

The blouse

It may just be a few metres of fabric but in an Indian woman's wardrobe the blouse occupies a pivotal place. For designer **Sabyasachi Mukherjee**, it represents the social evolution of the Indian woman. He speaks to **Kimi Dangor** about this all-important piece of clothing

Illustrated by JASJYOT SINGH HANS

A pivotal image from Sabyasachi Mukherjee's spring/summer 2019 campaign shows a model running through a field, in complete abandon. Clad in a perilously low-cut blouse, she truly captures the sensuousness and playfulness of the collection's #NamasteEasy hashtag. The fact that the image has garnered over 2,70,000 likes on Instagram (and thousands of conflicting comments on social media) is something that intrigues and interests the Kolkata-based couturier.

For if you're likely to dismiss the Indian blouse as just another item of clothing in a woman's wardrobe—always complementary, seldom complimented—Mukherjee will tell you otherwise. Over the last two decades, the NIFT graduate has built his bridal empire selling the luxe lehenga dream to millions of women worldwide, ably bolstered by the magical corsetry of his customised cholis.

He will tell you how, for the Indian woman, the blouse's length is not just a number but an identity. More than fastidious fits and quibbling over sleeve lengths, he believes the Indian woman and her sari blouse are a study in societal change. Rather than serving a supporting role to the sari, the blouse has become a mouthpiece for women.

While the sceptic may loathe to delve into the sociological underpinnings of a Sabyasachi choli, the self-confessed feminist believes that it is women who are redefining the blouse. "If you see our campaigns over the years, the lehengas and saris haven't really evolved, the blouses have. They have captured the zeitgeist of a generation," explains Mukherjee. From his Modesty or Kanthi blouse days (where high necklines, monotone colours and long sleeves kept the focus on the wearer) to its recent cleavage-popping avatar that paints the picture of the woman as a self-assured and sexual creature, the different iterations narrate a transformative tale. "We've started showing skin because women have realised that body confidence doesn't come with actually subscribing to a particular stereotypical theory of beauty. Women who own their sexuality need to be celebrated," he says.



The Bipasha

His all-time bestseller Bipasha blouse is inspired by—quite obviously—actor Bipasha Basu. When a proposed dance sequence for Mani Ratnam's *Raavan* was nixed, Mukherjee decided to commercially sell the blouse created for the Bengali actor. "Quite sexual for its time, it was a deep-cut blouse where the arms were covered. It was suggestive. And it became a raging hit. In fact, it is the most iconic product to come out of our atelier," says Mukherjee, who claims to have sold 2,50,000 of them till date with lehengas and saris. "When Bipasha was getting married, she came to the store, looked at the blouse and gushed: 'This blouse has my name written all over it.' I smiled and said: 'Quite literally.'"