

## ■ COVER STORY ■

**W**hen Priti Loungani-Malhotra recently designed a white version of the classic Indian wedding gown, it caught the attention of the media. The gown with a mermaid-shaped *lehenga* or skirt would do Vera Wang proud, *The Washington Post* wrote.

One of the more visible designers in the Washington, DC, area, Loungani-Malhotra, 32, has learned quickly to think outside the box. Indian weddings are not conventional anymore, she knows. They are not conventional in any big Indian city for that matter, she says with a chuckle. Her Indian and non-Indian clients often surprise her by requests for utterly unconventional dresses. "The gown referred to in the *Post* was the epitome of what is generally called fusion," the designer who operates from Arlington County, VA, said.

"Being a designer educated and trained in this business in the United States and the fact I was born and brought up here affects my designs. Not to forget I have many Eastern (*South Asian*) influences."

She studied at Marymount University in Virginia, where she majored in fashion design and merchandising. After graduating *magna cum laude*, she went to New York to work for Badgley Mischka and Escada. She then decided to venture out on her own and launch Illusions Designs, which incorporated Indian-American influences. After expanding her business into bridal wear, menswear and accessories, she is setting her sights on the global luxury market.

Despite her broad fashion interest, she says she takes special interest in designing marriage dresses. For a long time, she wanted to create a dress that 'was a perfect blend of both Eastern and Western designs,' she says, explaining how the white version of the *lehenga* came about. "Most South Asian brides tend to wear reds, Burgundies or pinks on their wedding day. I thought by taking a traditional cut of South Asian bridal outfit but making it an elegant shade of white with South Asian embroidery, I would create something an Indian or American bride would love."

She also says unless you have sharp roving eyes, you cannot really be a successful designer. "I have seen the scene changing slowly and steadily in my 10 years in this industry," she continues. "I believe it will continue to evolve as more intercultural marriages occur. You will always have brides who want to remain very traditional, because of their own preference or parents' or in-laws' wishes."

"But the more brides I meet who have grown up here," she continues, "the more the tendency to have a vision in their head since they were little, of walking down an aisle in a white gown. I can design a gown like the one mentioned in the *Post* that will satisfy the dreams of the bride while keeping the traditions intact."

How does she go around handling the demands of hybrid weddings, with one partner of South Asian origin, and the other anything from Chinese American to Mexican American? "As a designer, it is my job while designing a gown to make sure the bride looks beautiful and both families are happy," she explains. "I have worked with many hybrid weddings. Every culture has its own traditions and I have to respect that. Fusing togeth-

# Stitches in Time

Designing wedding gowns that combine two cultures effectively is no easy task



■ Priti Loungani-Malhotra raises a toast to another successful wedding under her belt. Bridal party clothing, below, designed by her

COURTESY PRITI LOUNGANI-MALHOTRA

er two different cultures to make one phenomenal gown is not easy, but I thrive on it."

The designer recently helped 28-year-old Bhavana Vaswani choose a dress. "Bhavana was born and brought up in the US," she says. "So, when we had our first consultation, she said she had always dreamt of wearing an American white wedding gown. She also said her fiancé's family was more conservative and she wanted to respect their wishes as well. My job is to ensure, first and foremost, the bride is happy. Keeping her concerns in mind, I designed a dress that wasn't the typical red or pink, but

not white either because conservative Hindus wouldn't wear white; it was an exquisite shade of gold with embroidery."

The dress was cut in a flattering silhouette — fitted with a long train for impact, Loungani-Malhotra says. "It was the perfect combination of what she had always dreamed of and what she wanted now. After all, in my opinion, the dress is not just a dress. It is also a creative combination of two cultures and families." ■

— Arthur J Pais