

a set of immaculately dressed gentlemen, and who better than the country's premier institution to draw inspiration from?

Until this moment, however, Shantana & Nikhil's menswear had languished as a sidebar to its womenswear. Now, having found a new USP, the designers took their story forward with each season. India's past for a future generation, with new flourishes and details like leather trimmings, embroidered patches and regimental brooches. At the designers' recently concluded standalone couture show in Delhi's storied Bikaner House, a sea of colour – greens, pinks, magenta, orange – made its way into a progressive collection. We caught up with the duo to discuss the fear of repetitive fashion and the future of their "India story".

You completely overhauled your entire collection just a few days before your recent couture show. What happened?

Nikhil: I was relaxing on the beach and saw baskets of colour lying in different corners – everything was white, orange, red, blue. That's when I decided we would change the collection. Without doing this, I think it would've looked similar to last year's. Adding colour made it feel younger.

Do you ever fear that your menswear will get repetitive?

Nikhil: All the time. India accepted four versions of the draped kurta and then it was abused and plagiarised. Where could we go from there? Because we've put in our best already. It's a bit scary, but that's why I'm trying to be more aware of my existence, and see what's happening around me.

Why vintage India for your moodboard?

Nikhil: Nothing starts out of the blue. There's always a story, right? The reason we came back from America [after studying] was because we missed India: the companions, love, chaos. India also allowed us the opportunity to create something that people would accept. Yet, it was only after 2011 that we gave it a lot more prominence. But the country's so vast, which part of it do you draw from? Some designers look at specific cultures and states. We look at all of it. We call ourselves anti-trend.

Shantana: Until a few years ago, we were still seeking inspiration from across the world – Spain, Paris, Rome – and then we'd bring it in India through our interpretation. But we felt we weren't doing it justice. Maybe we were getting too influenced by what was happening in the West. In 2015, we went back to the drawing board. That's where we started thinking about the best of Indian nostalgia and the Nehruvian era, from a modern menswear perspective.

Nikhil: Actually, GQ Fashion Nights triggered it for us. For the longest time, when we were



Colourful details on strong silhouettes from Shantana & Nikhil's recent couture collection

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doing menswear, we didn't know who our man was. When GQ gave us the mandate to steer away from conventional clothes, that's when we realised who our man was. That's when we created "Cabinet Mission".

Shantana: The idea of drapes came in, as well as a sense of femininity. It was familiar yet exotic. Nostalgic but hot. And that gave us the confidence to form a new narrative, techniques and details.

How do you appeal to a younger generation?

Shantana: The most important thing for us is to give them something that's reliable and cool. Couture, until now, was a one-of-a-kind product that sat on a hanger. Now, it's about that very product telling a story. →

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