

On the Row

With men's fashion the fastest growing luxury segment, the Ramakrishnan twins share their experience as outsiders on London's Savile Row

By Karan Nemani



The Ramakrishnan twins offer advice on how to create a wardrobe of beautiful and versatile garments

In 2004, Suresh and Mahesh Ramakrishnan did the unthinkable. The Tam-Brahm twins chucked their cushy jobs in the US and set up shop on Savile Row, the mecca of men's bespoke wear in Mayfair, London. A decade later, Whitcomb & Shaftesbury, their tailoring outfit, has clients from across the world including Richard Gere, Jude Law and Sachin Tendulkar.

The Ramakrishnans have also been innovators. Whitcomb & Shaftesbury's classic bespoke line is tailored in India and the tailoring house has two units in Chennai, which provide employment to local artisans and destitute women. The brothers speak about the early days of their tailoring outfit, their learnings, their recent tie-up with Tarun Tahiliani and the rise and rise of men's fashion.

It has been a decade since you set up Whitcomb & Shaftesbury. How do you look back on the journey and what are your learnings from it?

We started off as a small company and newcomers on the 'Row', and we are now considered a pre-eminent destination with clients traveling all the way from places as far away as Singapore and Norway just to visit us. Anyone can set up a shop on Savile Row, but that does not make you a Savile Row tailor. It is an exclusive artisanal community and to be truly accepted into it, you have to live and breathe the culture and represent the craft to the exceptional standards that has made Savile Row the ultimate destination for well-dressed men for over 200 years.

One of the things that we have done is to stay very true to the artisanal work, taking tremendous pains to both recruit and reproduce hand tailoring. We cannot think of any other 'outsider' who has been accepted into this community. Savile Row is an artisanal world; it is not for those who try and come in for commercial reasons and ride on its coat tails — you will be found out very quickly. It takes many years to build relationships and networks. To get the best cutters and coat makers to work with you is not easy. The artisans have tremendous pride in what they do and will only work with companies that they feel represent the craft in its true form. Artisanal tailors from other countries (Italy and France) as well as the big couture houses look up to Savile Row for inspiration and ideas even today.

What was the trigger that made you leave cushy jobs in the US and set up shop in Savile Row? It was almost akin to two Brits setting up a gourmet biryani eatery in Hyderabad or Lucknow.

Pure passion and love for the craft. Having studied computer science in the US, we could appreciate the level of technical detail and precision that went into making each garment and the more we learnt about it, the more we were seduced by this unique environment and wanted to be part of it.

What was the response of your storied neighbours on Savile Row? Was it hostile, condescending, or encouraging?

At first, they did not really accept us. Savile Row has and continues to see many people come and go — trying to trade on its name without being a genuine Savile Row house. As with anything



The collaboration between Tarun Tahiliani and Whitcomb & Shaftesbury features traditional Indian wear with the fine tailoring of a custom-made suit



Savile Row is an artisanal world which serves as a source of inspiration and ideas to couture houses

in life, you have to earn your stripes. Over time word got around about the quality of the garments being produced by two young men genuinely committed to the tradition of the Row and its crafts. They became more encouraging and supportive.

In one of your earlier interviews, you have spoken about a 'gap in the market for high quality tailoring and quality advice.' How successful have you been at filling this gap?

We are unique on that front as we are able to offer advice from a socio-economic perspective which our clients can appreciate. When we advise on a suit that is appropriate for a board meeting in New York or how to pair a jacket with trousers for a holiday in Positano, it is because we have been in these situations. One of the issues that most men struggle with is how to put together a wardrobe of beautiful and versatile garments rather than one or two nice suits.

Our advice takes into account their personal and professional standing in society, and we help them put together a wardrobe that allows them to look their best across the myriad situations that they would encounter in their daily lives. Also, as former clients of Savile Row, we can understand what goes through the client's mind when he first enters our showroom in London. Savile Row can be very intimidating and we have gone to great pains to ensure that our store is welcoming and yet offers the true experience.

With your classic bespoke line, you, sort of, pioneered a whole new approach to suit making on Savile Row. Do you think this is a pointer to the way the bespoke industry will evolve in the coming days?

The idea was not new. It has been done before across multiple industries and even in fashion. Outsourcing has been used by most couture houses to reduce costs and increase profits. Where our Classic Bespoke line differs is that the

manufacturing is done in our own workshops using identical techniques as our London workshops and with tailors trained by our staff. It is also a split manufacturing technique with all garments being cut in London.

We would like to believe that other luxury industries will evolve to our model, which is a more practical way of providing very high quality goods at a more affordable price. This requires tremendous investment of time and effort. The incentive for us was to provide employment and rehabilitation to local people and not purely economic profit, with the savings in cost passed on to the customers. Most houses that use overseas factories to produce quality goods, from shoemakers to phone manufacturers, do so purely to increase the bottom line with no reduction in sale price.

You are also regarded as social entrepreneurs, thanks to your efforts in setting up a unit near Chennai. How tough was it to dial in artisans from neighbouring villages into the suit-making process?

Our business model is very much one of social entrepreneurship with a principal focus on developing and training disadvantaged locals in an artisanal trade, to provide them with a good livelihood and increase their self-esteem through involvement in a product that is appreciated worldwide. It was very difficult initially as most families were sceptical about sending anyone to our unit, as they are not easily trusting of outsiders.

We worked with local social workers. We went to the villages and spoke to them extensively and paid generous stipends to anyone who showed up for our training, regardless of whether they would end up completing the training program. One of the things that made a big difference was when our coat maker Paul 'Grif' Griffiths went from village to village and spent days with the villagers. He was able to win over most sceptics.



Today customers are looking at individual items that are created specially for them

What kind of other innovations have you pioneered at W & S?

We have just partnered with designer Tarun Tahiliani to launch a range of bespoke Indian style garments, bringing in the best of traditional Savile Row tailoring with Indian styles. It is the first such collaboration of its kind in the world.

Could you give us an idea of how the classic bespoke suit is different compared to your flagship offering?

The classic bespoke process is identical to our Savile Row bespoke process, the difference is who is actually tailoring the garment. It starts with an individual appointment in our showroom over a cup of tea. The initial consultation is aimed at understanding the client's lifestyle, sartorial ambitions, current wardrobe and other preferences. This allows us to help the client select from over 5,000 fabrics. So, for example, if the client tends to travel between a dry climate such as London to a humid place like Singapore, we would advise specific fabrics that do not sag and wrinkle. While the meticulous process is the same, the difference is that the classic bespoke takes a (physical) divergence as the coat is sent to the workshop in Chennai.

Men are increasingly becoming style conscious today. How long do you think it will take before it becomes almost as big as women's fashion?

All research has shown that men's fashion is the fastest growing luxury segment. Men are growing more conscious of how they look — they are working out more and taking better care of themselves, as such they want to dress better. While men are less prone to trends than women, they are able to demand a higher quality as longevity is important. Consequently, while the volume of the men's market may not match the women's in volume, it may well come very close in economic terms.

How has the luxury industry evolved since the time of the recession? Does it work differently now than it used to?

There has been a shift in focus. In luxury, quality is the cornerstone of any business and people are demanding that and are appreciative of it. The market is flooded with numerous luxury brands offering generic products and people are looking at individual items that are unique to them. It is an oxymoron that you spend lakhs of rupees to choose something off the rack and see someone walk into the shop and buy the same thing. You may even see someone in a different continent with the same bag or dress. There was a time when one had to go to Paris to Chanel to get the latest perfume; now it is available in every department store and airport.

When you think of luxury *en masse*, there is no exclusivity. The new movement in luxury is away from the big brands of the 2000s, towards seeking out artisanal companies who make best in class products which are not accessible to the masses. Customers want unique and personalised products and they want companies to give them a piece of luxury made expressly for them. When it comes to clothing this goes a step further, as our bodies are different and a perfect fit can only be ensured by bespoke garments.

How is W & S doing in India? Which is your biggest market?

We entered the Indian market a few months ago. We are retailing through a partnership with Evoluzione in Chennai and will expand to Bangalore and Delhi shortly. Our co-branded line with Tarun Tahiliani will be available exclusively through Tahiliani's couture studios in Delhi and Mumbai.

Where do you see yourselves in half a decade? Still making the best suits in the world.



The collaborative collection features sherwanis, bundi and bandhgalas with a modern, luxe take