# Indian Luxury Jewellery—Going #VocalForLocal



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**Abstract** Jacques Cartier made his first visit to India in 1911 and developed contact with the many "maharajas" from Kapurthala to Mysore. Most well known of his commissions was the "Patiala Necklace" made for the Maharaja of Patiala with over 2900 diamonds. Inspired by the viewing of the private "Al Thani Collection" of over 250 exquisite pieces from the Indian subcontinent, we questioned if there was a connection between the rich tradition of handmade luxury jewellery and sustainability in India, and is it possible to revive and restore the diversity and richness of handmade jewellery, whilst preserving and sustaining the "artisan". Our research focussed on the launch and commercial success of "Sabyasachi Jewellery" as an independent voice that brought the craftsman centrestage. Our aim was to discover if it is possible to create an ideal balance between commercial success and sustainability of the craftsperson. Our primary method was desk research as well as interviews with customers and independent craftspersons across the jewellery industry in India. We discovered not only the possibility to find this ideal balance between craft and commercial success but a resurgence of customer acceptance and focus towards handmade jewellery.

# 1 The Mughals and the Maharajas

It was a short walk to "The Grand Palais" from Champs-Élysées, in Paris. The sky was a clear blue with small puffs of white clouds and flowers were in bloom everywhere. It was the first week of April 2017 and we were on our way to "Joy Aux"—an exhibition of jewels from the "Al Thani Collection". This was not ANY ordinary collection. The Al Thani Collection holds over 6,000 works of art spanning from

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the ancient world to the present day. The collection celebrates history and creativity through an exceptional holding of antiquities, jewels, paintings, manuscripts and ancient and historic works of art [1]. We were particularly interested as it was titled "From the Mughals to the Maharajas". The brochure read "The exhibition presents the major developments in Indian jewellery traditions, from the peak of 17th century Mughal imperial patronage through years of political chaos and colonisation from the 18th century onwards, to the age of the Durbar, great ceremonies that provided Indian sovereigns with a new setting in which to show off their jewels during the time of the British Raj" [22].

As we exited the venue after an unforgettable three hours, the overarching feeling was of amazement and wonder; of course, mixed with pride and slight anger. We felt anger revisiting the history of how these magnificent pieces of jewels were plundered and passed through generations of Mughals and private jewellers, and also thought of how India was often referred to as the "Sone Ki Chidiya" loosely translated as the "Bird of Gold". But we were also proud of the spirit of creativity and ingenuity of the many local artisans who created these masterpieces. As an Indian involved in the business of fashion and luxury, it seemed relatively easier for Sudeep to understand the evolution of the various techniques of crimping, partial and closed settings of diamonds and the "polki" style or the "kundan" inlay work that has now become so representative of Indian jewellery. Amin Jaffer, the Senior Curator of the Al Thani Collection, mentioned and quoted: "This collection is unique in that it has a very long chronological period: four centuries. Its diversity is also remarkable: there are both objects that were part of the Mughal Imperial treasure, but also masterpieces of contemporary jewellers who incorporate old stones whose historical value is well known or which draw their inspiration from traditional Indian shapes and patterns" [6].

The fact that we are able to recall each detail of this experience at The Grand Palais even after so many years is testimony to the amazement we had felt when we were there. When we came back to India and wondered who could possibly represent the breadth and width of this amazing history of Indian jewellery, only a handful of names of family-run jewellers came to mind. Unknown to us then, India's acclaimed Indian bridal couture designer Sabyasachi Mukherjee, was also thinking about emeralds, rubies, sapphire and diamonds. Having been obsessed with jewellery since he was a teenager, and after various successful collaborations with the likes of Tanishq, Forevermark [3] and many more, he launched Sabyasachi Jewellery in the fall of the same year.

The first time Sudeep met with Sabyasachi Mukherjee was when Suzy Menkes asked him to address the attendees of the International Herald Tribune Luxury Conference in New Delhi in March 2009 [25]. The theme of the conference was sustainability and we remember Sabyasachi making a passionate appeal to focus on the country's rich craftsmanship and heritage and to go local. Sudeep Chhabra had just taken charge of India's first international luxury shopping centre; DLF Emporio and was eager to know more about the business of fashion and luxury. Whilst it was easy to be enamoured by the big international luxury brands arriving to woo the Indian customer, here was an Indian designer who was fiercely proud of his heritage and

refused to adapt to the more western silhouettes that were the hot trend that year. He came across someone as striking clear and almost headstrong, articulating a detailed vision of India and its handcrafts. Perhaps, his was the only address that we recall most vividly. This was the same feeling of pride we had felt at The Grand Palais that April morning in 2017.

## 2 Sabyasachi and the Launch of Sabyasachi Jewellery

Sabyasachi Mukherjee started his eponymous label in 1999 and tasted success almost overnight. He is India's most successful bridal couture designer, retailing from five flagship stores, employing 1100 people directly and outsourcing work to another 35,000 people. Every Sabyasachi piece is lovingly, painstakingly and deliberately created by skilled artisans using the highest degree of craftsmanship, quality, devotion and care. At Sabyasachi, artistry, creativity and quality are of paramount. Each handcrafted object is unique and special, the making of which involves years of learned skills, passion, enthusiasm, commitment, sincerity, which reflects a living heirloom culture [18]. He calls his design philosophy the "personalised imperfection of the human hand" [30] (Image 1).

Whilst launching Sabyasachi Jewellery, he remarked to his over 4 million fans on Instagram "Growing up, I spent hours rummaging through my mother and grand-mothers' jewellery cupboards. Their taste was simply exquisite. Maybe this is why I feel disappointed. Where has all the art gone? Perhaps it was this question that pushed me to find the answer" [17]. When interviewed by Architectural Digest,

**Image 1** Mukherjee [11, 12]



he said "I am not someone who enjoys prissy jewellery. For me, jewellery can be classical or irreverent or completely obnoxious. All three things for me are exciting—otherwise they don't matter". So, centre stones in charm necklaces are often lower in value than the rarer, and more precious ones flank them; polki diamonds in rani haars (heavy, long necklaces) are hidden under drapes of coloured stones; and the back of every piece is as interesting and exquisitely finished as the front, often carved and engraved with diamonds or lush meenakari (a metal enamelling technique) [19].

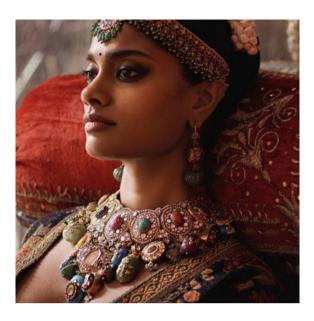
The region of South Asia has a very longstanding and unique history of jewellery. This is partly the result of natural circumstances. The region has been home to gemstones: fine diamonds were found in the Deccan, Kashmir produced sapphires of the most beautiful hue and Badakhshan was home to the most prized spinels. Sapphires and rubies were available from nearby Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Burma (Myanmar), and pearls were available through trade with the Persian Gulf. Emeralds gravitated to India through a commercial exchange, brought by European merchants after the discovery of mines in Colombia. These precious materials were transformed through the ingenuity of Indian craftsmen, raised to fresh heights by patronage that continues until today [23] (Images 2 and 3).

One could argue that this geographic advantage is the key reason that India's gems and jewellery sector has been one of the largest in the world, contributing around 29% to the global jewellery consumption [7, 8]. We would propose that it's actually because of the thousands of "karigars" or craftsman as they are called, who have learned the techniques and craft of handmaking jewellery through many generations. India is deemed to be the hub of the global jewellery market because of its low costs and availability of high-skilled labour. It is the world's largest cutting and polishing centre for diamonds, exporting 75% of the world's polished diamonds.

Image 2 Mukherjee [11, 12]



**Image 3** Mukherjee [11, 12]

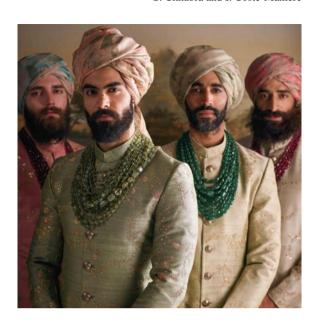


Today, 14 out of the 15 diamonds sold in the world are either polished or cut in India. India exported US\$ 18.66 billion worth of cut and polished diamonds in 2019. The sector is home to more than 300,000 gems and jewellery players, employs over 4.64 million people and is expected to employ 8.23 million by 2022 [7, 8] (Images 4 and 5).

Image 4 Mukherjee [10]



Image 5 Mukherjee [10]



# 3 Jewellery Production: Behind the Doors

Making jewellery has been a vocation-based craft through various generations of goldsmiths, artisans, polishers and jewellers. Till some time ago, it was an unorganised sector concentrated in certain pockets of the country where the whole family was involved in the business. Because of this, certain communities had a majority of artisans and were able to demand a premium for their skills, especially as all the work was done by hand. For example, in a "kundan" literally meaning "24 carat gold" type of setting, the goldsmith sets gemstones and uncut diamonds directly onto embellished or engraved jewels and then uses a very thin foil of pure gold (kundan) that is used to fill the crevices of the embellishment and heat this with small charcoal pieces so as to complete the setting. Not only is this very intricate and fine work, there is a certain skill that comes from practise that cannot be replicated by any machine. Most of these artisans use handmade tools that they have created themselves to make the entire jewellery from start to finish. This often led to a flourishing of creativity so that each family or community evolved their own particular styles and imperfections that contributed to the diversity of designs and craft. Because of this very detailed and slow, painstaking nature of handwork in creating jewellery, oftentimes two pieces were never exactly alike, yet they appeared the same. The amount of time required on each large piece of jewellery was more aligned to commission-based production rather than commercial production.

If you try and look at the huge jewellery market in India, you cannot miss the diversity across different regional cultures. The major consumption of jewellery in Indian households is either for special occasions like marriages and special occasions

or for everyday use. A large part of this demand comes from the rising middleclass population whose urban lifestyle influences purchases. Working women prefer comfort as well as flexibility. This has led to a skew towards easy to wear, lighter pieces with more contemporary western influences. As the working middle class moves to urban centres within the country, they often don't live in the same city as their ancestral homes. The industry has thus quickly evolved to mixing regional designs and styles into a blend that is universally more sellable than before. This demand slowly led to the adoption of investment casting and electroforming commercial processes in the manufacture of jewellery, where the need was to have workers who were good at delivering volumes by operating machines. Mechanisation does not require a specialised craftsperson; instead it's preferable to have a worker who is more process-driven. The factory model of investment casting allows many exact replicas of an original design to be mass-produced, rather than hand-made jewellery which would take a long time to make just a couple of pieces. Almost all the major hubs of jewellery production thus moved to casting which was not only more economical as it reduced wastage and was time effective but also reduced defects and labour costs. Whilst companies still employed goldsmiths to oversee parts of design, most of the remaining workers were left to work in process-driven production. Soon, design and manufacturing became two separate entities, as trained designers worked on computers and specialised design software to automatically create fine details with accuracy and speed whilst churning out designs. The quality of machines also improved and the precision with which these designs could be manufactured was even better than handmade jewellery. This led to the slow demise of handmade jewellery. Though many of the signature large pieces were and are still handmade, the majority of each collection was in a large part mechanised. These changing preferences led to an over standardisation in the way the jewellery business is structured. They need to stock a lot of variety and be relevant to a large demographic with very diverse tastes. Beautiful and exotic names of collections, coupled with well-spun marketing messages accosted the average Indian customer who was being exposed to a bewildering choice in the jewellery market. With the advent of e-commerce, and the option to sort on price, mostly the decision to buy was influenced by finding the ideal mix of a number of criteria for each customer. Entry-level discounting, loyalty programmes and exchange offers further fuelled the insatiable demand of the Indian customer who is the largest consumer of gold in the world. India's demand for gold reached 690.4 tonnes in 2019 [7, 8].

As jewellers became more structured in their business operations and started focussing on the customers with large showrooms and a variety of designs, the backend work of designing and manufacturing jewellery started getting aggregated to large manufacturing units. Traditional and "khandani" or "generational" craftsmen slowly started facing unemployment, low income and decreased demand for their skills. This factory model meant that most of the small "karigars" or "artisans" were employed on a contract basis or worked for smaller manufacturing units where specialised work was outsourced to. Because the business is cyclical, this also meant that there was no steady income throughout the year. If you were a polisher or an enameller you were bunched into manufacturing units doing the same work and hence

your skill was expendable. Since most of these "karigars" typically started working at an early age within their families, often they did not have time for education. They did not have any formal training or certification that they could rely on to look for work throughout the year. As one grew older, many would have weak eyesight or back problems as their work required them to work in a sitting position for a long time peering down at very fine stones. When work was not available throughout the year in the manufacturing units, many of them started shifting to well-paying factory jobs with large companies completely moving out of the jewellery sector. The following generations aspired to live better lives than their parents, so they never wanted to carry on with the family tradition of being a "karigar". On the contrary, they aspired to have a better education and move to urban areas with better paying and far more stable jobs. This became and continues to be one of the major challenges of the jewellery business today. A large section of craftsmen just disappeared and moved to other industries carrying with them the fine skills and techniques lost to posterity. On the other hand, the jewellery business faced an acute shortage of skilled artisans during high season months. Most of who stayed started asking for a high premium to support themselves for the months they would not have any work. The umbilical cord between generations of artisans was being cut.

These communities of skilled "karigars" were also geographically dispersed in major centres and pockets across the country. Mumbai is an important hub for casting and diamond set jewellery, Thrissur is a hub for southern light-weight jewellery, Hyderabad has a long history of gems, pearls and set jewellery, whilst Jaipur and Bikaner are famous for the "kundan" and "jadau" [26] style of jewellery. Delhi is a large hub for silver jewellery and Surat is world famous for diamonds and polishing stones and Kolkata (former Calcutta) is a major hub for intricate handmade jewellery. Typically, there is a high demand for Bengali goldsmiths for precious metal jewellery, diamond and gemstone polishers from Surat and enamellers from Jaipur, who are mostly paid higher for the quality of craftsmanship they offer. Another unique feature of the Indian jewellery market was that most if not all of the major Indian jewellers actually began as diamond or gem traders (involved in cutting and polishing) and then naturally expanded their business to become jewellery manufacturers. Our personal view is that oftentimes any disruption in a business model comes from outside the business and not from within. So, it is interesting to note that a designer like Sabyasachi who is almost unapologetic in his strong view on the grandeur and opulence of the jewellery business, rooted in tradition and handmade artisanal work, has been able to make a mark on this industry in just a few years. This seems counterintuitive. When he launched his jewellery line on his Instagram page he said "Indian jewellery is beautiful, arrogant and strong and very individualistic. It's my mission to bring it all back, in all its former glory. And I will not rest till it's done" [16, 26]. Bespoke, at the heart of the vision and the strategy... Very few customers today realise the difference between machine or 3D SLS made jewellery and handmade jewellery and this is why we argue that Sabyasachi Jewellery has made a distinct place for itself. His passion clearly focusses on not what jewellery is as a product or accessory but what it means. He has been able to stitch the logic of "why" one should buy rather than "what" one should buy. "Because I say that jewellery should not just



THE SABYASACHI FLAGSHIP JEWELLERY STORE

Image 6 Mukherjee [11, 12]

be a public luxury, it's a private luxury as well. It is what it does to you, before it does it to anybody else" [19]. In an interview to Vogue he says "The fundamental know-how and the intricate craftsmanship are somewhat lost to the younger generation of urbanised youth. It is the older generation of craftspeople who design with joy. The youth talk statistics and price points. Jewellery needs to go back to its purest form and exuberance" [21] (Image 6).

#### 4 The Kolkata Connection

And herein lays an interesting aspect of geography as well as heritage. Kolkata or Calcutta as it was called earlier has been a major hub for jewellery production, especially known for "filigree" work that requires a lot of skill. Bengal's association with jewellery is a combination of factors, like cost, creativity of design but most importantly immaculate craftsmanship. This has also to do with the continued patronage provided to the craft of the local population over the last many decades. Most of these "karigars" moved to various parts of the country to jewellery manufacturing units as demand for their skills grew and they carried their art with them. And this is what Sabyasachi was able to offer to them but back in their home state. The fact that he looks at the business from the lens of craftsmanship is a critical aspect of

his brand ethos. He has been resolute in his efforts to re-create an era of craftsmanship that was long forgotten. As he shares in an interview with Vogue, "I started my jewellery business with the same principle with which I started by clothing business. We have been successful with what we do because we have been able to find a gap in the market that others did not see and bought relevance back to these things", said the designer, whose thought and aesthetic is deep-rooted in old-world Kolkata, or Calcutta, as he prefers calling the city [27, 28]. His focus has been on making small quantities of traditionally designed diamonds and jewellery which will have a higher value and could be worn over many years. Yes, it's more aligned to the heavier occasion-based as well as bridal market that he is known for, but if you look closely; his aesthetic is rooted in tradition. He says, "Lack of patronage and, worse, lack of hope is what was glaring to him on his journey in the world of jewellery. The artisans who have extreme know-how live in abject poverty because they have out-skilled themselves in a market that demands mediocrity. I want to slowly push mediocrity out of the jewellery industry by giving work to the kind of craftspeople you no longer find easily" [21]. When Vogue India interviewed him recently on his twentieth anniversary and asked him about his most important takeaway, he said "The most gratifying thing about being in this business is that I have been able to create opportunities of empowerment for a lot of people working with my brand. Every year I sit with my Human Resources team and recreate a policy where we hire at least 10-15% more people. We hire more craftspeople, we adopt more villagers, and we work with many more craftsmen to be able to create a demand and supply" [27, 28].

## 5 The Sabyasachi Art Foundation

The Sabyasachi Art Foundation was started by Sabyasachi and his sister Payal, as a tribute to their mother, who used to work in the Government Art College and was deeply involved in handicrafts. It strives to give indigenous artists and craftsmen the due recognition and a means of livelihood. Today, it is an integral part of the brand both in a creative and socially responsible capacity [4, 26]. To this end, he hires highly skilled artisans from families where the next generation might be veering towards careers in construction or engineering in urban centres, discarding their family businesses, because they have ceased to provide opportunity and value to them. "What this great country offers to you—which we will only realise later, and in retrospect—is craftsmanship", he says. "The way the world is headed, the intangible will become far more important, and far more expensive, than the tangible" [20]. Of all the people who are in the fashion business, he should know.

The Sabyasachi Art Foundation has 43 artists from West Bengal who need financial support and are unable to market their craft. They have already worked on many an association with Christian Louboutin, a special hand-painted collection of artefacts for Pottery Barn, a long continuing wallpaper collection for Asian Paints and most recently the capsule collection of Sabyasachi with H&M [9]. Sabyasachi has

a very deep and respectful relationship within India's artisan community. In fact, he is proud that the entire genesis of his jewellery is based on Bengali craftsmanship. Working with these artisans, he is able to leverage their age-old wisdom and techniques so as to highlight the nuances of traditional designs to build an aesthetic that stands out with a certain character that is his own. He is able to have some of the best artisans who had left to work for the big jewellery houses to come back to Bengal and work with him; because they relate to his ideology of Bengali heritage. He says "We have started focussing on craftsmanship and craftsmanship is something you have to nurture. We have brought back what used to exist in India 50, 60, 70 years ago, before the great tirade of buying jewellery only for investment happened and completely killed craftsmanship. Thirty years later, if you are not going to save the ecosystem, the second or the third generation might not know how to make it any more, because craft is goes from father to son" [2].

This unwavering long-term vision that comes from clarity of thought born out of pure conviction is what makes Sabyasachi Jewellery unique. The fact that he designs each piece so that it may be worthy of sitting in a museum in 15–20 years' time is what makes him stand apart. Does jewellery design need to be so individualistic and slightly arrogant? Shouldn't it be more mainstream and appeal to many rather than just a discerning few? This almost counter-intuitive way of running his business is the reason he has carved a place in the jewellery market in the last few years.

As the Made in India movement gathers speed, many designers are focussing on promoting local production to make it sustainable and scalable [13–15]. The Indian government's #VocalforLocal campaign [5] also encourages enterprises to take a pledge to support local artisans and small businesses to progress together. A large part of the sustainability conversation in fashion is to promote local clusters of craftsmen so that they return to their roots and pass on their expertise and skills to the next generation. One of the ways to encourage this is to not only provide earning capabilities but more importantly a sense of honour and prestige to the craft itself. If any brand is positioned to provide a pedestal to craftsmanship which is synonymous with its design aesthetic, the "truth" of the brand shines out and the customer values this. The new customer of today is beginning to see past the similar sounding marketing campaigns and has started seeking their own reality. As the customer matures in their understanding of fashion and our unique Indian heritage, the conversation has shifted to how the jewellery is made, working conditions and proper wages of staff and what is the brand's stand on issues like social and environmental sustainability. Whilst Indian customers have typically looked at their purchase of gold and diamonds more from an investment point of view and their value appreciation over time, but they seem to be slowly shifting to also what it "means" and the language of design actually helps to uncover that answer. This critical shift is happening slowly, thanks to brands like Sabyasachi Jewellery that espouse craftsmanship and are able to put that on a pedestal. As he says in an interview with Architectural Digest, "The position that we have reached and the power that we have now, the more well-known I am becoming worldwide, the more I am becoming arrogant about my cultural heritage. Bengal had at one time created a cultural renaissance in India, history repeats itself and it's happening again... and while it happens, I want to be the front runner in it" [2]. Sustainable doping on the way... (Images 7 and 8).

**Image 7** Mukherjee [13–15]



**Image 8** Mukherjee [13–15]



## **6** The Story of New India

In early 2020, Bergdorf Goodman released the following statement. "As a purveyor of style and taste, Bergdorf Goodman celebrates brands rooted in craftsmanship and innovation. A proud new addition to the department stores featured jewellery brands; Bergdorf welcomed the exclusive launch of Calcutta-based jewellery designer Sabyasachi Mukherjee, who debuted a 65-piece Haute Joaillerie collection featuring all one-of-a-kind pieces" [24]. As the only designer to have a window at the famed 5th Avenue and a curated pop up in early 2020, it certainly cemented this position of Indian handcrafted heritage jewellery. It was very surprising to have a customer be in touch with the store especially during the lockdown to insist to buy a particular piece from the Sabyasachi Jewellery collection for his fiancé. After a virtual viewing was setup by the store, the customer waited for the store to offer kerbside pickup and ended up buying not one but two pieces from the collection. It has been one of our most successful partnerships till date, said Darcy Penick, President, Bergdorf Goodman [29] This first ever virtual sale won't be easily forgotten, especially as it was from an Indian designer who says "success and niceness are not mutually exclusive" [13–15]; we would argue so is the case with jewellery and traditional craftsmanship.

#### 7 Conclusion

When we talk about sustainability, the first thought that usually crosses our mind is that of material and sourcing. In the case of jewellery, designers are consciously thinking of not only this but also the entire process of bringing a piece to life. For those like Sabyasachi, who are able to revive regional craftsmanship and put it on a proud pedestal, it takes an unwavering spirit of conviction to see this process through. And this is also a celebration of sustainability, which is the inclusivity of the local business model. We must highlight this effort which is now certainly finding a valuable place in the minds and heart of the conscious customer. More than an example of a definitive achieved vision, a sustainable strategy....

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