

Holi Choli Top
By Swati Argade

FUSION FASHION'S KARMIC CYCLE

A group of Indian American designers are determined to bring India's distinctive style to the West. Their collective mission is to infuse ancient handicraft traditions with modern taste and create fusion fashion designs that would add a silver lining to their bottom lines.

DAVID SUROWIECKI

BY RICHA GULATI

South Asian women in New York dressed with a curious similarity last summer. The young and old alike wore items more likely bought in a Mumbai bazaar than an American mall. Long cotton *bandani* skirts, beaded Punjabi *jutis*, and embroidered *kurtis* replaced the standard summer uniform of shorts and flip-flops. Chandelier earrings and wooden bangles completed the India-inspired "ethnic" look.

South Asia has never been ignored by fashion; celebrities have long flirted with Indian style on the red carpet. Notably, Gwen Stefani's *bindis* and Madonna's brief obsession with *saris* come to mind. Yet never before has India's distinctive style made the leap from high fashion to the mass market so pervasively. Teens now plan *mehndi* parties as if henna tattoos have always been a part of mainstream American culture.

If India's emergence as a fashion force comes as a surprise, so do the designers and entrepreneurs at the latest ethnic trend's forefront. Critics often talk about fashion's lack of diversity as an industry but a group of Indian-Americans are nevertheless determined to make, and more importantly keep, India fashionable in this fickle industry. Their collective mission is to infuse India's ancient handicraft traditions with modern taste, requiring sleeker proportions and silhouettes. This is the essence of "fusion" design.

Ironically, prominent members of this group found their careers by accident. New York based jewelry designer Amrita Singh left her native Delhi at the age of sixteen to study marketing in New York's Fashion Institute of Technology. She had no intention of designing the jewelry that now routinely graces pages of fashion's most influential magazines like Vogue and Elle. After graduation, Singh worked at various venerable fashion houses, including Bergdorf Goodman and Oscar de la Renta, but eventually left to pursue a dream of

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owning her business designing one-of-a-kind couture blouses. For six months she worked in Rajasthan's factories, celebrated for their thriving craft traditions, to create her debut blouse collection. Merely as an afterthought, she created jewelry from the gems left from work on her blouses so as not to waste the precious stones. Back in America, the reaction to her blouses was tepid but her accidental jewelry was hot, and her career was launched.

Now, Singh travels to Rajasthan four times a year, as she says "to get the best stones in Jaipur and to work with the best artisans who specialize in the *minakari*, or enamel setting, in Bikaner." Her jewelry initially reinterpreted *Mughal* era designs. Her philosophy is evident in her work which "takes the old and makes it new with fresh stones and fresh cuts." Her current project, for example, reinterprets classic *jhumke* designs. "The basic *jhumke* design has been the same for the last 2,000 years", she explains, "I am making them with ebony wood inlaid with rose-cut diamonds. The caps of the earrings are finished with different shades of light or hot pink enamel. I stay away from the traditional colors of red, green and white. Aslo, I sometimes use wood in place of usual 22-karat gold, or fresh stones rather than diamonds, in order to make an old design look new."

According to her, an important element of modern design is to steer clear of "heavy sets" or matching earrings and necklaces. Such heavy sets are popular in

India, but not in America where women will likely wear either a bold necklace or earrings, but usually not both at the same time. Colored stones like citrine and amethyst, as opposed to traditional clear stone settings, also render her kundan pieces modern.

Brooklyn-based clothing designer Swati Argade had a similarly circuitous route to fashion design. Raised in North Carolina, Argade trained as a classical South Indian dancer. She quickly became a fixture in the downtown arts scene after her arrival in New York in 1998, but not for her clothes, at least not at first. Performing with her sister across the city, Argade began to make her own costumes for shows. Only when strangers repeatedly asked Argade about the costumes did she think about fashion as a career. A diverse background has served as the informal fashion training for Argade, who says her craft comes naturally to her. Numerous annual summer vacations spent in India, the study of art history, and professional dance career have all found a voice within her designs.

Argade's sophisticated designs, launched in the fall of 2004, are based on her vast knowledge of Indian history. The "beauty of women" is a constant theme for her collections, which also have imagined characters to set the mood. Her last collection visualized what women would have worn traveling from India to study at Oxford in 1940's. "She was part of the intellectual movement in England during



22K Vermeil Large Fan Earrings With Quartz And Turquoise \$350.00

22K gold vermeil large fan earrings with white quartz and dripping with turquoise beads.



Wide White Quartz Bangle With Jhumki Drop \$370.00

2" wide 22K gold vermeil on silver bangle with white quartz and attached jhumki (chandelier) drop.



5-Stone Sunburst Sterling Silver Ring \$120.00

Sterling silver ring with sunburst of semi-precious stones



Pear Shaped Coral Pendant Necklace \$850.00

Vintage Victorian double-strand necklace of 6 mm red coral beads affixed to a beautifully suspended pear-shaped sterling silver pendant of 8.80ct. t.w. rubies surrounding a 3.50ct. center



Oval Clear Stones and Crystals Bangle \$55.00
Oval designed bangles with clear stones and crystals.

Metallic Embellished Bangle \$28.00
Metallic pink or silver bangle embellished with colorful stones in a floral design.



Hot Pink Bangle With Colored Crystals \$85.00
Hot pink bangle with a multi-colored crystal pattern and outlined with white crystals.

Amrita Singh Jewelry was launched in January 2003. "Jewelry making was an accidental love and has become a passion"

says Amrita, who believes in creating jewelry incorporating the best elements of modern and classic.

<http://www.shopamritasingh.com>

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Indian Independence,” says Argade. All regions of India inspire her and she now spends nearly half of each year there. She often goes to West Bengal for the “wealth of embroidery traditions and textiles” and also to Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh, as she recently did, “to get inspiration from different craft and weaving traditions”, she says.

Argade’s work also has a social dimension; she works closely with Co-operative Associations that contribute back to the local Indian communities that inspire and produce her designs. “Many of these craft forms are endangered because no market for them exists anymore. For one of our past Spring/Summer collections, we employed a weaving process not used in the past five years and brought a particular type of silk textile design back into production,” she says and adds, “It was a special feeling, to be able to bring back a tradition, and not just the usual *saris* and *kurtas*.”

Intricate design philosophies of Singh and Argade inevitably face limits in a business that places creativity on a pedestal, but has realities of bottom-line numbers. Argade acknowledges that while communicating history through her clothes is important, she is a businesswoman and her

customers’ desire “to look beautiful in one of her dresses” comes first.

Karima Popatia is one-half of the sister team that founded New York City’s Indomix, which they claim to be the first and only boutique in America to exclusively sell Indian designers. She knows the pressures of retailing first hand. Several years ago, Karima and sister Salima could not find latest fashion for Karima’s upcoming wedding in the sari shops of New York. Frustrated, the pair went to India where they found an abundance of gorgeous modern designs in all major cities, which were unavailable in the USA. The sisters, with their combined business and fashion merchandising experience,

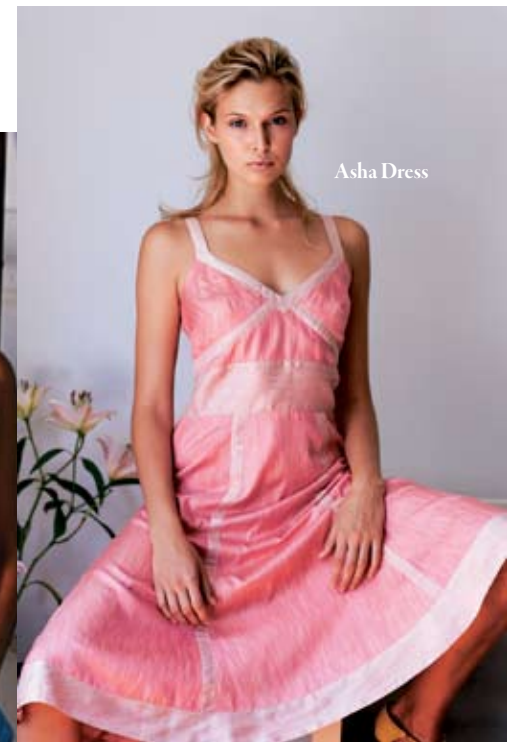
not only spotted the need for access to such designers in the USA, but also drafted a business plan to sell five of India’s top designers, like Payal Singhal and Kavita Bhartia, in a proposed boutique. The chic and well-edited downtown boutique opened its doors over a year and half ago, building early success largely by word of mouth.

Popatia’s clientele, like that of Singh’s and Argade’s, is a mix of Americans, many of South Asian descent. Building customer loyalty is important for a store selling creations of twelve of India’s top designers firmly rooted in ethnic wear. The biggest challenge facing these designers and retailers

may not be getting their feet in the fashion door, but rather dealing with fashion’s notoriously fickle spirit. India is hot right now, but each woman must ask what happens when minimalism, the antithesis of embellished and colorful Indian fusion fashion, returns?



Buckle Bias Dress



Asha Dress



Safari Rani Jacket
Roll Up Shorts



Carly Top

**Designs
by
Swati
Argade**

**Spring/Summer 2006
Collection**
Photographs by David Surowiecki
<http://www.swatiargade.com>

[HTTP://WWW.MOODINDICO.COM](http://www.moodindico.com)

Singh acknowledges the trickiness of fashion trends in the current environment, where items become enormously popular in a short time only to fizzle quickly. However, she believes that there will always be a market for unique, well-made jewelry whose designs have survived hundreds of years. From a retail perspective, Popatia says that India has actually been ahead of the American trends, and she is confident that the items she selects for her stores will keep pace with American fashion. "Jutis were a big trend in India and Europe long before they became popular in America. Now platforms are hot in America this summer but they were trendy in India last year, so I already have them for sale in our store now."

Argade sums it up best. "My designs don't follow trends," she explains, "and there's not a sequin anywhere on my clothes," she says, quietly rebelling against the shiny staple of Indian design. "My customer already has a sophisticated personal style." Indeed, a confident customer who knows that fusion fashion suits her style will likely keep buying, regardless of what fashion pundits proclaim to be today's

trend. One rule in fashion might just keep all three designers safe: What is in style one day, is out the next--and inevitably comes back again. Ultimately, keep your bangles and *kurtis* in the closet safely because fusion fashion, even if it does go out of style, is bound to be back. ■

Richa Gulati is a freelance writer based in New York.



Satin Deaded Double V
 Designer: Rehane \$325.00

A sexy 100% satin top entirely hand made with clusters of orange beads and dull gold sequins. Deep plunging V front and back. Ties at front, back and bottom at side. Loose, flowy fit.

Boucle Shirt Jacket With Stone Edge
 Designer: JJ Valaya \$1

A light weight textured boucle shirt with turquoise stone detailing on the edges and blue striped silk cuffs. 3/4 sleeves.

Designer Collection By Indomix

<http://www.ShopIndomix.com>

Baga Beach Tunic

Designer: Payal Singhal \$175.00

Printed 100% Chiffon drop waist tunic with deep V. Gold metallic peacock motif embroidery on front center. 3/4 sleeves. 1" silk band on neckline, sleeves, waist and hem. 30" long.



Wrap Around Crinkle Skirt
 Designer: Anamika Khanna \$250.00
 Crinkled wrap around skirt with all over circle patterned thread and sequins embroidery. Royal blue and brown cotton banding on bottom hem and at side wrap. Ties with a red printed vintage fabric. 100% cotton. Skirt length 26".

