

Tasva	28.07.2024	The Hindu (Page: 1-4)	Mumbai, Bengaluru, Kolkata	Dressed to Represent India
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For an international audience (Clockwise from below) Tarun Tahiliani working on Team India's outfits, India's official Olympic uniforms, and designer Tahiliani. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)



PARIS OLYMPICS 2024

DRESSED TO REPRESENT INDIA

With National Handloom Day approaching, and in light of Team India's official Olympic outfits attracting flak, designers weigh in on the challenges of creating ceremonial uniforms

Sahil Dey

If the Olympics is one of the world's biggest sporting events, its opening ceremony is its crowning glory. On Friday, the 2024 Paris edition took things up more than a few notches. The first games to have the curtains come outside a stadium, it saw almost 100 boats carrying an estimated 10,500 athletes down the Seine. The quays became spectator stands while the sun reflected off famous Parisian landmarks. And with all eyes on the global fashion capital, everyone was a fashion critic.

Dressing any national contingent for the occasion is a flex. Top designers, luxury houses and sportswear brands vie for the honour. 2024's lineup of uniform makers included Ralph Lauren for the United States, Berluti for France, Emporio Armani for Italy, and Lululemon for Canada, among others. For the 187 athletes of Team India, it was Tarun Tahiliani, the New Delhi-based couturier, via Tasva, the premium affordable menswear label launched by him and Aditya Rishi Fashion and Retail Ltd. (ASPRIL).

India has not had the most shining track record when it comes to dressing up for the ceremony – the team relies on traditional dressing with little designer flair or major crafts showcase. With Tasva taking on a sponsorship role, this edition was the first time that a designer created the ceremonial uniforms.

Part of the first generation of Indian fashion, Tahiliani has underpinned his nearly 30-year career with experiments in a distinctive India Modern aesthetic. A master of sculpting and draping, he applies Sagarwadi crystals and kani on his lustrous designs with the same flair as brocade, chikankari and zari embroidery. In 2020, as part of a joint venture with AIRTEL, he launched Tasva (now with nearly 75 outlets) – offering wearers the kind of supply and price points that wouldn't be possible had everything been handmade or hand-embroidered, and giving customers the Tahiliani experience at as low as ₹1,999. It's not something many designers can boast of.

Missed opportunities

Last month, when Manuakh Mandavika, Minister of Youth Affairs and Sports, unveiled the Olympics official outfits, the designer was in attendance, along with IOC's Asian Olympic Association president PT. Usha, hockey players Jarnagpreet Singh and Nikunja Sharma, and shooter Anjumoudgill. Expectations were high, but the news did not travel much beyond

had to dress 32 athletes, and they could afford to spend hours on each uniform – with its ivory silhouettes inspired by the traditional dhoti-trunk, flowing sleeves, and embroidered vests with the rat, moon, and Gao-Mara (mythical deer from Mithila's folkloric).

In the weeks since, Tasva released new video content and images to showcase the garments, but the criticism has been hard to quell. Sports writer Sharda Iyer notes that while the "chunky presentation" did not make a good first impression for the garments, Tahiliani's uniforms will be worn BBL in a different setting. "This year's ceremony will be hosted in the daylight, as the sun doesn't set till very late in Paris in summer," she shared, a few days before the Games kicked off. "The athletes will be on buses on the Seine, and next to the flag, the uniforms may look different." The Indian contingent will wear the same uniforms to the closing and tribulation ceremonies.

Going beyond the blazer

India's uniforms for the Olympics have shown little evolution over the years. Men tend to wear blazers, bandhgala or sherwanis, sometimes accompanied with a turban. Women wear saris, almost always with a blouse, which often does little apart from obscuring the rest of the ensemble. During the 2012 Olympics, many women athletes, including tennis player Sania Mirza, walked with their blouses fiddled over their arms, offering everyone a better view of their bright yellow saris. Even when the uniforms for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics switched from sari to a sarori suit, the blazer remained.

Tasva's uniforms depart from these norms in many respects, including skipping the blazer. "When we did our research, we saw that prominent international designs were done to coordinate with the colours of their national flag," says Tahiliani, speaking of the tri-colour inspiration. "We have athletes from around the country, and luxury usually suits everybody." The handi became the hero silhouette layered over a kurti set.

The process began in January, and Tahiliani notes there was no specific brief or guidelines from the IOC for the uniform's design. It was finalised following multiple iterations and feedback sessions; garments were crafted in stages as athletes qualified for various sports. Some qualifications continued well into June, and the Tasva team created a total of 200 uniforms for athletes and accompanying staff. "I did fittings three, and I was there for every meeting," says Tahiliani, responding to criticism that he did not spend enough time on the design and production.

Iyer says that many of the design elements make for a refreshing change, particularly the custom-tissue gold brocade scarves. The digitally printed tri-coloured dhoti patterns have polarised opinions, but she observes that it can have a special appeal for its wearers. "The flag is very important to athletes, and they will feel proud to wear the tricolour on their uniforms."

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BALANCING AESTHETICS WITH FUNCTIONALITY

The designer has created outfits for PT. Usha, Usha Bhonsle, and BIP Chitguba and Amazanka Chitguba only

DAVID ARJANIAN

On his role of creating the uniforms, which he created after the Olympics, and the challenges of creating them

To make uniforms that are hardy, but also easy and comfortable, all while expressing the brand's values can be a challenging experience

