



STYLE
(BESPOKE)

THE INDIAN TWINNS ON SAVILE ROW

Eight years ago, Tam-Brahm siblings **Mahesh** and **Suresh Ramakrishnan** quit their lucrative IT jobs to set up shop on Savile Row, the world's most famous tailoring street, under the very British name of Whitcomb & Shaftesbury. With clients like Sachin Tendulkar and Richard Gere, the duo is now getting ready for India.

By

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Suresh (left) and
Mahesh Ramakrishnan

EARLIER THIS YEAR,

The Chap, a British men's magazine targeted at certified dandies, organised a demonstration on London's Savile Row, the internationally renowned hub of men's tailoring. Friendly protesters, kitted in vintage suits, held placards: 'Give three-piece a chance,' they demanded. The Savile Row suit — and a tradition stretching more than 200 years of dressing Britain's ruling class — was under threat. US fashion retailer Abercrombie & Fitch planned to open a childrenswear store at 3 Savile Row, where the Beatles once had their London base.

"Sorry chaps, Abercrombie & Fitch doesn't fit Savile Row," said a heading in the online edition of Guardian newspaper. "The Row has been the heartland of English bespoke tailoring for 200 years. This is not the place for T-shirts and cargo pants". The columnist, Gustav Temple, made the case that it was on Savile Row that "tailors made the uniform worn by Horatio Nelson when he was killed at the Battle of Trafalgar; it was here that Edward VII invented the dinner jacket". Temple expressed outrage after learning that Abercrombie's chief executive uses Savile Row himself. "If you enjoyed lunch at a fine restaurant," Temple asked, "would your response be to open up a McDonald's next-door?" The London Evening Standard quoted a Savile Row tailor saying, "Slapping an American kids' shop in the middle of Savile Row would be a knife in the gut for us". That knife is now firmly lodged: Abercrombie opened its Savile Row shop in August.

The Chennai-born twins who left lucrative jobs in New York to set up bespoke tailoring outfit Whitcomb & Shaftesbury in the Row's Mayfair environs in 2004 were not, fortunately, met with such protests. Suresh Ramakrishnan, a Wharton alumnus, dealt with IT risk-management algorithms at Goldman Sachs, while Mahesh was a systems integrator at a consulting firm.

"We had to wear suits to the office



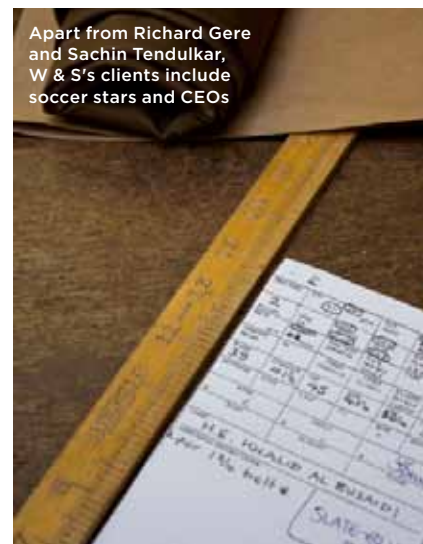
The Ramakrishnans employ some of the world's top coat-makers and tailors



The tailoring outfit takes its name from two intersecting nearby streets



The textile display rack



Apart from Richard Gere and Sachin Tendulkar, W & S's clients include soccer stars and CEOs

and we were constantly frustrated with our experience with off-the-rack tailoring that we found in America, so we ventured into bespoke," says Suresh, who found custom tailoring either prohibitively expensive or bare basic. The brothers spotted "a gap in the market for high quality tailoring and quality advice", and their string of corporate contacts was perfect for kicking off word of mouth. Whitcomb & Shaftesbury takes its name from two intersecting nearby streets.

IT IS ON A RAINY

and grey Monday morning that I catch up with the two 39-year olds. I pant my way up the stairs to their second-floor shop: like many Savile Row shops, theirs is a 'storied' outlet, as opposed to one with a ground-floor façade. Inside, you're suddenly

in a gentleman's club: it's all leather and mahogany and there is not a computer in sight. We could well be in the 1950s. I could stay here all day smoking a cigar and watching customers go in, who knows, maybe Sachin Tendulkar or Richard Gere, both of whom are reportedly Whitcomb & Shaftesbury fans. At 9:15am, though, with harsh rain beating down outside, there's little chance of that.

Sitting in on the interview is John McCabe, the firm's head cutter and a Savile Row veteran whose hiring was something of a coup for the two brothers. The brothers are well-spoken, polite and charming and, of course, elegantly suited up. Suresh shrugs off the notion that Abercrombie aside, the Ramakrishnans' own presence on what is known as the golden mile, sounds the death knell for Savile Row as we know it.

"We're just another in a long line of newcomers to the Row: they get absorbed and then they become part of the Row and you have the next wave of entrepreneurs," he says. "What is important when you are evolving a tradition," says Mahesh, "is that you stay true to its soul."

The major obstacle they have encountered has been one of "perception". "When you say you're in Savile Row and you're making a good product, people are not entirely sure whether everything is the way it should be. The real challenge has been to get them to experience the product. This is key because we don't fall into the typical Savile Row image," says Mahesh. "Savile Row is a set of standards that make up the garment rather than the location of the actual shop. It's always been the golden mile. And, in fact, a lot of the best tai-



SUITS
&
STYLE

STYLE (BESPOKE)

lors don't even have a shop anymore, with the [soaring] rents. So it becomes very hard for a customer. The hardest thing has been to build their trust up, both within the trade and outside."

Whitcomb & Shaftesbury's Savile Row Bespoke line is made in London, but they have another range, the relatively more affordable Classic Bespoke, which, while cut in London, is tailored in Chennai by handpicked craftsmen who have been trained to the match Savile Row's demanding standards. Suits from the Savile Row Bespoke line cost about £2,800 (Rs 2.4 lakh), while Classic Bespoke starts at ₹1,250 (Rs 1.1 lakh).

The Chennai connection started in 2004, following the south Asian tsunami, when the Ramakrishnans became involved in a project with the French Blue Cross, which aimed to train people in new skills to rebuild their lives, such as tailoring; so a number of workshops were set up with the intention of empowering participants. The Ramakrishnans also started the Rehabilitation of Destitute and Abused Women programme in 2009, in Tada, Andhra Pradesh. One of the things taught here is tailoring, and those who make it through a rigorous three-month assessment can end up working at the company's Chennai base at Mahalingapuram. The duties they handle at Whitcomb & Shaftesbury's Chennai facility include hand-sewing of hems, and button holes among others.

Siddharth Das, who handles the Indian operations of Whitcomb & Shaftesbury, says that the tailoring outfit is also about "rebuilding the highest traditions of craftsmanship and skill through luxury".

"Luxury provides a platform for the demonstration of skills at the pinnacle of human achievement. Assigning high value to such skills will incentivise their acquisition and practise," says Das, who founded RBI-licensed credit bureau CIBIL in 2000, after a long stint in the technology industry in the US.

WHITCOMB &

Shaftesbury works primarily with two master tailors. Besides John McCabe, they also employ Robert Bigg, a master coat-maker, who also leads the



Siddharth Das (left), who heads Whitcomb & Shaftesbury's Indian operations, at a W & S event in Mumbai

training and development of the staff in India. "Bob, on several occasions, may bring other tailors down to assist him in the training as required," says Mahesh. Last year the brothers teamed up with Thomas Mahon, a Savile Row tailor who runs his own business in Cumbria, in northwestern England, to launch the English Cut made to measure brand. Mahon's clients have reportedly included David Beckham and Prince Charles (Savile Row tailors are shy about naming

eight months instead of the six weeks it takes to craft English Cut's outfits. "The idea is to democratise Savile Row and give people a chance to experience the tradition without the costs." "This was a way of expanding the business," says Mahon, who visits Chennai every year to train tailors at the Whitcomb & Shaftesbury facility. "But what it offers people is a garment that is British-designed, looks British and is handmade by artisans in India. "Clients are measured, particulari-

WHITCOMB & SHAFTESBURY'S SAVILE ROW BESPOKE LINE IS MADE IN LONDON, BUT THEY HAVE ANOTHER RANGE, WHICH IS CUT IN LONDON AND TAILORED IN CHENNAI

names). English Cut, which is cut in England but tailored in Chennai, offers suits that sit "somewhere between the bespoke and the ready-made", says Suresh. "The same as bespoke in terms of quality, but it doesn't have as laborious a fitting process." A bespoke suit can take up to 80 hours — and 20,000 stitches — to produce and take

ties are noted, the cloth is ordered and it all goes to India." The process only works, however, if the customer's physique allows it. "With some clients I wouldn't even let them try it: their figure's too awkward and they'd have no chance," says Mahon, adding that this would require the cutter computing far too many notes against the stock

garment. Both Mahon and the brothers stress that the craftsmanship associated with the Row is not compromised both with the Classic Bespoke Line as well as the English Cut.

About 50 percent of Whitcomb & Shaftesbury's work is done out of India, says Das. "Our Chennai workshop has tailors who are rigorously trained by our Savile Row experts. Once a cut pattern is handed to the team and a tailor assigned, the process works in much the same way as it does on Savile Row, with small variations," says Das.

THEIR CUSTOMERS

include Hollywood actors and soccer stars, but how do their Indian customers view their products? After all, if you're buying an English suit it's likely you'll want it to be made in England. "Indians who have worked in the West are fine with the made-in-India product," says Mahesh. "They're very proud of what's made in India, so they want to support that."

Das says that Whitcomb & Shaftesbury are preparing for launch in India. The plan is to hold trunk shows and fly down their master craftsmen periodically from London to Indian metros. "We will do this as per a preset calendar so a customer knows exactly when they will be fitted or get delivery of their garments. There shall never be a need to go to London because every customer's personal pattern will be stored there. Future requests can be made directly on the basis of this pattern, with a few adjustments for fabric, or for changes in a customer's body over time. In fact, specially for our Indian customers, we can do some things which are not possible in London — such as quicker turnaround to meet wedding requirements."

But isn't all this at risk from the global downturn? "Savile Row by itself is a boutique industry so the people who come to Savile Row are not generally affected by the larger scenario," says Mahesh. "We haven't seen our business go up hugely when the market is going boom, nor have we seen it going down when the market is down. But I think in times of difficulty people value tradition and craft."