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Following *SUIT*

A Savile Row establishment helmed by two Indian brothers
brings the art of bespoke tailoring to the subcontinent.

by AASHMITA NAYAR

The discerning eye always starts its scrutiny of a man with the outer crust—his attire. It accordingly forms a first impression that ordinarily does not budge until introductions are made and a conversation is struck up, paying allegiance to Mark Twain's famous words, "Clothes make the man." For 200 years, the eye has been indulged—or deceived, as may have been the case—thanks to the deft hands of Savile Row tailors, who indisputably remain the pinnacle in bespoke men's tailoring. Six years ago, a new addition to this exalted London address caught the eye unawares, because its founders had mastered the intricacies of this bespoke craft beautifully despite being outsiders in the industry as well as the country. Since then, they have not only amassed a loyal following among men worldwide but have even advanced to developing the trade in their home town, Chennai. "We have always been attracted to the English cut," says Mahesh Ramakrishnan, who co-founded Whitcomb & Shaftesbury with twin brother Suresh. "Of all the distinct silhouettes, it is, by far, the smartest, offering a clean line and crisp image."



At Whitcomb & Shaftesbury, each bespoke suit takes more than 60 hours to make by hand, as compared to the 10 hours it takes with a machine.

The Ramakrishnan brothers perhaps had a slight edge in this business due to their former professions: Suresh worked as an investment banker at Goldman Sachs in New York, while Mahesh worked as the Managing

Director at Scient. During this period, the twins would spend a small fortune on expensive designer wear which, they claim, "neither fit well nor looked great". Having recognised that attire could make or break a businessman, they moved their patronage to Savile Row. "Our first suits were [stitched] at the venerable Kilgour, one of the most distinguished and storied firms on the Row," recalls Mahesh. When the immeasurable finish and fit of their bespoke suits started drawing attention from friends and colleagues, they found themselves bridging the divide between Wall Street and Savile Row.

"They found a huge gap in the market for high quality personal advice—for example, what fabric helps avoid a tired look during a conference—and service, as most Savile Row tailors, while excellent fitters and cutters, did not have a social or professional background that might enable them to anticipate their customer," explains Siddharth Das, the twins's friend and now a client. Mahesh and Suresh eventually decided to set up their own bespoke tailoring establishment, Whitcomb & Shaftesbury, at the intersection of two namesake streets in central London. Kilgour's experienced

Twin brothers Suresh and Mahesh Ramakrishnan (above) launched Whitcomb & Shaftesbury on London's Savile Row six years ago.

head cutter, John McCabe, joined the firm, along with Robert Bigg, a master tailor with 50 years' experience on the Row, and David Cook, who leads the front office and sales and specialises in cutting *shervanis* and Nehru jackets.

At Whitcomb & Shaftesbury, each bespoke suit takes more than 60 hours to make, as compared to the 10 hours it takes with a machine. After a client books a one-on-one appointment (either by telephone or email), the store carefully takes various two- and three-dimensional measurements—the former includes the height, chest and waist, and the latter takes into account elements such as posture, a rounded back, and forward shoulders. Abundant time is also invested in order to understand a client's lifestyle and preferences. "Sometimes, it is also about knowing a customer over a period of time and watching their needs and tastes evolve," says Mahesh. That said, the store's ideal perception of a suit (or a house style) is that of a close-fitting, lean garment with a one-button waist and natural shoulders. "Not that we impose this look on anyone, though," he adds.

Among Whitcomb & Shaftesbury's clients are increasing numbers of discerning Indian men, who, like the brothers in the past, are approaching Savile Row for sartorial solutions. "The younger Indian male is increasingly well-read, widely travelled and aware of diverse trends," says Mahesh. "It is fair to say that he and his older counterparts are evolving their style sensibilities and tend for most part to be inspired by Western styles. We expect this to change over time as they become more engaged in determining—perhaps with our help—what works for them, and develop preferences borne of inquiry and experience." Of course, apart from Western styles, classic Indian cuts are also in demand. "A *shervani* or a Nehru jacket is a layer of expression on the bedrock of technique and tradition," says



Mahesh. "We've many years of experience tailoring for Indian styles, and tie up with some of the best embroidery houses to commission intricate works on the suit."

The beautiful art of made-to-measure wear caters to any physical incongruities, and the brothers offer no less. It is at this point that the skill of cutter is highlighted, by rendering the weaknesses of the customer non-existent and exaggerating his strengths at the same time. "By cutting a jacket a touch shorter, legs appear longer—a trick especially favoured in women's clothing—and by cutting the front of the jacket smaller and the back larger, we can slim down a large frame. Subtle moves such as cutting a higher collar notch and creating longer lapels also allow us to make the customer look taller," says Mahesh. A careful choice of colours and materials is crucial, too—lighter fabrics tend to har-

monise better without adding weight or bulk. Mahesh advises that younger men should experiment with unorthodox materials such as velvets, corduroys, linen, and silk and cashmere blends, while older men should appreciate a careful focus on comfort and classic styles. "Indian skin can carry off colour stunningly well," he adds. "But one has to keep in mind that complexion alludes not just to skin tones, but also the contrast between hair and skin and is crucial in colour and fabric selections."

It is such attention to detail and the masculinity of the Savile Row silhouette that is irresistible for many, in addition to having unusual requests indulged. "A famous rock musician had us create a secret pocket in his suits to stash 'certain chemicals' that would then survive airport pat-downs," reveals Mahesh. "A business tycoon wanted the name of his com-

pany in 22-karat-gold woven into a pinstripe for his suit."

It is no wonder then Whitcomb & Shaftesbury patrons have in the past included Richard Gere, Mick Jagger, Michael Jackson, the Vanderbilts, the Pirmals, Vijay Amritraj, and Amar Gopal Bose of Bose Corporation. "We often travel to various places as desired by clients who choose not to visit the store," says Mahesh, recalling one particularly interesting example: "A music mogul flew a team of our tailors down to New York to create a suit overnight for him to wear to the Grammy awards and Jay-Z's birthday. He wanted images of all the rock bands he had launched printed on the lining of his coat; it was delivered just hours before the event." The most expensive suit the brothers have made cost £50,000, thanks in large part to the choice of fabric. "The cloth was a blend of super-220's cashmere and pure diamond chips woven into the pinstripe," says Mahesh. "There were

other Savile Row stores, who allocate sewing to tailors in other countries). The cutting is still done by British cutters to preserve the essence of the English cut. The Chennai project was spurred by an idea put forward by Frenchman Jean Francois Lesage. Lesage, who was involved with the Children of the World project after the 2004 tsunami, recommended that the brothers set up a workshop in Chennai to help provide employment to victims of the natural disaster as well as abused women. The duo agreed; they have trained more than 300 people since then and today employ more

our team of tailors from London to train the Indian workforce. All our tailors also undergo a 2-3-year training programme, and are only allowed to join our workshop once they have been certified by our master tailor, Robert Bigg, after a rigorous test."

A standard Whitcomb & Shaftesbury suit is priced at approximately £3,000. However, suits that customers elect to have stitched in the company's Chennai workshop cost roughly half as much. So far, the twins claim, clients have found no difference in the make or the tailoring.

The company is now planning to expand its footprint in India by making its services available, via appointment initially, during the scheduled visits of its team of cutters and tailors to the country, and at stores such as The Collective in New Delhi. "We hope to make India the hub for high-quality hand-tailored garments, like Italy has become for machined suits. Of course, our premier offering will

Whitcomb & Shaftesbury stands at the intersection of two namesake streets in central London.



over three carats of diamonds in this fabric, but the pattern was so subtle that the diamonds were visible only when the light hit from an angle."

For all their meticulously tailored products, Whitcomb & Shaftesbury has to adhere to the 50-yard rule of the Row, which states that all suits must be sold within 50 yards of the London location. However, Mahesh and Suresh have allocated the sewing of the cut suit pieces to craftsmen in Chennai (a practise also shared by

than 160 artisans in the southern state. "These people, most of whom have never even held a needle in their life, have developed their skills at an extraordinary rate," says Das. "Even though [only] a tenth of the trainees eventually stick on to become master craftsmen, which is no small cost to us (the company is not funded by NGOs or the government), it is a rewarding experience." Mahesh, who oversees the Chennai operations, says, "We have regular visits [every six weeks] by

always remain a full Savile Row bespoke experience, whether or not the garment is partially or fully furnished in India, based on a customer's personal preferences and budget. What we will guarantee is the authenticity of the product and process," says Mahesh, subtly yet effectively challenging the discerning eye to spot the difference. ☐

Whitcomb & Shaftesbury, London, UK, www.whitcombandshaftesbury.com

More than 35 two-dimensional and 25 three-dimensional measurements are required to create a single bespoke suit.

The workshop in Chennai employs more than 160 artisans trained by Whitcomb & Shaftesbury's team of expert cutters and tailors.