

New exposure After decades of criticism, Pirelli's calendar shifts its focus to India

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Against the ancient, weathered walls of Jaigarh fort, high on the hills above Jaipur, Bhavitha Mandava stood barefoot and draped in gold.

Just a few months earlier, the Indian model had been catapulted from a life of obscurity as a student at New York University to being one of the most recognisable and celebrated new faces of fashion. Last year, she became the first Indian woman to open the Chanel catwalk at its Métiers d'Art show and her Chanel outfit for the Met Gala fashion gathering became an international talking point.

Now Mandava, who grew up in the south Indian city of Hyderabad, is among the lineup of all-Indian women who will be the faces of the first Pirelli calendar to be entirely shot in India.

Launched back in the 1960s as a marketing giveaway for the Italian tyre company, the Pirelli calendar is now seen as one of the most influential publications for fashion photography, and has featured almost every famous supermodel of the past six decades.

Yet for decades it faced criticism for its lack of diversity, showcasing primarily thin, white models, and for its sexual objectification of women. The 1987 calendar included a topless 16-year-old Naomi Campbell among an all-black lineup. By 2016, fashion's most famous photographer Annie Leibovitz shot a calendar celebrating a diverse roster of influential women, from Serena Williams to Yoko Ono. In 2018, Tim Walker returned to a cast of only black models with his Alice in Wonderland themed calendar.

However, a return in 2025 to a focus on sensual and nude images, both female and male, drew criticism in the post-#MeToo era.

The decision to shoot the Pirelli calendar in India this year comes amid a shifting landscape for south Asian representation in fashion, both in terms of talent and in recognition of the crucial role of Indian craft. While Indian craft, fabrics and embroidery have long influenced the designs of the top fashion houses, their originators rarely went acknowledged.

In March 2023, Dior staged a show at Mumbai's Raj-era Gateway of India arch, becoming the first major European luxury house to present a full runway show in India, with Indian embroidery workshops and artisans at the forefront.

Two years later, Prada found itself engulfed in controversy after its runway show in June 2025 showcased models wearing leather sandals that were strikingly similar



▲ Bhavitha Mandava, 26, the breakout model, poses for the 2027 Pirelli calendar in her native India. The Indian photographer Avani Rai, left,

and crew, below, aimed to capture the 'multiple coexisting universes' in the vast, diverse country, Rai said

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to traditional Kolhapuri "chappals", crafted in western India for centuries. After a backlash, the fashion house admitted their Indian origins and sent a delegation to meet the artisans.

Mandava, 26, admitted that the history of the Pirelli calendar and how it would work in India's more modest culture had initially caused her to hesitate.

"I wasn't very enthusiastic about the past eroticism of the Pirelli calendar and those associations," she said. "But I'm so glad, they have actively made an effort for me to feel like I belong."

She said she celebrated the decision by Pirelli to champion India's "beauty and diversity". But while she acknowledged a shift in the portrayal of Indian beauty



in the west, she also cautioned against trying to make women such as herself "representations" of an entire country or race.

"I like to think my race isn't the most interesting thing about me," said Mandava. "I'm happy that whatever I'm doing is providing representation but I also don't think about how I'm representing India. That would just be too daunting."

The project had initially been envisioned as a collaboration between one of India's most famous photographers, Raghu Rai, and the Norwegian photographer Sølve Sundsbø. Rai was seen as a pioneer of photojournalism in India and his photographs remain some of the most vivid representations of the country.

After Rai's death in April, his daughter Avani Rai, also a photographer, agreed to take on his part of the project. It was, she admitted, difficult to follow in her father's footsteps. "My father was always my audience," she said. "And initially I thought, if he's not going to see these photos, then why should I shoot? But then I started talking to him and he started showing up in divine spaces."

Representing all of India's vastness and diversity was impossible, said Rai, and instead she focused on capturing an essence, the contradictions and "multiple co-existing universes". She decided to take the Pirelli calendar project back on to the streets, shooting scenes on the streets of Delhi's old city, its flower market, gullies and cinemas.

For Anoushka Shankar, whose genre-spanning music has revolutionised how the traditional Indian sitar is perceived, India has "always been about beauty and grace and sensuality, but outside of the country, there was often a deeply ignorant understanding of the culture".

Shankar will appear in the Pirelli calendar with her sitar, something she said would have once felt unthinkable. "If I think of how it felt for me as a teenager growing up in the UK or in the States, as a South Asian, we weren't thought of as the beautiful people," she said. "I would feel a little bit self-conscious about being Indian when I walked into certain rooms. But watching the last decade or so, South Asian presence in mainstream global culture has really changed that."

For Padma Lakshmi, a model and chef who was born in south-eastern India, returning to shoot the calendar - her second time featuring in it - felt particularly poignant. "Coming back to India to shoot this makes it feel a lot more feminine," she said. "I was raised in a house of women, and I associate my earliest talisman of femininity with those women."

At 55, she is among the oldest women who will feature in the 2027 calendar, and she celebrated the recognition that "the world is a very big place with lots of beauty".

"For so long we saw only one kind of Indian beauty, manufactured to certain tastes or certain narrow stereotypes," said Lakshmi. "But this shows the many faces of what it means to be an Indian woman globally."