

HOME GROWN



Tinker Tailor

In an age of speedy obsolescence, what does it take to make a gadget live forever? **Diwik Singh Chhalani**, founder of the sustainable luxury speaker brand Diwiks, tells **Nidhi Gupta** about his vision for timeless technology

It started with an old discarded radio that Diwik Singh Chhalani found at his ancestral home. “My grandfather had an engineering bent of mind,” he remembers over a Zoom call one humid day, walking around his studio in Bikaner. “In our village Diyatra, he was known as the guy who, outside of his carpet yarn spinning business, would enlist the help of an ironsmith and a carpenter to make tools and give them away to our neighbours. He was a gadget buff. Our family was the first to acquire a radio, a TV, a car.”

In 2015, Chhalani rescued that radio from his grandmother’s annual cleaning drives and brought it to Delhi, where he was working at an advertising agency. “Wouldn’t it be wonderful, I thought, if this thing could have better sound and a bluetooth port. So I began to tinker with it, which I did a lot as a kid” – inspired by his uncle, who never joined the

family business, and enlisted as sidekick in a *Rick and Morty*-like project to reclaim technology that had been forgotten – “take things apart and put them back together again.”

With the help of an electronics guy and a sound guy, Chhalani had the radio up and running in no time. “I didn’t go far with the sound or the engineering,” he says, “but I had found the idea.”

Chhalani, now 36, quickly moved on from restoring radios because “their design was repetitive, they were often made in bulk and often in plywood.” He was clear about a few things: “I wanted to make things that would last, so that in a 100 years, even if the sound has conked off and the wood is a bit chipped, the thing has survived in essence and is ready for new life.”

Thus was born Diwiks: A brand with the tagline “Remade in India”. This range of boom boxes meticulously crafted in his Bikaner studio, one at a time, fits the power of tower speakers in a cuboid that’s made of 100 per cent reclaimed wood and specced out with indigenously engineered high-end fittings. They’re luxurious, sustainable and nostalgic all at once.

Inside a Diwiks speaker, you’ll find four speakers/ drivers, a woofer and tweeter combination, an amplifier and other components to fit the design;

all of which have been engineered specifically for the brand. Diwiks’ signature rolling shutter speaker, exhibited this year at the India Art Fair, is crafted using reclaimed Burmese teak wood; the black and gold collection from 2019 stands out for the dull gold lines which lend it a degree of sophistication.

Himself an “art guy”, Chhalani believes his biggest achievement has been to find the right people to do the right job. He’s found worthy collaborators like audio consultant Milind Raorane, who’s known for his work on the Taj Hotels’ sound system in Mumbai; Milton Martins, the ‘speaker’ guy who manufactures “the cone-shaped things that actually produce sound”; and Jacob “Amplifier” Abraham, who is “kind of my CTO”, and whose studio in Bengaluru assembles the parts for a Diwiks speaker.

The craftsmen in his studio, such as Manoj Suthar and Ustad Mainudeen – an artist of Iranian descent, hailing from a tribe that settled in Bikaner decades ago and is known for creating Usta art – bring his vision to life. “There are small raw materials that anyone would have to source from China, but everything from the back chassis to the power supply, is made in India.”

“I am fascinated by music,” Chhalani says. “I have come full circle to realise that the music that I resonate most with are the sufi and folk sounds of my homeland,” he laughs. But he is quick to add he

is no audiophile. His approach to working on a Diwiks speaker is to “play the angry customer”. “My eye is always on the next thing. How can we get the latest bluetooth port, for instance, or if we can build an app.”

Ideas on what a Diwiks speaker should or shouldn’t be also come from his patrons. The decision to work on an app actually came from the fashion designer Nikhil Mehra (of Shantanu and Nikhil), among Chhalani’s early customers. “He bought three speakers for their Mumbai studio, and he wanted them all to play the same song at the same time. That can only happen if the devices are connected over LAN or WiFi, and to manage that you need an app. So we’re working on one.”

Vir Kotak, Samir Modi, Keshav Suri, Hari Singh Jaaj all own a Diwiks. In 2019, 30 speakers were sold (averaging between Rs 1-1.5 lakh). Right now, he has 40 orders, including from Sanjay Garg of Raw Mango and Sunitha Kumar Emmart of GallerySKE in Bengaluru, who also exhibited Diwiks’ speakers in a unique show called *A Tale Of Two Ateliers* late last year. “What makes this art?” Chhalani repeats a question he gets often. “We know why, since we work on each for 3-4 months.” But his inspirations and intent may also have something to do with the rapturous reception his line has received among the design community.

“I want to be known for the sound,” he says to explain why he doesn’t want to diversify his brand into other types of sound devices. “I also don’t want people to look at my speaker and feel like it belonged to the 1930s. I’m trying not to get caught up in this whole thing of ‘my work is a tribute to the mid-century modern’ or whatever. It is what it is, and it is inspired by buildings, by nature.”

One of the core inspirations for the upcoming collection from Diwiks is in fact an old art deco building that stood for a century outside Chhalani’s ancestral home in Bikaner. “Nobody could even punch a hole in its wall, that’s how strong its walls were. They’ve razed it now to build a mall or something,” he says disparagingly. “I just wanted to own a piece of it. I sourced the doors and windows. I decided to use at least some element of its design in my work. In my way, this building will now live through this collection.”

One WIP piece he shows in his studio uses slender white stems from the kaner plant to create sleek geometric lines that are a signature of the Art Deco movement. Another is that small-batch approach to crafting objects, but for Chhalani the real reason for the limited editions is rooted in common sense. “We’ve always had that practice in Rajasthan,” says Chhalani, “that if a father got a nice suit made for a special day, that stuff would get passed down to the next generation. And we’re somehow not doing that anymore. I want to bring timelessness to the things we make.”



(Clockwise from left) A WIP speaker from Diwiks’ new Art Deco-inspired collection; the building that inspired it; a kaner plant in Chhalani’s home, whose wood is used as inlays in this collection; the finished product



IMAGE: NIRALI NAIK / COURTESY DIWIKS (PORTRAIT), DIWIK SINGH CHHALANI