

THE RISE OF THE SOFT-TAILORED WARDROBE

Indian couture is no longer about excess. It is about how beautifully it has been made and how meaningfully it can be worn.

By BINDU GOPAL RAO

For decades, Indian fashion's international identity has been shaped by excess—embroidery, occasion, spectacle and the visual density of craft. Its contemporary vocabulary, however, is beginning to soften. The sharp shoulder is giving way to the dropped one; construction is becoming less visible; tailoring, once associated with stiffness and authority, is being loosened by drape, movement and ease. The Indian wardrobe is not abandoning structure. It is simply learning not to be imprisoned by it.

Luxury is no longer only about how much is on a garment. It is about how beautifully it has been made and how meaningfully it can be worn. A heavily embellished garment can be spectacular, but if it is worn once and then stored away, its relationship with the wearer remains limited. Today, luxury consumers are seeking a similar level of craftsmanship expressed through lighter silhouettes, thoughtful detailing and pieces that can move between occasions.

Shivani Parakh, Founder, Rivaaj Couture, avers, "Tailored soft is about finding the space between structure and fluidity. The garment should have enough structure to feel considered and luxurious, but enough ease for the wearer to move, sit, travel and live in it comfortably. This comes down to the choice of fabric and placement of embroidery relative to the cut, finish and proportion of the garment. We are particularly interested in silhouettes that retain the

elegance of Indian dressing, without making the wearer feel restricted. The luxury is in achieving that balance without making the garment look deliberately casual."

MATERIAL MATTERS

Fabrics such as khadi, mul, linen and fine handloom cotton are being elevated into luxury propositions despite their inherently relaxed character. A beautifully embroidered mul or finely finished cotton can have as much presence as a heavily embellished fabric, but in a much quieter way.

Aishwarya Lahariya, designer and co-founder at Jiwyra, a plant-based fashion brand, says, "Unfortunately, a lot of designers are resorting to synthetic silk to balance the lightweight weaving of certain crafts. In my opinion, that's crushing the soul of handloom techniques which were built with natural materials in mind. At Jiwyra, we are going back to the roots. Unbleached cotton, khadi, mulmul, hemp, kala cotton, and jute are our go-to fibres. We try to understand fibre length, yarn construction and then fabric weaves to bring out a variety of fabrics, keeping comfort and the planet in mind. Even our hand embroideries use these fibres and natural elements such as reclaimed wood, real brass and copper."

Raghav Agarwal, Business Head, Twamev, a contemporary luxury wedding wear and occasion wear brand, adds, "At Twamev, we elevate these fabrics through



COURTESY: JJ VALAYA

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cut, drape and detailing rather than adding weight—a considered neckline, a fine border, hand-finished edges, or pairing a relaxed fabric with a sharper silhouette. That's often enough to make it feel finished and occasion-ready, without taking away the ease that makes it special in the first place."

REPEAT AND REUSE

When clothes are designed for repetition, the intent is to stop designing only for the photograph and start designing for the relationship between the garment and its wearer. People are looking for pieces that speak to each other—an embroidered kurta that can be worn with a different bottom; a drape that can be styled multiple ways; or a jacket that can transform a simpler outfit.

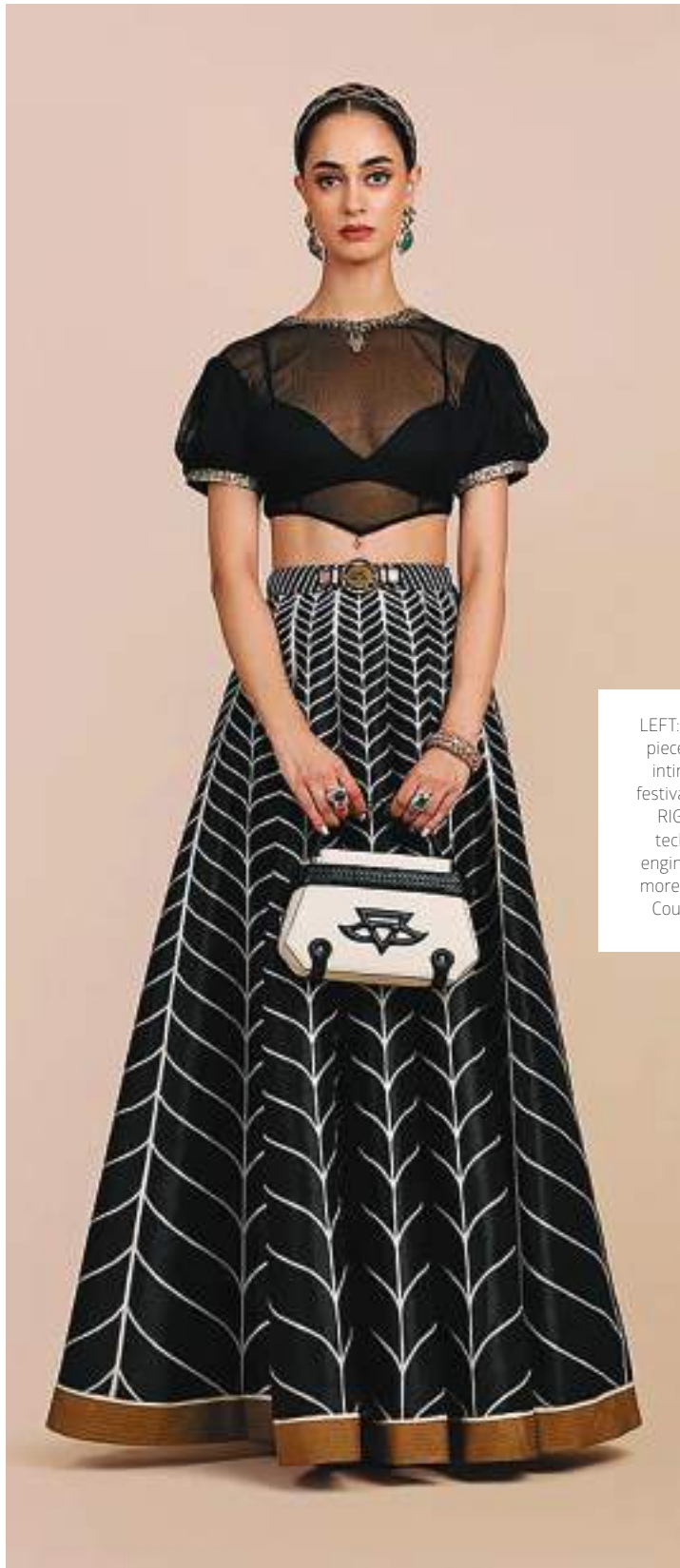
The new luxury wardrobe is less about the spectacle of a single garment and more about building a sophisticated collection of pieces that can be styled repeatedly. "That is a positive sign. It marks not just the quality of the garment but, in a way, attributes to the wearer's ethics. It is slowly becoming a sign of a better consumer to repeat a style per personal sense and flaunt it with pride, in a way reflecting personal style, a trait that was honestly dying in the past few

years with blind trend following," says Lahariya.

Unnecessary and polluting embellishments—plastic glitter, shiny studs and purely decorative excess—are often the first to go. Breathability, comfort, frequency of wear, and ease of movement take centre stage, naturally paving the way for natural fibres, better fabrics and good-quality construction. As Agarwal says, "Consumers are becoming far more conscious of how they consume fashion, not just what they buy, but how many times they can genuinely wear it. A heavily embellished piece that comes out once a year doesn't offer the same value as something that can be restyled and brought back into rotation. People still want a sense of occasion, but increasingly they're measuring luxury in uses per wear rather than the impact of a single evening. Beautiful fabric, fine detailing and Indian craftsmanship remain essential to us, but the question we hear more from our customers is simple: will I wear this again?"

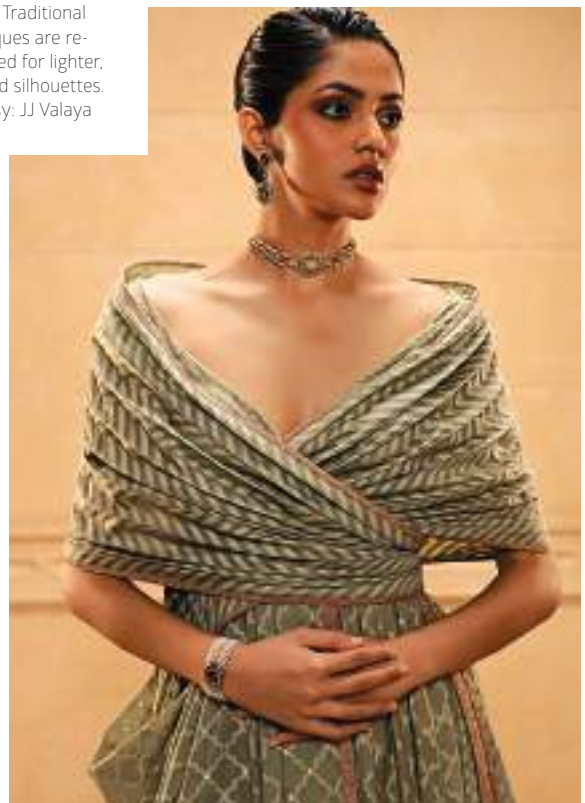
THE COMFORT FACTOR

There is a certain confidence in wearing something beautiful without needing it to be visibly excessive. People are increasingly understanding the value of fabrics that feel wonderful against the skin, tailoring that allows movement,



LEFT: Twamev designs pieces to move from intimate dinners to festivals and weddings.

RIGHT: Traditional techniques are re-engineered for lighter, more fluid silhouettes. Courtesy: JJ Valaya



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Luxury lies in beautiful making and meaningful wear. Courtesy: This Page Left and Opposite Page: Kunal Rawal; This Page Right: Dhruv Kapoor.



Tailored soft is about finding the space between structure and fluidity. The garment should have enough structure to feel considered and luxurious, but enough ease for the wearer to move, sit, travel and live in it comfortably.

and craftsmanship that reveals itself only when you look closely. The new luxury isn't necessarily about being noticed from across the room. Sometimes, it is about how you feel when you are wearing it.

"The moment the wearer puts comfort first, overbuying goes down, caring for the perfect garment kicks in, and you think of investing in good-quality apparel, and all of these are the very roots of sustainable behaviour, something our ancestors knew and practised very well," avers Lahariya.

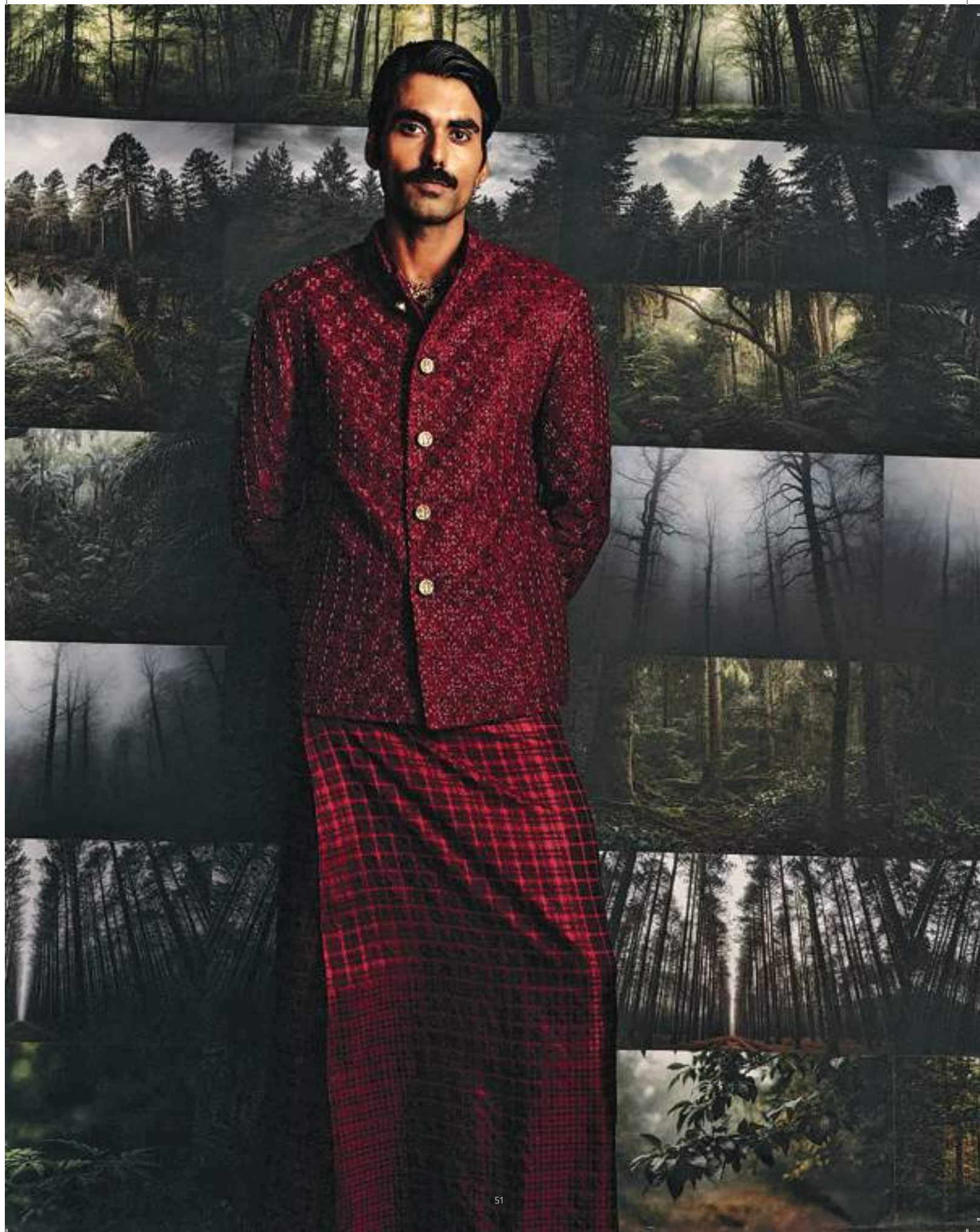
Handlooms have largely been restricted to ethnic wear, and Jiwyia is trying to change that with its 100% plant-based fashion, putting comfort, authenticity and better material at the forefront of the finished garment. "Garments should look structured and polished, but you shouldn't feel trapped in them. The cut must give you room to move, the fabric needs to fall naturally, and nothing should feel forced. We like clothes that look considered but don't make you think too much about what you are wearing. You should be able to

put them on and get on with your evening," adds Agarwal.

CONTEMPORARY CUES

Designers are re-engineering traditional Indian techniques such as Banarasi weaving and forms of hand embroidery, including zardozi, to make them lighter, quieter and more versatile. "Indian craftsmanship is incredibly rich, but it doesn't always need to be used in its most maximal form. We can take a traditional technique and reconsider its scale, density, placement, and application. Instead of covering an entire garment in embroidery, we might allow a motif to travel subtly along a neckline, sleeve or hem. Instead of making embellishment the entire story, it becomes one element within a larger design," explains Parakh. That allows traditional craftsmanship to feel contemporary without losing its identity.

Designers have also started thinking about the garment as something that must live with you well beyond one



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There is beauty in wearing a garment that's impeccably crafted, without the use of any visible excess. Courtesy: Top: Rivvaj Couture; Bottom: JJ Valaya



evening. “At Twamev, we design with dinner parties, smaller celebrations, festivals and weddings all in mind, so the same piece can genuinely move across all of these moments. Can it be restyled from a festival look into a wedding look? Does it still work dressed down for dinner with friends? Will you want to pull it out again in six months? That thinking shapes everything, from weight and construction to how much embellishment we need. The more occasions a garment can live in, the more valuable it becomes, and we think that’s where real luxury sits today,” adds Agarwal.

People have not stopped desiring opulence; they experience it differently now: being able to sit through a full dinner without adjusting your outfit, dance at a sangeet without worrying about a dupatta shifting out of place, or get through a long evening without once thinking about what you’re wearing.

CRAFT FOCUS

A segment of affluent Indian consumers values craftsmanship, though it is not widespread yet. “Because it honestly requires an eye. To spot the real deal, find the authenticity and champion it with value. My bet is another five to seven years, and it will become a trend. We are certainly trying at Jiwyra to reduce this time span,” adds Lahariya.

Agarwal explains how this approach works in practice.

“The real shift isn’t just where these techniques show up, but how they’re re-engineered to work on lighter silhouettes. A Banarasi weave that once anchored an entire saree might now be isolated to a single panel or border on a jacket or skirt, so the craft still reads clearly without the weight of a full piece. Zardozi and hand embroidery get scaled down and worked in finer thread, placed with more restraint—a neckline, a hem, a sleeve—rather than covering the whole garment. It keeps the craft legible and valuable but makes the piece lighter, so you can move in it,” avers Agarwal.

GREEN SOPHISTICATION

There is a growing trend towards transparency and raw, unfiltered aesthetics in affluent circles. It signals a consumer aware enough of craft and detail to appreciate them. The Indian luxury consumer understands textiles, craftsmanship, construction and provenance. “I don’t necessarily think they are buying fewer beautiful things. I think they are

Consumers are becoming far more conscious of how they consume fashion, not just what they buy, but how many times they can genuinely wear it.





CLOCKWISE FROM
LEFT: Rivaaj Couture's
Gul Collection; Tarun
Tahiliani; Jiwy's Chandni
Jumpsuit, Parna Jacket
and Boond Tie from Lata,
AW'26, Paris Fashion
Week.



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JJ Valaya's tiger print and Jiwyia.



A growing openness towards Indian fashion that feels “fluid and modern rather than purely ceremonial”, with garments designed to be effortless, inclusive and adaptable across personal styles.

becoming more selective about which beautiful things deserve a place in their wardrobe. There is a greater emphasis on quality, longevity, fit, fabric and craftsmanship. The value of a garment is being measured by how long it remains relevant, and not simply by how dramatic it looks on the day it is purchased. The most exciting part: the shift allows Indian fashion to evolve without becoming disconnected from its heritage,” says Parakh.

For a long time, Indian luxury was strongly associated with weddings and occasion dressing. That will always remain an important part of our culture, but there is an opportunity to take the same incredible craftsmanship into everyday luxury.

FUTURE PERFECT

The future is not about choosing between tradition and

modernity. It is about making tradition relevant to the way people want to live today. The most successful luxury garments of the future will be those that make you feel extraordinary without asking you to dress like someone else. They will carry the hand of the artisan, the intelligence of the designer and, ultimately, the personality of the person wearing them.

The future of Indian luxury, then, is less about preserving beautiful clothes in a wardrobe and more about creating beautiful clothes that become part of a life. Sometimes the most valuable piece in a wardrobe isn't the one that gets the most attention but the one you reach for automatically because you know it works. And when a young person chooses handloom because they genuinely like how it looks and feels, that's a far stronger revival than being told it's their heritage. **J**

The designers shaping the shift

By N Deepali

Besides young contemporary labels such as Jiwy and Twamev, established designers, too, are pivoting towards subtler luxury, even as the materials remain lush and the silhouettes fluid.

Two of 2026's major fashion showcases carried evidence of the shift. At India Couture Week, Kunal Rawal's *Rawalgarh* collection allowed softness to prevail over sharp tailoring, bringing Indian textiles and utilitarian detailing into the codes of black-tie dressing. At FDCI India Men's Weekend in Jaipur, JJ Valaya presented a spin-off of his *East* line built around fluid silhouettes, kimono-inspired overlays and understated detailing, reframing royal heritage through a more global minimalism.

Long before ease became a wider fashion proposition, Tarun Tahiliani's work balanced structure with fluidity in a way few Indian designers have matched. Beyond the concept sari, Tahiliani's couture has consistently pursued lightness: clothes that are constructed, certainly, but designed to move with the body rather than overpower it.

Designers such as Kanika Goyal, Péro's Aneeth Arora and Dhruv Kapoor are building a more globally-oriented Indian modernity through deconstruction, craft and contemporary silhouette. Kapoor's Spring Summer 2026 *Milan collection*, Foundations & Futures, drew foundational Indian garments into a contemporary vocabulary. Kartik Kumra's *Kartik Research*, with its crafted, relaxed approach and growing international recognition, offers another version of the same proposition: Indian textile intelligence without the expectation that it must arrive as costume.

Antar-Agni, founded by Ujjawal Dubey, seems almost purpose-built for this moment. The label's language is one of unconventional drapes, relaxed silhouettes and intelligent cuts that blur the traditional boundaries between menswear and womenswear. Bodice offers an equally compelling womenswear counterpart. Founded by Ruchika Sachdeva in 2011, the label drew from minimalism and menswear

tailoring traditions while insisting on comfort, adaptability and movement. Its design language brings draped Indian garments—the sari and dhoti—into conversation with soft tailoring.

The details reveal how seriously that idea is embedded in the clothes. Trousers can be adjusted through double-button systems; detachable pleats alter hemlines; sari pleats are worked into trousers so that the garment functions as an ordinary pair of trousers while retaining something of the sari's movement. It is tailoring made less authoritarian and more responsive to the body.

For years, designers attempting to enter the global conversation faced a seemingly impossible equation. Make the clothes visibly Indian and risk being confined to the ethnic or occasionwear category. Make them too internationally generic and risk losing the cultural distinctiveness that gives Indian design its value.

Soft tailoring offers one possible way through. A sari pleat can become a trouser detail. A dhoti can inform drape without becoming a costume. A lungi can be restyled as contemporary ease. Royal heritage can be stripped of ornament and expressed through proportion. Indian handwork can sit inside a fluid silhouette rather than announce itself through surface excess.

This shift also helps explain why international customers are receptive to Indian design as something that can enter everyday wardrobes. Hyderabad designer Aisha Rao has described a growing openness towards Indian fashion that feels "fluid and modern rather than purely ceremonial", with garments designed to be effortless, inclusive and adaptable across personal styles.

It is easier to imagine a jacket with a relaxed shoulder, a draped trouser or an unstructured coat travelling from Mumbai to Milan, Tokyo or New York without requiring its wearer to participate in a cultural performance. That does not make the garment less Indian. It may, paradoxically, allow its Indianness to become more sophisticated.