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Designing Woman

Moving from engineering to bridal fashion, Chhabra premieres collection

By Poornima Apte

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — When she got married a little more than two years ago, Shelley Chhabra wished she had a local bridal designer like herself to go to. She wanted someone who understood Indian fashion but who could tailor her wedding dress to her American sensibilities. Months before her wedding, she drove down to New York and New Jersey and was quite disappointed. “There were all these cookie cutter red and gold dresses and everything was marked up at three to four times the prices we would get in India,” Chhabra says. So she “buckled in,” took time off from work and went with her family to India to shop for her wedding trousseau.

Like many other Indian American weddings, Chhabra’s wedding was a fairly lavish affair and lasted three days. Having grown up in Billerica, Mass., she wanted to include close American friends in the wedding ceremony — so she ended up shopping for them as well in India.

The amount of time Chhabra had to take time off from work just for her shopping soon cut into her honeymoon time and she had to shorten it. For a busy professional, she soon realized, this kind of shopping arrangement did not utilize time or money efficiently.

Soon enough, Chhabra decided to go into the business herself. Chhabra’s family in New Delhi, India, already has a thriving business in wedding and party wear. She decided she would create her own designs and then get them implemented in India. Thus far, the nascent project has gone off to a good start — Chhabra has designed a few outfits keeping Indian American brides in mind, and the results, she says are quite worth the effort.

“They are high-end wear but not with the price level of a high-end brand,” she says. “Because the overheads are low, I can leverage my contacts, these [dresses] can be offered at just a fraction above the cost of what they would be offered for in India,” she says.

Chhabra did a fashion show at Yolanda’s in Waltham, Mass., in January. As of press time, the details of her business relationship at Yolanda’s was still being worked out.

Chhabra is aware of some local competition but she says that once a client sees the quality of the outfits on offer, she would not go anywhere else. “The quality of the fabric, the quality and detail of embellishment, you can instantly tell the difference, depth of colors, there are so many things that stand out,” she says.



Chhabra



Wedding gowns such as the one above, can be custom made. An option is to tailor the embroidery according to one’s taste.

The 29-year-old Cambridge, Mass., resident is a relative newcomer to the fashion industry — she is an engineer by training but remembers a time growing up when she used to always like to sketch. “I would sketch my neighbors’ houses, for the longest time I thought I would be an architect,” Chhabra says. “Then I did the sensible thing and became an engineer.” Chhabra says she does not regret the seven years she worked in the high-tech industry riding the dotcom wave. “But I wasn’t using all my natural attributes, my innate skills, the creative side — I wanted to go into business for myself,” she says. So she adapted her computer aided design skills to the design of tailored clothing.



Shelley Chhabra’s wedding gowns can be made in bold halter styles (above) or more conservative ones (below).

Chhabra’s decision to move on to designing bridal wear for Indian Americans is perfectly timed — many of the Indians who moved to the United States in the 60’s and 70’s had children who are now getting married. The opportunities, Chhabra points out, are lucrative and growing. “In just the two and a half years since I got married, things have changed. I remember we had a list of 25 hotels and most of them did not allow outside food or allow fires. These days, the same hotels are bending over backwards to accommodate these weddings because they know it is big business,” Chhabra says.



Also, the young Indian American brides today have a different sensibility from their parents. This is reflected in the choice of their wedding dresses as well. Chhabra offers conservative ones to more daring ones and also “cancan” skirts that define the flow of the skirt much better than other styles. According to her, the dresses can be customized for any body shape and taste. “We have skirts that can hide or accentuate any feature you’d like,” she says. Also customizable are the level of embellishment and color of the dress. The traditional reds are not always in, she says. These days, brides are choosing other colors such as green, teal, purple and pink. Chhabra can also supplement the gown with other wardrobe options so the bride can wear her outfit again for less flashy occasions. For example, a heavy dupatta can be paired with a plain salwar kameez outfit for a more refined look, she says.

When not designing bridal wear, Chhabra likes to pursue her other passion — she teaches Kathak to children in Andover, Acton and Cambridge, Mass.

Americans are also waking up to the exciting possibilities of Indian wear, Chhabra says. “The whole image that Bollywood conjures up, you see the influence in fashion here,” she says, “in all the tunics that continue to flood the market.”

Chhabra is hoping that busy professionals will see the value in what she has to offer and stop by. “This makes so much more sense than going to India, and let’s face it — India is not known for customer service. Part of my experience is built on understanding just how customer service works, what the bride wants,” Chhabra says. “People like me represent the dichotomy of Indian and American cultures, and we’d like for the two to come together and move forward for one of the

biggest rites of passage in life.”

For more information about Shelley Chhabra fashions, please visit www.shelleychhabra.com.