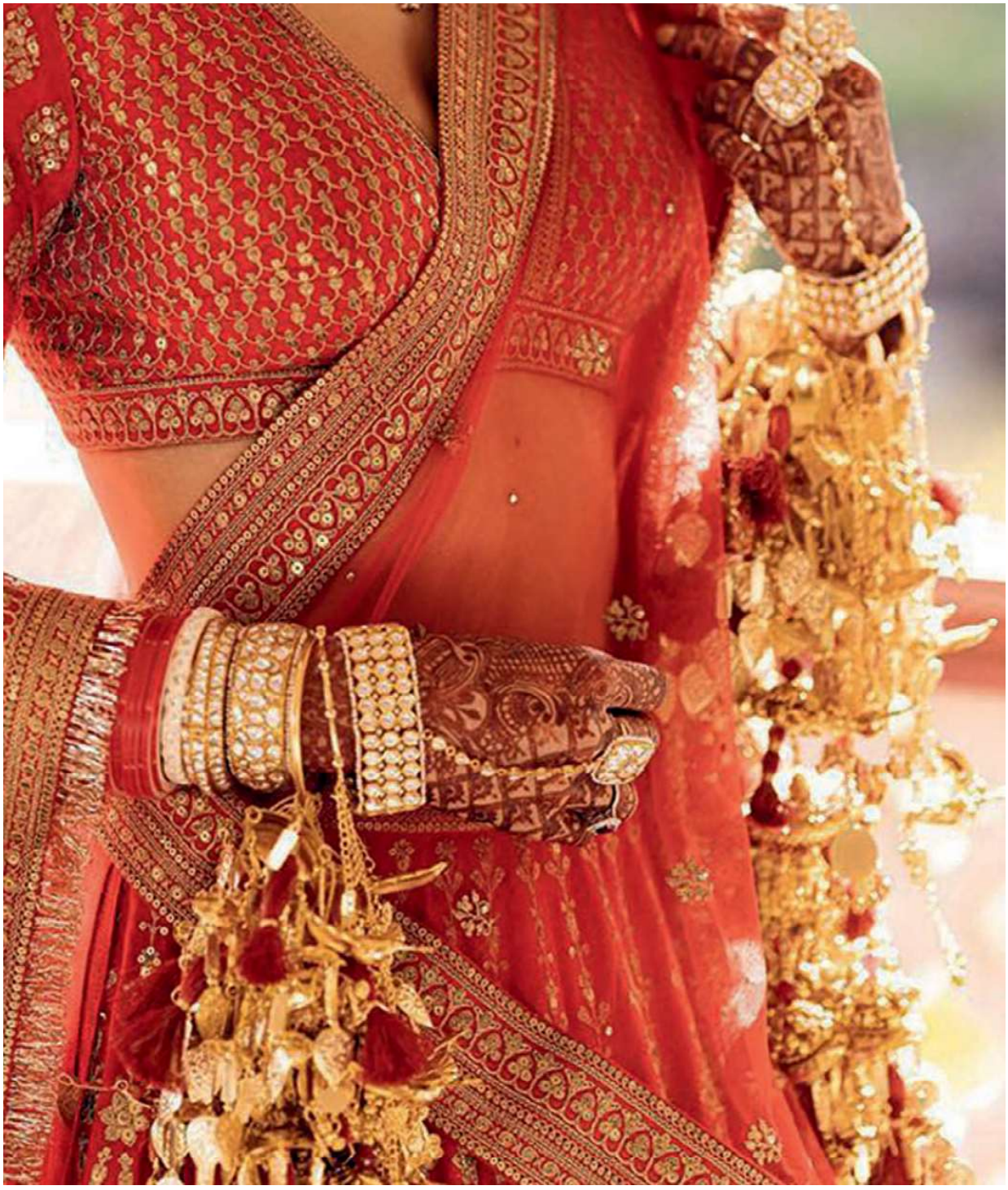

TRANSCENDING TRADITION

The symbolism, evolution, and style statement of a kaleera at an Indian Wedding

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IN THE VIBRANT TAPESTRY of Indian weddings, one ornamental element stands out for its shimmering beauty and profound symbolism: the kaleera. *Arabian Business Traveller* takes you on a journey through the rich tradition, evolution, and contemporary trends of these intricate bridal accessories that have captured the hearts of North Indian brides for generations.

What are kaleeras?

Kaleeras are an elaborate item of ornamental jewellery, forming a key part of a North Indian bride's wedding attire. The shimmering kaleeras are usually attached to the wedding bangles of the bride-to-be. Think of oversized cascades of fluttering gold and silver metal leaf domes connected by delicate shiny inter linking strands. They aren't heavy, but the overall effect adds to the existing sparkle of a traditional Indian bride's ensemble.

What is the significance of kaleeras?

Each kaleera is intended to signify a good friend or cousin from the bride's side that she may be leaving behind as she enters her new marital home. The tinkling sound of the kaleeras remind the bride of all the love she has from her maternal home as she enters this next phase of her life.

Why are kaleeras shaped like hollow half domes?

Originally kaleeras were made from sections of hollowed out coconut shells that could be studded with bits of dried fruit so the bride could discreetly snack on a potentially long journey to her new home. It was also a wish that the bride's home always overflowed with an abundance of food.

Nowadays kaleeras can be made from just about anything. Thin sheets of gold and silver, little conch shells, elaborately woven knotted fabric called gota, precious gemstones or a combination of all these materials. But often the shapes still resemble those original hollowed out shells. Of course there's no lack of any kind of food at today's Big Fat Indian weddings!

When are kaleeras actually worn by the bride ?

The traditional time for tying the kaleeras would have been at what's known as a chooda ceremony in the morning – or near it – of the wedding. The bride's maternal uncle plays a key role here. Today the red and white chooda bangles of a bride would be worn for a lot longer than the ornamental kaleeras.

IMAGES: SUPPLIED BY RAABTA BY RAHUL; MRINALINI CHANDRA

Contemporary kaleeras

Wearing a set of kaleeras remains a very integral part of the contemporary Indian bride's attire. They make a fashion statement all of their own and today's Indian brides have a lot of choice in the kaleeras they wear. While there don't seem to be any rules as far as kaleeras go, there are some emerging trends.

Iconic Bollywood actress Katrina Kaif wore not one but two sets of kaleeras on her wedding day, both of which were made specifically for her by eminent Indian designers. One set had customised golden trinkets with handmade red tassels to complement her wedding dress. These were crafted by renowned jewellery designer Rahul Luthra.

Another set incorporated Katrina's choice of words from religious texts. They even included messenger dove charms in 24 carat gold. Delhi Designer Mrinalini Chandra used recycled metal and gold plate employing artisans from Luknow and Jaipur to create this set of bespoke kaleeras.

It certainly looks like kaleeras are here to stay and there's no limit to their look, feel and style. But far from being a mere design object, hopefully the sentiment behind them will remain, offering blessings and good wishes from all the bride's existing friends and cousins, and to never have a lack of food in her new home.

As for my own kaleeras, well they looked very much like they had been made from gold top milk bottle caps that we used to get at primary school in London! But you know what? I wouldn't change a thing. ■