

INDIA
TODAY

SIMPLY PUNJABI

A MONTHLY CITY MAGAZINE

PLUS:

DANCING DERVISHES
THE GLASS MENAGERIE
SPORTING CITYJesse Singh with
son VictorFrom princes to
presidents, these
Bangkok-based
tailors have
dressed them all

BESPOKE BRILLIANCE

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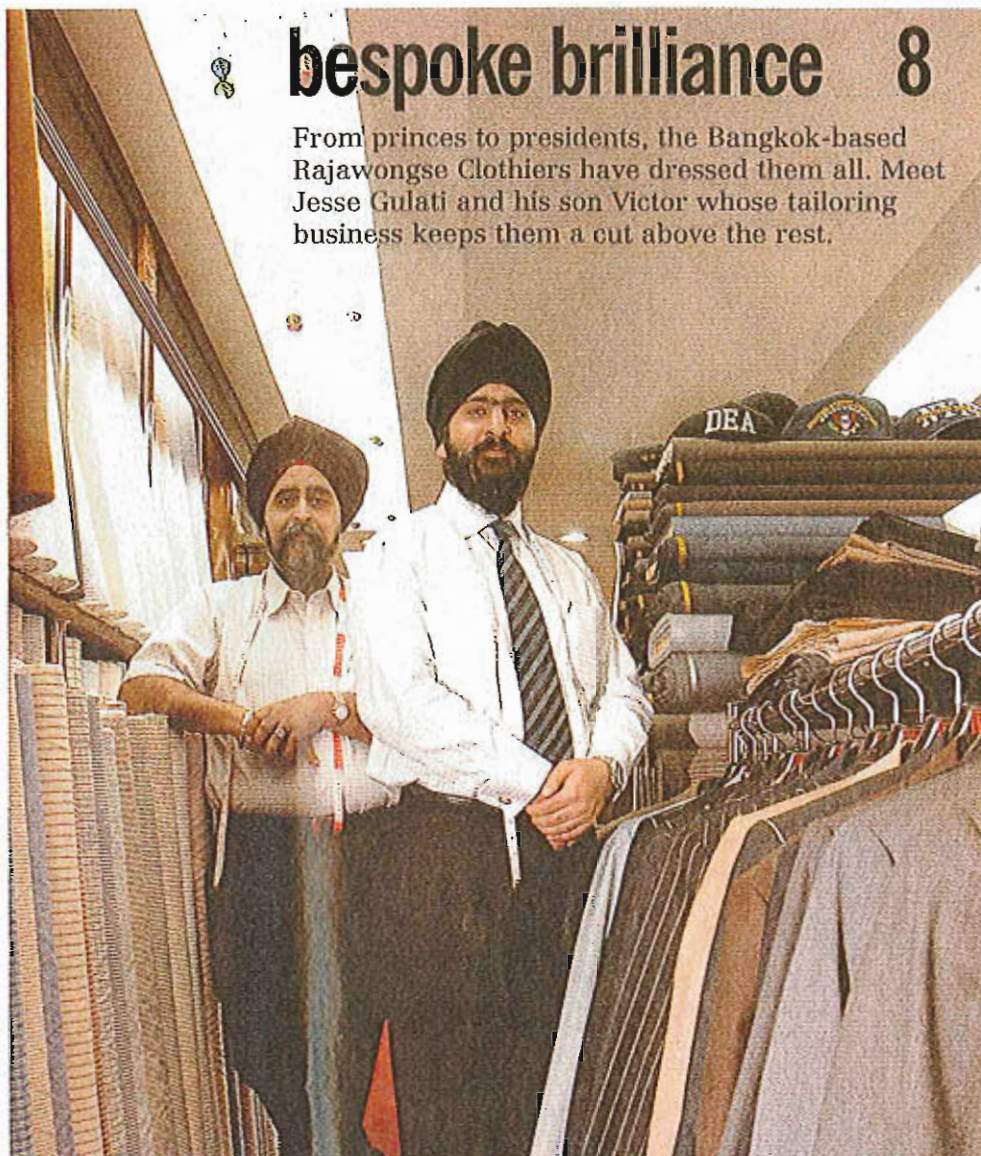
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 Bandeep Singh

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From princes to presidents, the Bangkok-based Rajawongse Clothiers have dressed them all. Meet Jesse Gulati and his son Victor whose tailoring business keeps them a cut above the rest.



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Five dance troupes with very individual styles are getting the party started across the state with their brand of rhythm.

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Moti Mahal, the great Indian restaurant, finally reaches Punjab, the state which has been inspiring its cuisine for the last 59 years.



PUNJABI DWAR

Photographs by BANDEEP SINGH

DESPOKE BRILLIANCE

FROM PRINCES AND
PRESIDENTS TO
SECRET SERVICE
AGENTS, BANGKOK-
BASED MASTER
TAILORS JESSE AND
VICTOR GULATI HAVE
DRESSED THEM ALL

On busy Sukhumvit Road in Bangkok, there is little to distinguish shop number 130 from the ubiquitous tailoring outlets for foreign tourists. But step through the glass-doors of Rajawongse Clothier and you'll figure out what makes this 20 ft by 10 ft shop a cut above the rest. Amid bolts of textile, Jaswant Singh Gulati (Jesse to his clients) and his son Victor greet customers in English that's as smooth as silk. On the wall are a slew of appreciation letters, signed photographs and kitschy mementos from VIP clients from around the world, including US President George W. Bush.

For over three decades, Jesse has combined master craftsmanship with customer-friendly ingenuity and sewed

up an array of international clientele that would make Saville Row go green with envy. From America's First Family to royals, diplomats, corporate honchos and even secret service sleuths, he has dressed them all. It is this formidable reputation that makes this 54-year-old second-generation Thai Sikh a tailoring tycoon in his adopted country.

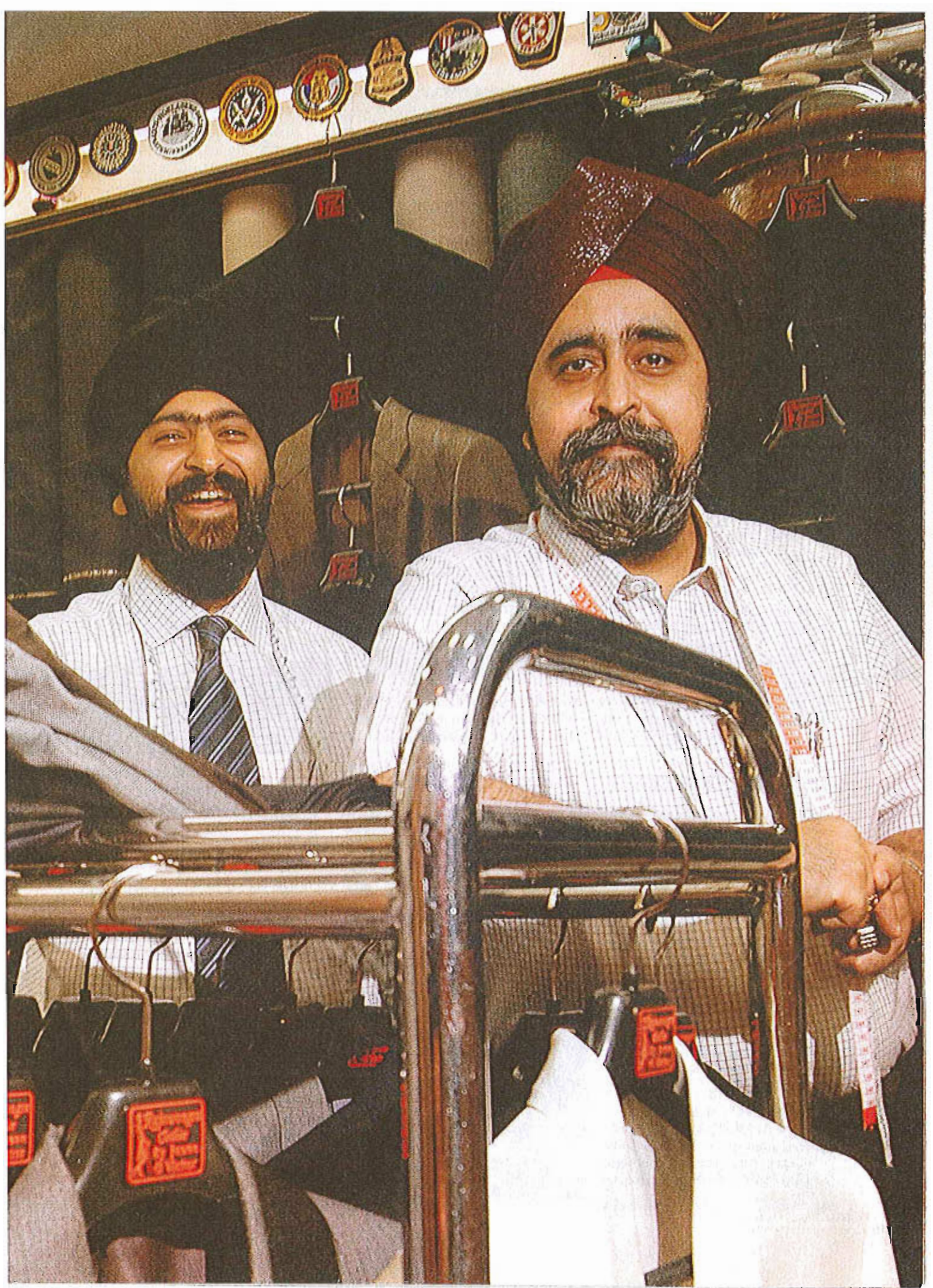
Rajawongse Clothier has built on its band of loyal VIP clientele not by advertising, but what Jesse modestly calls good word-of-mouth publicity. "Our customers are our best advertisers," he adds. Roughly 90 per cent of the clients here are foreigners who consider their Bangkok itinerary incomplete without a trip to the doyen of drapes.

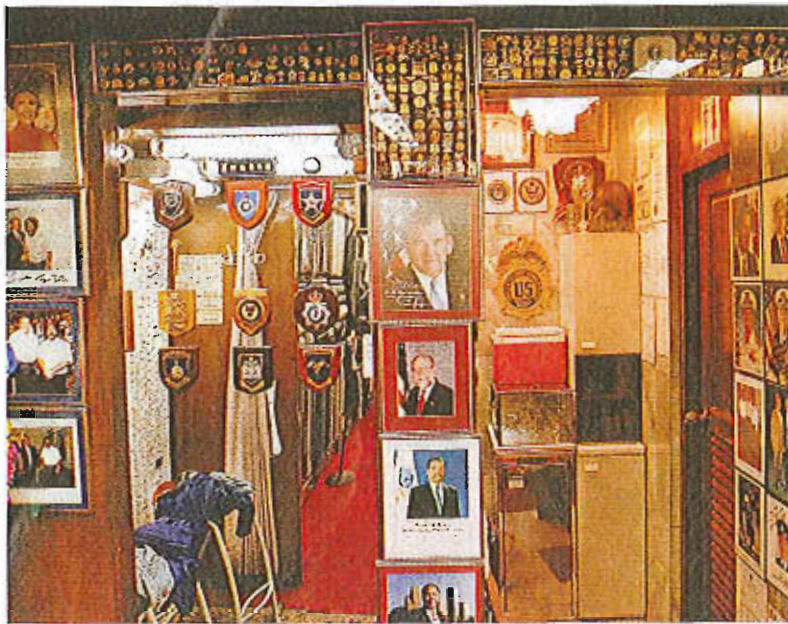
Ask Steve Costello, a Seattle-based

Family pride

Jesse (far right) has been in the tailoring business for over three decades and is assisted by Victor







telecom engineer who traveled to the Thai capital last month and carried a 'must-visit' note for Rajawongse. "My friends in the State Department recommended this shop," he says.

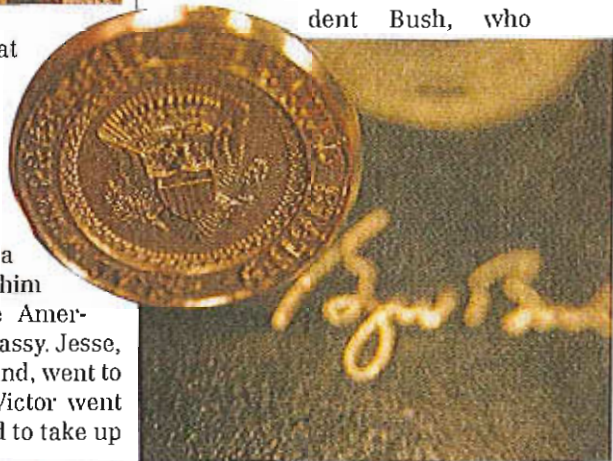
Jesse encapsulates the home-spun enterprise that defines the Punjabi immigrants' incredible success stories overseas. His Partition-hit father Iqbal Singh, a clothier in Sheikhupura (now in Pakistan) migrated here in 1948 and started a textile import and

distribution business at Ubol Rajdhani, a settlement in north-east Thailand. The presence of US troops there presented a huge opportunity to Iqbal Singh, who set up a tailoring unit that got him clients from both the American army and the embassy. Jesse, who was born in Thailand, went to school in Mussourie (Victor went there too) and returned to take up

the family business after his father's death.

In the early '70s when Jesse shifted to Bangkok, the US embassy continued to patronise him: a connection that made him a sought-after clothier with other diplomatic missions as well. But the big break came in '94 when the former US President, George Bush Senior, paid him a visit and placed orders for clothes for himself and his sons. While Jesse was able to take Bush Senior's measurements, he had to use his expertise to tailor the suits for the sons on the basis of family photographs. The Bushes acknowledged this gesture by sending a signed thank you note.

So it wasn't really surprising when the current President Bush, who



TAILORMADE FOR SUCCESS

■ The first time that Jesse made a suit for US President George W. Bush (junior) was in 1994. He gauged his measurements by referring to family photographs.

■ Nancy Reagan, the wife of the late Ronald Reagan, had an unusual request when she was in Bangkok on an official trip in 1986. She wanted a curtain that would match her blue dress and earrings for a scheduled television interview. The US embassy staff couldn't think of a more suitable tailor than Jesse who did a perfect job overnight, saving the day for them.

■ Jesse has also tailored a blazer for the Crown Prince of Thailand, who wore it to his university reunion.

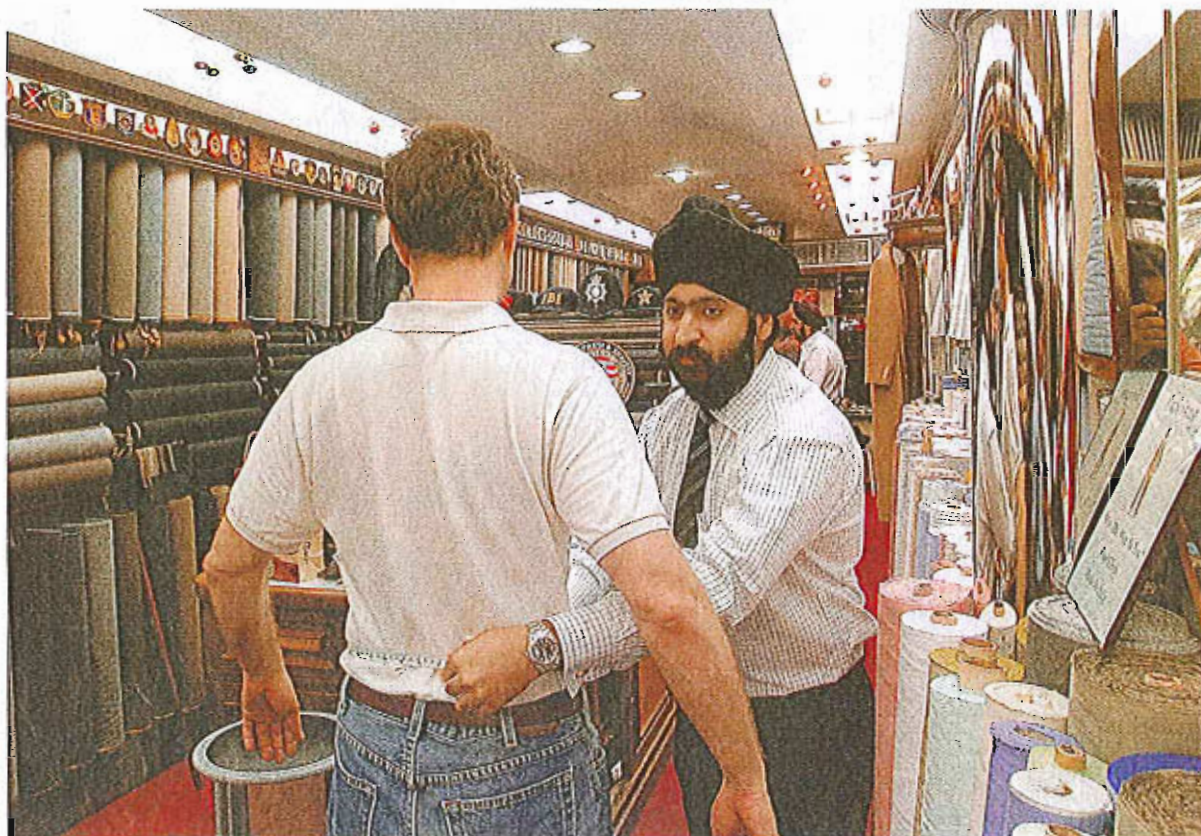
■ Rajawongse's list of clients includes agents of the FBI, CIA, Scotland Yard and Interpol. Jesse has also made uniforms for the Canadian Royal Constabulary besides the New Zealand, Danish and Thai police.



Hall of fame
Photos of dignitaries at Jesse's shop (top left); Presidential cufflinks (above right); VIP visiting cards (left)

came to Bangkok in October 2003 for the APEC summit, sought out Jesse to stitch two suits for him. "The President wanted a comfortably loose fit. Though he didn't tell me, I know that he has to wear a bullet proof vest underneath," says Jesse. This assignment brought the turbaned tailor into the limelight in leading American and Thai newspapers. It also led to a deluge of orders from other APEC delegates. "It took me nearly six months to meet the orders for about 1,000 suits," smiles Jesse.

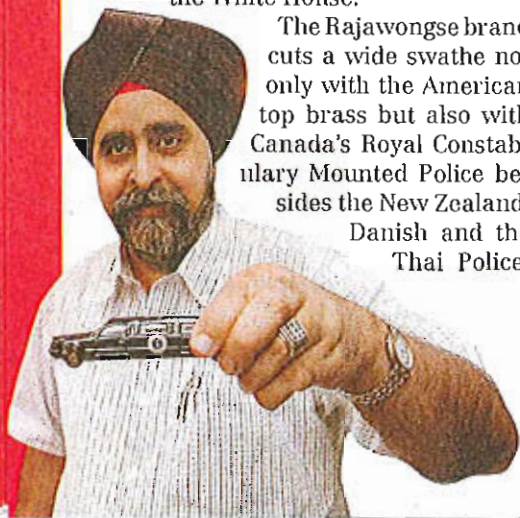
Incidentally, the first time that Bush wore the Rajawongse suit in December 2003, White House



staffer Steven A. Atkiss sent Jesse a photograph of Bush along with an e-mail reading: The President wore your suit for the first time today and commented on it.

"It was an honour to tailor a suit for the US President and to be on his mailing list," says Jesse, showing the signed 2005 New Year and Christmas Card that he got from George and Laura Bush. Equally prized is a trove of tokens like the US President's signed seal, cufflinks and other mementos from the White House.

The Rajawongse brand cuts a wide swathe not only with the American top brass but also with Canada's Royal Constabulary Mounted Police besides the New Zealand, Danish and the Thai Police.



"Almost 80 per cent of our business comes from foreign law enforcement agencies," says Victor, who joined the family business when he was just 16. Top security agents and sleuths, accompanying foreign VIP delegations, have a special liking for Rajawongse. "They like an easy fit because they have to carry concealed weapons," says Jesse.

Wary about disclosing his turnover, the master tailor says: "We are not into chasing money and prefer to keep a low profile." But business is clearly booming. His tailoring unit, employing 250 workers, rolls out 30 suits and 80 shirts a day. It's not that Rajawongse puts a premium price tag on its suits. On an average, a suit here costs between US\$ 250 and US\$ 300, compared to \$700 for similar tailoring in Hong Kong. Most of the workers are traditional tailors from the countryside and have

Master tailor Victor (above) measures a client for a suit; Jesse (below) with a replica of the US President's limousine

stayed with Jesse since he set up shop in Bangkok. "I keep them happy and each one earns more than a banker," smiles the owner.

Excelling in quality is the key to Rajawongse's reputation, say both father and son delineating their trade from the drape-and-dupe deals of many clothiers down the street. The store generates half of its business online through its website dress-for-success.com. Recently, Jesse added another feather to his cap by tailoring a blazer for the Crown Prince of Thailand, which the latter wore to his university class reunion.

Deeply religious, Jesse spends his weekends at the gurdwara doing community service or spending time with his family. Victor is more outgoing. He is a member of two of Bangkok's elitist clubs where foreign diplomats and the Thai gentry tee off. "I joined the clubs to mix with old clients and make new ones but now golf has become a hobby," he says. Clearly, Victor, like his father, knows well the ways to keep their tailor-made success a cut above the rest. ■ by Ramesh Vinayak