



CREATING A MELTING POT OF FASHION

Bindu Gopal Rao engages in a conversation with Sangita Sinh Kathiwada, Founder of Mélange, a fashion house in Mumbai which recently celebrated its silver jubilee.

A qualified graphic designer who further studied jewellery designing, interior decoration, photography and silk screen printing, Sangita Sinh Kathiwada's achievements make for a rather overcrowded cap with many feathers. In 1992, Sangita's inherent sartorial acumen and design education led to the creation of Mélange, the premier fashion house of India, which opened its doors in a 100-year-old wine cellar in Mumbai. At a time when sustainability was not the watchword du jour yet, Mélange enjoyed meteoric success by taking an environmentally conscious approach to fashion with unstructured garments that sat proudly amidst a sophisticated backdrop.

Under Sangita's critical eye, Mélange became the launch pad for many notable names of the current crop of top couturiers including Savio

Jon, Wendell Rodricks, Ramesh Nair, Narendra Kumar, Sabyasachi Mukherjee, Priyadarshini Rao, Sanjay Garg, Hidden Harmony, Priti Paul, Sabina Singh, Anuradha Vakil, Anavilla Mishra, Sunita Shankar, Aneeth Arora, Aki Narula, among many others. When the country started recognising an alternative way of buying fashion, Sangita Kathiwada had the desire to support the backbone of the industry which is the crafts, looms and hand weaves. This led her to establish The Morarka Cultural Centre in 1995 at the prestigious National Centre for Performing Arts (NCPA). The Morarka Cultural Centre then went on to be the backbone of Sangita's passion projects by propelling weavers and artisans at the grass-roots level, enabling them to be part of a larger fashion movement. She also worked on

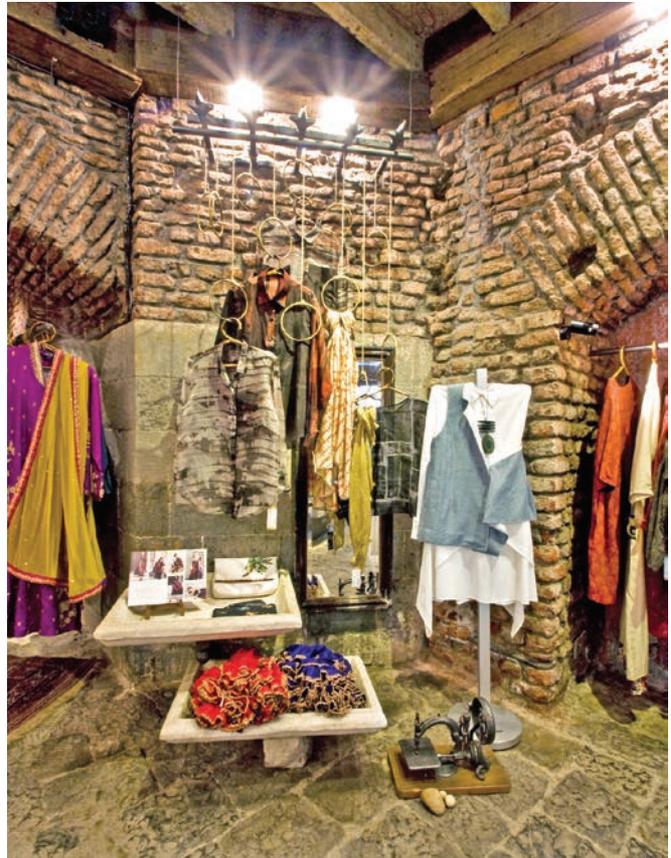


drawing the attention of the city to its magnificent heritage architecture by conceptualising several path-breaking fashion presentations at the Royal Opera House, Faramji Kavasji Hall and the Mumbai University Convocation Hall. As word of her creative prowess spread, she was also invited by Milan University in 2003 to share her views on fashion and cinema.

The force behind Mélange has also committed herself to the cause of redefining the role and reach of our national fabric, khadi, and other Indian textiles. To innovate new threads from our tradition, while building professional platforms from which the artisan, artist and entrepreneur can create together, serves as the *raison d'être* for this iconic visionary. Founder Sangita Kathiwada tells us more in this exclusive tête-à-tête.

TELL US SOMETHING ABOUT YOUR EARLY DAYS—SCHOOLING, COLLEGE; DID YOU ALWAYS HAVE AN ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT IN YOU?

I did my schooling from Indore, Madhya Pradesh, pursued my further studies in Sophia Polytechnic, Mumbai to study art and design, and graduated in Mass Communication and Photography. I believe I have always been an entrepreneur since the age of 16. Whichever projects I did in school, I thought of converting that into a bigger project and not just keep it limited to the school level. I always felt the need to impact more people at a larger scale, involving people from the slum community and converting it in a way where it could be economically beneficial. Even the projects that I am currently working on, they are not just vanity or dream projects; a lot of thought



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process and understanding goes behind how they would convert into something sustainable and beneficial to everyone involved.

WHAT VEERED YOU TOWARDS A CAREER IN DESIGN?

I believe there has been an inherent talent of design in me. In fact, all of my childhood interests have been whirling around art, craft, and design, which led me towards opting for design as a career.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR BRAND MÉLANGE AND HOW AND WHEN YOU STARTED IT.

Mélange is a 25-year-old brand which began as my deep passion to do something creative; it is what holds importance and meaning to it. The driving force was to work with the textiles and weaves of the country and to salute the rich crafts



that India has to offer. This mini movement was started by SNDT College and NIIT producing some young talent. I feel quite fortunate to be a part of a journey which many talented people started back then.

WHAT IS THE USP OF MÉLANGE?

All the designs are created with a lot of passion and imagination. Mélange takes pride for staying true to quality and style, with a strong emphasis on authenticity.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR SUSTAINABLE INITIATIVES WITH MÉLANGE.

For starters, we transformed a 100-year-old wine cellar into Mélange which has always stood for its originality of thought and expression. Mélange has witnessed success by taking an eco-friendly approach to fashion. At Mélange, we are conscious about more than just what we sell. Our letterheads carry bags and visiting cards made of recycled paper, with an active focus on

environmental sustainability and development of heritage arts and crafts, giving a holistic approach to design.

WHAT ARE THE KINDS OF PRODUCT LINES YOU HAVE AS PART OF THE BRAND? WHO ARE THE DESIGNERS YOU WORK WITH?

I may have roughly worked with over 250 designers in the span of 25 years. I believe I have always had a deep sense of understanding when it came to picking out designers who would turn out to be talented and extraordinary and whose work would be distinct from the others. My keen eye for fresh and innovative designers made Mélange a platform for launching new talent. It was one of the first stores that gave a platform to amazing designers like Rohit Bal, Priyadarshini Rao, and Narendra Kumar, to name a few. Most of the big names heard today were launched at Mélange and it has been an incredible journey till now.



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even procured bamboo hangers from Manipur, recycled wood from the railway yards and particularly used organic and environmentally conscious packaging. Our Morarka exhibition titled 'Khadi sails upon a new wind' had an engaging set with charkhas and panels with quotes by Mahatma Gandhi, all interspersed with khadi designer wear. It was an experience especially for children who could learn how to spin their own yarn.

WHAT ARE THE FASHION TRENDS FOR 2019 ACCORDING TO YOU? WHAT IS IN AND WHAT IS OUT?

I am not really a person who goes with fashion trends or forecasts and what is in and what is out. I mainly respond to the moment and the thought put behind the designing of a piece. I believe that there is a psychological understanding about what one wears and how one creates a language from it. For me, it can be something classic like a sari or a simple dress that can work wonders.

WHAT DO YOU LIKE DOING OUTSIDE OF WORK AND WHAT ARE YOUR FUTURE PLANS?

My work is my home and my mind is actively focused on creating innovative plans or developing heritage properties. I have been really enjoying converting our family-owned heritage properties into wonderful spaces by using contemporary designs. I make sure to use spaces in a manner without compromising on the aesthetics and integrity of the handmade design or the original structure which is one of my greatest loves. It is similar to the wellness centre I am creating in my house in Mumbai. It is an important project I'm trying to develop—a wellness product line which people can use as an alternative medicine, as I did alternative clothing 25 years ago. My idea is 'live and consume consciously'. Our choices should be refined and thoughtful as they impact our personal development. ■

TELL US ABOUT THE MORARKA CULTURAL CENTRE.

The Morarka Cultural Centre was set up at NCPA with a grant from Mr Kamal Morarka. The main motive was to bridge the gap between the rural and urban audience and create an educational awareness programme where we can bring projects to the ultimate user, who can directly be in touch with the artisans and witness the whole process of designing. We felt that even the users should appreciate and value the hard work that goes behind these skills.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR WORK WITH KHADI AND TRADITIONAL INDIAN TEXTILES.

My roots are firmly entrenched in a culture that respected Planet Earth. Everything about the store was sustainable. We used natural fabrics like khadi, cotton, linen and silk and