

Birkin bags and Swiss ski resorts: How super-rich Delhi wives want to be part of global elite

For Indian super-rich families, a summer vacation abroad is a necessary signal of being part of the global elite. But it can't be somewhere 'touristy'.

PARUL BHANDARI 13 January, 2020



People in a mall (representational image) | Tuur Tisseghem | Pexels

When Akash Ambani, son of Mukesh Ambani, one of the richest men in the world, decided to host a pre-wedding event in February 2019, he chose St Moritz in Switzerland. While St Moritz is a popular ski destination for the international jetset, it was not a prominent holiday destination for Indian elites.

But through my research with super-rich housewives of Delhi, I've discovered that since the Ambani winter gala, Swiss ski destinations such as St Moritz have become a part of the lexicon of the Indian elite. India's cricket captain Virat Kohli and his wife, the actress Anushka Sharma, as well as other Bollywood celebrities, recently celebrated new year in Switzerland.

By choosing St Moritz, the Ambani family seemed to signal that they are at ease with the way of life of the international super-rich, and are comfortable with both an Indian way of being elite as well as a global one. This ambition, desire and anxiety to be a part of the global elite was clear among the subjects of my new book, the super-rich women in Delhi who call themselves housewives.

There are 119 billionaires in India and the top 1% of people took 73% of the wealth generated in the country in 2017. My research looks at how Indian business elites use their money and explains both how their life is structured around luxury and privilege and marred by anxieties of class, money and race.

A global wedding

I spent some time with a bride-to-be, Soha*, who returned from the UK aged 23 after completing a masters programme and was set to marry Akshay, a man from a renowned Delhi business family. The match had been suggested by a famous marriage broker.

Soha was excited about her wedding, especially because her university friends, most of them non-Indians, were going to attend and they were looking forward to what she called a “big fat Indian wedding”. Soha had promised them a gala affair, but also warned them that she was not a typical Indian bride.

She saw herself as a sophisticated Indian and wanted her wedding to incorporate Indian traditions – but also appeal to a global palette. This meant, she told me, that the aesthetics and ambience of her wedding would not be “too loud”, by which she meant ornate decor with bright colours of red and orange. Instead, the colour scheme would be pastel to exude a sophisticated vibe. In fact, for her bridal wear too, Soha chose a golden beige outfit over red, a traditional colour for Punjabi brides.

With soft colour palettes, an international spread of food choices, afternoon teas, Spanish dancers and music, and a white-gold wedding outfit, Soha successfully communicated the international sensibility of her taste.

The Hermès Birkin bag

One symbol of global eliteness that has been embraced by super-rich Indian women is the Hermès Birkin bag. The competition among them does not end at owning a Birkin. It also centres around whether the bag has been purchased from

the Hermès showroom in India or from a city abroad, its colour and whether it's made of "regular" calfskin, or an "exotic" leather such as crocodile skin.

The level of this competition struck me when these women discussed the "thrill" and patience involved in buying a Rouge Hermès Birkin. These red versions of the bag are available in limited Hermès showrooms around the world and there is a waiting list to buy one. These women assess who among them has the best fashion sense and is most "in" with international trends, based on who has the most number of Birkins, in which colour and leather, and bought from which cities of the world. Notwithstanding this sort of one-upmanship, they all agreed that Arab women are always a step ahead of them, buying not one but several Birkins, made of the most exotic leathers which are unavailable in the Indian subcontinent.

Anxieties of travel

For Indian super-rich families, a summer vacation abroad is a necessary signal of being part of the global elite. The super-rich women explained to me that since the middle class also travel widely nowadays, they need to develop strategies of distinction to set them apart from middle or upper middle-class Indians.

The first strategy is to avoid, what one super-rich woman, Reena called, "touristy" destinations such as Barcelona, Rome or Singapore. Instead, the super-rich look for more "exotic" or expensive destinations such as St Moritz, St Tropez in France, or Bora Bora islands in French Polynesia. Reena explained that since these destinations are very expensive – with only five-star hotels and high-end restaurants – the Indian middle class are discouraged from visiting. Moreover, these destinations are also visited by the super-rich of other countries, so they offer a chance for the Indian super-rich to mingle with other global elites.

A second strategy is to make sure they wear visible, high-end brands on holidays. Aarti, another super-rich housewife, recalled that a salesman at a luxury shop in London once mistook her for a middle-class Indian tourist – someone who cannot afford branded clothes and only window shops. As a result, she told me the salesperson responded halfheartedly and rudely to her queries and Aarti believed this was because she was dressed casually and not wearing clothes from any high-end brands. She thought she'd been treated in this way not only because of her race and nationality, but also because the salesman didn't see her as a member of the global elite who buy high-end fashion products.

Since this incident, she makes sure that when she goes shopping anywhere in the world, she wears her Louis Vuitton or Gucci scarf, clothes from Burberry and carries her Louis Vuitton, Dior, or Chanel bag. She wants to be instantly recognised as wealthy.

Adorning high-end luxury products, then, is not just about conspicuous consumption but also a way to assuage anxieties about not being recognised as elite in a global context. In a way, it seems that high-end luxury consumption, for these women, is a “membership fee” to be a part of a global network of elites.

** All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of the research participants.*

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