



THE RAW MANGO FLAVOUR!

Bindu Gopal Rao speaks to Sanjay Garg of Raw Mango, who is celebrating a decade of being in the business and has also recently opened his first store in Bengaluru.

His creations are a favourite among Bollywood celebrities and are regularly seen adorning the ramps as well. In the last decade, the designer has championed the revival of handloom textiles, from Madhya Pradesh's *Chanderi*, Varanasi's *Benarasi* brocades, West Bengal's *Jamdani* and *mul*s to Gujarat's *Mashru*. Raw Mango has successfully modernised saris and lehengas for women of all ages, bringing the uniqueness of Indian design and its unabashed legacy of vibrant colours to the forefront. The brand currently employs over 250 skilled *karigars*, with the intent to preserve the livelihood of skilled artisans. Raw Mango is more than just fashion; it is about a larger programme that has managed to uplift an entire community by creating a new value for an existing and ignored product—the humble sari. The label has effectively adapted traditional techniques to transform them into sophisticated, contemporary designs, thereby creating a fresh, new aesthetic that is both homegrown and

chic. His sprawling store in Bengaluru is spread over 1,500 square feet and includes his bridal collection. Sanjay's clothes have a sense of understated elegance with knee-length kurtas, floor-grazing shararas, draped silk satin dupattas and more in an array of rich, vibrant hues. He tells us more in this exclusive conversation.

HOW DO YOU LOOK BACK ON YOUR DECADE IN THIS JOURNEY?

It has been a good journey, but there are more questions than answers as always. This is because I want to do more things in terms of the fact that I feel I have done less. In terms of the store and the contribution itself, I realise the fashion market is so huge in India and the organised fashion space is so little in terms of the size of the country. So I am hoping to make a bigger impact and change as far as the fashion industry is concerned. So, there is definitely more to come.



TELL US ABOUT THE NAME 'RAW MANGO'.

This name is all about the beauty of imperfection. Just like the taste of tamarind, it is beauty and is like the khadi fabric that has so many imperfections that it makes for beauty.

YOU HAVE BEEN A CHAMPION OF TRADITIONAL TEXTILES. WHAT STEERED YOU TOWARDS THEM?

My area of focus has indeed always been on tradition simply because I never thought of tradition as passé. It has been my concern that people think of it as the past and for me, tradition is what we can do in the future too. And while I say this, I also like working with machines and technology; we can use them in combination. It is just that we use our past heritage and continue it in the future.

HOW DO YOU ENSURE THAT SARIS REMAIN INTERESTING FOR THE YOUNGER GENERATION?

What we did with our saris to drape well is that we wash every sari in-house first so that the starch is removed and it never feels stiff. This was

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a feedback we specifically received. Also, in terms of designs, colours, zari, motifs and layouts, we have made sure that the saris continue to appeal to younger generations. I feel the sari is one of the most evolved garments and has remained relevant for thousands of years. Of course, we change the look and feel to ensure that it remains relevant to the new generation too.

RAW MANGO OPENED LAKMÉ FASHION WEEK IN 2017 AT THE ROYAL OPERA HOUSE IN MUMBAI. CAN YOU TAKE US THROUGH THAT EXPERIENCE?

It has been good and I enjoyed it, but as I have always maintained, that is not the only thing I

DESIGNER SPOTLIGHT

ASKING QUESTIONS CONSTANTLY IS SOMETHING I ALWAYS DO. ALSO, BEING AWARE AND SEEKING INSPIRATION FROM SOCIETY, CULTURE, POLITICS AND BELIEFS MAKES SURE I AM IN TUNE WITH WHAT MY CLIENTS NEED.

want to do in life. So I have been participating in different options, platforms and mediums to reach out to different audiences.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR COLLECTIONS 'MONKEY BUSINESS' AND 'CLOUD PEOPLE'.

Monkey Business was started as I was not very happy with the idea of the set norms of tradition in terms of motifs like horses and elephants

on garments. I was not convinced that it is unintelligent to have monkeys as motifs. So my collection uses the temple monkeys as a key texture. Cloud People was a beautiful collection again. Usually you see all the narrative stories in kalamkari and block printing, but you never see angels. I wanted to question the set perceptions of visual imagery and wanted to have angel motifs as well which were not seen earlier.

HOW DO YOU KEEP CONNECTED WITH THE INDUSTRY AND STAY RELEVANT TO THE NEEDS OF THE CHANGING SOCIETY?

Asking questions constantly is something I always do. Also, being aware and seeking inspiration from society, culture, politics and beliefs makes sure I am in tune with what my clients need. Day-to-day activities and happenings and also India being a country of storytellers ensures that there is no dearth of inspiration, to be honest.



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YOUR PIECES HAVE BEEN INTERNATIONALLY EXHIBITED AT THE VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM. TELL US MORE...

Well, they came to us and chose the saris and I am happy that my work is there, but I wish our museums can do it too. I would be happy if the saris are showcased, for instance, in a museum in Lucknow or anywhere else in India. It is not a big deal, but I am happy nonetheless.

HOW HAS THE RESPONSE TO YOUR TRUNK SHOWS IN HONG KONG, LONDON AND SINGAPORE BEEN AND HOW DO YOU PLAN TO FURTHER YOUR INTERNATIONAL OUTREACH?

I am going to concentrate on India as there is so much that we have not yet tapped. Trunk shows abroad have however been very successful and there is no doubt there. In fact, trunk shows in India have also been doing exceeding well, which is why I want to focus on India through new store launches. The Bengaluru store is also a result of this thought process.

I HAVE ALWAYS BELIEVED THAT IT IS IMPORTANT FOR A BRIDAL TROUSSEAU TO SHOWCASE THE BRIDE'S CULTURE AND HERITAGE AND STICK TO THAT VISION.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR BENGALURU STORE. WHAT KIND OF COLLECTIONS WILL IT HAVE?

Actually, I feel there are no major exclusive designer outlets in Bengaluru and I really wanted to have a store in the South and Bengaluru fitted in really well. Being a cosmopolitan city, the people do not really look at it like a designer store and I am glad. We will have the same collections here as we have in our Delhi and Mumbai stores. I never see that kind of regional difference to do things differently here.

WHAT ARE THE NEW TRENDS IN BRIDAL WEAR?

I have never believed in trends. I have always believed that it is important for a bridal trousseau to showcase the bride's culture and heritage and stick to that vision. So, in a sense, the designs must reflect where they come from and what they like to wear. Of course, there are so many motifs, colours and designs that work today. For instance, in Bihar and Rajasthan, brides wear a dupatta over the sari. Moreover, the sari itself is being draped in so many ways, so all that is taken into consideration while designing bridal wear.

WHAT ARE THE NEW APPAREL TRENDS YOU SEE IN 2019?

Again, I always rely on my gut feeling when it comes to what I want to do and I am really the last person to look at forecasts. My new collection is called 'Hazara', which means 1,000 flowers and is a collection inspired from Kashmir. This will be out by early next year. ■