for these products," she says, nodding to beauty brands hailing from the region that have already become international staples. In April, Estée Lauder announced its intention to acquire full ownership of Forest Essentials, after first investing in the luxury ayurvedic beauty brand in 2008.

Through the inclusion of south Asian fragrance brands including Rahasya and Ruhveda, retailers including Sephora and Selfridges are also hoping to further capture Indian spending, wherever it is in the world.

With India's high-net-worth population set to nearly double between 2025 and 2027, "the growth of the Indian travelling consumer is fast outpacing the Chinese consumer," says Bhatia. "The positioning of Diwali as a major event in the global calendar, and the attention that it has received from international brands, also reflects this shift."

As with the success of K-beauty, Bhatia believes the success of south Asian fragrance will depend on enough brands building international credibility over time: "The beauty segment is proof that building a brand rooted in south Asian identity is a possible success story. Rahasya and Ruhveda are only the first wave of Indian fragrances that will sit on international shelves within five years."