



Uproar over Prada sandals

Italian fashion house stirs debate over cultural theft with Indian-style footwear

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It started off innocuously enough. Last month, the Italian fashion house Prada sent models down the runway in Milan wearing T-strap sandals.

Then Indian social media exploded. The sandals looked suspiciously like a handcrafted leather shoe, known as the Kolhapuri chappal, that is worn by millions of Indians. The sandals are named after Kolhapur, a town in the western Indian state of Maharashtra where they are made, and are a part of India's rich cultural heritage.

The outcry over the Prada shoes — from accusations of design theft and cultural appropriation to demands that the luxury brand give India credit — caught the company flat-footed. Emboldened by the country's rising global stature, Indians have become quicker to demand that India be recognized and feted for its contributions to the world.

After the Maharashtra Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture shot off a stern letter to Prada, the fashion house's executives apologized, according to the Press Trust of India, an Indian news agency.

In a statement, the Prada Group said it acknowledged that "sandals inspired by traditional Indian footwear made in specific districts in Maharashtra and Karnataka, India, were featured in its Men's 2026 Spring Summer show in Milan." Karnataka is a neighboring state.

The company added that it was "opening a dialogue for a meaningful exchange with local Indian artisan communities," and that it was "in contact" with the Maharashtra authorities on the topic.

Kanika Gahlaut, an Indian fashion and lifestyle columnist, said that the uproar reflected concern that Prada,

rather than the Indian Kolhapuri industry, could benefit by selling the sandal that appeared on the runway.

But she called it "a point of outrage with no legal basis," because it was not clear what commercial plans, if any, Prada had for the shoe. A company representative said on Monday that "the entire collection is currently at an early stage of design development and none of the pieces are confirmed to be produced or commercialized."

The outcry over the shoe recalled a similar case from a decade ago involving the British designer Paul Smith and a sandal that resembled what is known as a Peshawari chappal, which is made in Pakistan. The designer did take that shoe to market, selling it for \$595, though the company changed the description of the sandal on its website to say it had been inspired by the Peshawari chappal.

Countries issue "geographical indication" tags to mark a product as belonging to a certain region within their borders, such as Bordeaux wine from France's Bordeaux region or Darjeeling tea from India. The tagging system was set up under global trade rules, partly to guard regional knowledge and craftsmanship, which can sometimes be diffuse or held communally within a certain locale. It's a marker of authenticity rather than a way to stop an imitator. The Indian government gave Kolhapuri sandals that designation in 2019.

Prada would be within its right to sell Kolhapuri sandals at whatever markup it wanted if it sourced the items from the eight districts in Maharashtra and Karnataka that are covered by the geographical indication tag, said Subhang Nair, an intellectual property lawyer. It would also have to publicly acknowledge the artisans in some way.

But, said Priyam Lizmary Cherian, another intellectual property lawyer: "Prada is not saying it is a Kolhapuri chappal. They're saying it's Kolhapuri chappal-inspired leather footwear, and that's a correct representation of it."

Still, Ms. Cherian said, Prada created an "ethical" issue by not giving due credit at the outset. "Had they acknowledged their inspiration from the get-go, it perhaps wouldn't have blown up," she said.

India has become more protective of its cultural heritage — whether it's yoga, the wound-healing properties of turmeric, or multihued Indian textiles — in part because its products are reaching a broader global audience.

But cultural pride can sometimes veer into angry nationalism. "We've become a very sensitive society," said Raghavendra Rathore, an Indian men's wear designer.

Mr. Rathore said he experienced quiet pride in "watching the symbols of our culture drift into foreign lands." The arrival of the humble Kolhapuri sandal — a pair can cost from 1,000 to 3,000 rupees in India, or from \$20 to \$30 — on an international stage should be cause for celebration rather than outrage, he said.

"It hasn't harmed the community that does these products," Mr. Rathore said. Instead, it has created more global awareness of a handcrafted sandal in an image-driven, social media-infused world, and that could help sales, he said.

The evidence? Since the controversy started, social media and shopping platforms have bombarded him and his team with ads for Kolhapuri sandals, he said.

Pragati K.B. contributed reporting.





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A Prada show at Milan Fashion Week. Indian social media users noted that the sandals in the show looked like Kolhapuri chappal shoes.