

# FASHION

*Fusion Style from CP Fusão, by  
Designer Christine Philip*



INDIAN DESIGNS AND  
DESIGNERS ARE MAKING  
HEADWAYS INTO THE  
MAINSTREAM FASHION  
SCENE BY LAVINA MELWANI



# FORAYS

Indian-inspired fashion has made it to the White House! When President Obama threw his first state dinner, first lady Michelle Obama chose to wear a striking champagne-colored tulle gown with silver tiki embroidered flowers created by Mumbai-born designer Naeem Khan. Earlier in the day she wore a skirt created by another designer who has her roots in India, Rachel Roy.

Well, Indian-born designers and Indian crafts, fabrics and embroidery seem to have come a long way, from the cotton hippie skirts sold in flea markets to the stylish sequin and crystal-laden couture of major American designers like Oscar de la Renta, Carolina Herrera, Michael Kors, Vera Wang and Bill Blass, along with European fashion brand names such as Chloé, Valentino, Balmain, Sonia Rykiel, Escada, and Gucci, to name a few.

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While designers like Ritu Beri and Manish Malhotra have for long been trendsetters in India and Europe, now Indian designers are making inroads into the mainstream fashion scene in America. What's more, the forays are a two way street. Many in the West are now reasonably well-versed with Indian design elements. India is on everyone's radar with *Slumdog Millionaire* winning Oscars,



Top: Indian-inspired fashion in the White House: Michelle Obama's striking champagne-colored tulle gown with silver tiki embroidered flowers was created by Mumbai-born designer Naeem Khan.

Right: Designer John Galliano brought sari elements to Frieda Pinto's sapphire, one-sleeve gown, for her Oscar debut last year.

groups such as the Pussy Cat Dolls doing interpretations of Indian songs, Gwen Stefani and Lindsay Lohan wearing bindis, and Rihanna and Madonna in Hindi printed scarves and mehndi, not to mention the White House gatecrasher resplendent in a bright red sari! Last year, when Freida Pinto made her Oscar debut in a sapphire, one-sleeve gown by John Galliano, he designed it to bring in sari elements to reflect Freida's Indian origins.



Recently, Condé Nast Publications finally brought *Vogue*, the most distinguished and remarkable fashion publication, to India. *Vogue India* not only recognizes and exposes Indian designers, but also intertwines their work along with Western designers.

From Bollywood dance to *dosas* to *pashmina* shawls, everything Indian seems to have a fan following in America. A lot of it has to do with globalization and India's enhanced role in the world, but in reality Indian crafts and colors have colonized the imagination of Western designers, artists and writers through the years.

Many are the travelers who've journeyed to India and found it to be a bottomless well of inspiration for color, style and crafts. Indian silhouettes of the *churidar* or tight pants as well as the *kurti* have been incorporated into the fashion language of major designers, and these can be found in upscale stores from Neiman Marcus to Saks Fifth Avenue.

After Naeem Khan designed Michelle Obama's gown, he became the third most Googled name in the world and the media buzz was intense. In designing the first lady's gown, Khan hit just the right tone of classic and contemporary. "I took some very abstract flowers inspired by Andy Warhol and I put the old tiki work into that," he says. "But then I cut the dress into a very modern strapless dress for her because she's tall and has perfect shoulders. So the fabrication is very old world India but the shape of the dress is very modern."

## A JUXTAPOSITION OF OLD AND NEW

This juxtaposition of old and new is what appeals to the Western consumer. Khan's other high-profile clients include Queen Noor of Jordan, Beyonce, Kim Cattrall, Eva Longoria, Debra Messing, Carrie Underwood, Katherine Heigl and Taylor Swift. Recently Marissa Mayer of Google was married in a Naeem Khan dress, and his clothes are sold in over a hundred stores internationally.



Naeem Khan and his collection

Director Mira Nair describes his appeal thus: “Naeem’s clothes are sumptuous and sexy—he combines the ancient aesthetic of Indian craftsmanship with his own inimitable spin, creating beautiful modern things that are utterly wearable.”

One thing is certain—the whole nine yards of the ornate Indian look that is so popular in Indian bridal fashion cannot be exported wholesale, if it has to succeed in the Western market. A small whiff of India goes a long way, and is all that is needed to give a unique touch to contemporary clothing worn in the West. Several designers in India have successful

New York’s garment district is full of Indian manufacturers who have made their fortunes in the thriving ready-to-wear market by providing junior sportswear for all the major stores at affordable prices. They have often used known designer names in this country, but have done all the manufacturing and fabric procurement in India, and often in China.

According to a report in *Women’s Wear Daily*, the Indian textile industry accounts for \$32 billion which is 17 percent of the country’s exports and 4 percent of its gross domestic product. By 2012, India’s textile industry value will rise to



partnerships with stores and boutiques abroad, and their offerings for the Western market are quite different from the products for the home market.

Designer Manish Arora is a dramatic success story who has mastered the language of design to get audiences in all countries. He has participated in the Paris, London, Hong Kong and India fashion weeks, his label is available in over 84 stores worldwide, and he collaborates with Reebok on his hugely successful Fish Fry line, which is available in the United States.

\$110 billion, going from 4 to 7 percent of the global market, and employing an additional 14 million people.

Garments from India are available everywhere from Walmart to Target to Macy’s. Well known companies include The Tharanco Group, Andrew Sports Club, and Crazy Kat.

Haresh Tharani, Chairman of Tharanco, whose company earlier was the largest licensee for Bill Blass, has a host of brand name garment companies including the eco-friendly contemporary brand Living Planet, the Greg

Manish Arora, creator of Fish Fry, the highly successful, international line of clothing seen here with filmmaker Mira Nair.



Norman Collection with men's luxury shirts, and the contemporary designer label Poleci, all of which use resources in India. Says Tharani, "Clearly, India is a valuable source for our business and production, and we salute its emergence as an educated, creative powerhouse on the world stage, and we look forward to growing our business there."

India and Indians seem to have a finger in every pie, and recently New Yorkers got to see the full gamut of India's \$8 billion leather industry, from bags to stylish leather jackets in every possible hue. Leather is one of India's top ten foreign exchange earners with annual production at over \$7 billion, and an export value of \$3.59 billion.

The United States accounts for about 9.98 percent of Indian leather exports, with Walmart a big buyer. Major brands including Hugo Boss, DKNY, Versace and Kenneth Cole also source some of their leather garments from India.

While Indian leather is popular in European style, it is only now moving from basics to high fashion in the United States. America has looked at China as its main resource for leather products in the past while Europe has done so with India. Now, the companies from India want to explore the untapped potential of the U.S. market.

An exciting new innovation is occurring in fashion with the entry of Indian Americans into the many different fields of the American fashion

market. Having studied and grown up in the United States, these designers, stylists and entrepreneurs bring their own unique sensibilities to the arena. Aru Kulkarni is the President of Sales at the Jones Apparel Group, and has been Vice President at Liz Claiborne; Aria Das is a fashion stylist with Bloomingdale's; and Mili Dutt Reddy is Manager of Sales Forecasting and New Products at Louis Vuitton NA.

Sachin and Babi Ahluwalia are a New York-based husband-and-wife team whose company ANK Embroideries designs and manufactures couture embroideries for some of the biggest American fashion brands. As they point out, "What the general public doesn't realize is that Indian embroidery, textiles and craftsmanship are already a major influence within the industry across the board."

## CHIC AND CLASSIC WITH EDGY AND TRENDY

The couple also own ANKASA, a luxury home furnishings brand steeped in Indian fabrics and crafts where they combine "what is chic and classic with what is edgy and trend-driven." Just a year back they launched their fashion label "Sachin and Babi" in which they experiment with textures and silhouettes. The price point makes this stylish line accessible to consumers.

As someone who's been active in the home interiors and fashion industry, what changes has Babi seen in how India

is perceived by buyers and the media? “I think India has a more elevated presence and is well accepted because of its diverse facets. It has become more about preserving the arts and handicrafts rather than just factories. We manufacture our line in India, but design and conceptualize it here in New York.”

Asked if designers from India can break into the U.S. market, she says, “Yes, it is possible for an Indian designer to break into the U.S. fashion market—I am a living example of that! However, you do have to modify to the market. If you can understand the quintessential American lifestyle and cater to it, you will do well.” She points out that living in America and being immersed in the culture gives one an innate sense of what the market needs, appreciates and requires.

In Atlanta, another young designer of Indian origin is bringing the Indian sensibility to her creations. Christine Philip, a graduate of Emory University, apprenticed with a master European couturier before launching a couture collection. More and more, Indian-born designers are bringing different influences to the mix. Philip has German and Portuguese heritage too, has lived in the Middle East and traveled in Europe and the Far East. Her label is CP Fusao, a tribute to her Portuguese grandma who hailed from a Madeira wine family.

Fashion for these young Indian-American designers is a constant dialogue. Philip recently hired Anthony Williams from Neiman Marcus as her creative director and a designer for CP Fusao. Williams is

currently competing in the hot television series *Project Runway*. “India has always been on the minds of buyers and the media and you can’t go into a high-end store without running into something influenced by Indian culture,” she says.

“Even renowned designers are looking more and more towards Indian-inspired trends in fashion and are taking it from day to evening wear such as Michael Kors, the late Alexander McQueen,

Oscar de la Renta, Marchesa, Armani, and Badgley Mischka, to name a few. India is making a global impact in their extravagant silks, vibrant colors, lush embroidery, and its undeniably exotic flavor.”

Philip, who has recently launched a style magazine called *Global Glam*, feels that while Indian elements such as embroidery, embellishments and silks are already big in fashion, designers from India are not that well-known in the market yet.

Some young style-conscious Indian Americans are look-

ing to change that. Misha Shivdasani is launching Misha Nicole in the fall of 2010. She is envisaging this as a retail concept store and event space. “The mission is to create a fresh, cultural, and engaging shopping experience,” says Shivdasani. “It is being established as the premier platform to showcase coveted designers that have strong brand recognition internationally, but aren’t represented in the U.S.”

Shivdasani, who has been a buyer for Bergdorf Goodman and worked with Neiman Marcus and Salvatore Ferragamo in sales, really knows her stuff. “With the



*The edgy designs of Sachin and Babi*



Top: Atlanta's own Christine Philip, founder of CP FUSÃO, the trendy Buckhead boutique, and her collection to the right.



over saturation of the luxury brands in the market, the exorbitant prices and the demise in quality, consumers don't feel as inclined to invest into the mainstream brands that are becoming less unique and interesting, and don't make up for it with the quality," she says.

"So India provides product that is exciting, has a unique perspective, and is diversified in its range of product offering. The media and buyers are realizing that this is where the goldmine is, and consumers want to purchase items that are fresh and exciting, but do not want to break the bank. India not only provides newness, but also prices that are competitive."

### UNIQUENESS, QUALITY AND A GOOD PRICE

In the tough economic atmosphere, when stores are being shuttered, is it smart to bet on India and open a store dedicated to Indian style and fashion? "It couldn't be a better time," says Misha Shivdasani as she launches this April with Global Runway, a fashion event at

the Paramount Hotel to inaugurate Misha Nicole. "People are excited about India and fashion that provides uniqueness, quality and a good price, and that is what India can provide. India is on the upswing, and investing now is the time."

A young designer who would attest to that is Gurpreet Pia Fleming, whose line BIAN by G. Pia Fleming has really taken off internationally. Calling her on her cell phone in New York, I got her instead in the middle of the night in New Delhi! She was jetlagged, having flown from New York to Dubai to New Delhi, in time for Fashion Week. In the last few years BIAN has become a brand name in the Middle East, Australia and Japan, and scores of boutiques in America carry the line. Fleming now has a flagship store in Delhi, and is involved with the Fashion Week carnival in India.

She has certainly paid her dues and shows how fashion careers are going full circle globally. She was among the first batch of students to graduate from the National Institute of Fashion Technology in Delhi, which was created in collaboration with the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York, and under the

guidance of the dean of FIT, she came to study in the United States, and interned with Tommy Hilfiger and at Nordstrom.

Fleming launched BIAN with a line of accessories in New York in 2002, and then participated in Toronto Fashion Week. Tellingly enough, BIAN means mysterious—in Vietnamese! So Indian workmanship doesn't always have to have a geographical identity and is merging itself into many styles and sensibilities. China and other countries may be useful for mass fabrication but India remains the place of choice for intricate craftsmanship and techniques such as zardozi, appliqué,

ers have found their way onto prestigious runways and upscale retailers of the world," she says. "My vision is to bring the best and brightest Indian designers to the U.S., while primarily being a fashion destination for the women of America seeking a unique and modern style."

She adds, "Soigne K represents the perfect mix of approachable Indian pieces which appeal to the Western market, and traditional Indian formal wear. The store will also celebrate India by serving as an educational portal to learn more about the craftsmanship, quality and intricacies of the clothes."



Misha Shivdasani is launching Misha Nicole in the fall of 2010, "to showcase coveted designers that have strong brand recognition internationally, but aren't represented in the U.S."

tough, but young entrepreneurs are betting on India in the luxury and style market. This fall, exclusive Madison Avenue is going to get an Indian store along with its noted neighbors such as Chanel, Armani, Dolce and Gabbana, Hermes and Roberto Cavalli, which are all on this street of high fashion. Soigne K is a multi-brand specialty store being launched by Soigne Kothari, an entrepreneur who graduated from FIT in buying and merchandising.

"India's greatest and latest design-

beading and crocheting. The experience of hundreds of years is now being tapped by designers both in India and abroad.

Yes, the times might be

And so from spring through fall this year, we should be seeing a lot of excitement and action in the fashion arena. Will more and more Americans be seduced by Indian fashion through travel to India, through cinema, and through Indian-American friends in an ever increasing Asian population? Will American designers continue to find inspiration in India's myriad delights of color, crafts and couture? Will Indian designers make it big in America? Will new mega-fashion stores dedicated to India ring up the sweet music of cash registers?

As global influences permeate countries and as people move effortlessly across borders, brought closer by the Internet and virtual worlds, this seems very likely. "Cultural Amalgamation," says, Christine Philip, is going to be the new trend for 2010 and 2011. Stay tuned as the fashion story continues! ■