

On *Raja Kumari*: Epaulé sari gown, **S&N by Shantanu & Nikhil**. Embellished shoes, **Christian Louboutin**. Earrings, **Lara Morakhia**

## RAJA KUMARI, 33

### RAPPER

"THE PIECES FIT ME SO PERFECTLY, AND MY BODY TYPE ISN'T LIKE EVERYONE ELSE'S. EVERYTHING DRAPED PERFECTLY, LIKE COUTURE"

Playing with volume and structure, and with a devotion to form, Shantanu & Nikhil turn the landscape of Indian wear classics into something novel, something that all good design aspires to become: a modern classic.

It takes years, and practice, to arrive here. A shoulder turns into a drape, no dupatta necessary; a corseted bodice with a draped back meets a voluminous skirt-lehenga, all one-piece and zippered—the designers render traditional silhouettes like the lehenga and sari effortless, ridding women of cumbersome appendages.

This is the lightness of being that they bring to the heaviness of Indian couture. One of many dichotomies—male/female, soft/hard, structured/voluminous, traditional/modern, Indian/global—that they straddle. Of course, they can give you beautiful, embellished lehengas and sherwanis—they're couturiers. But somewhere along the way, they stripped down the excesses and began innovating with drapes and corsetry: yards of flounce began to form lehengas and bondage-y leather bustiers replaced cholis. "We brought femininity to menswear with draped kurtas. And for women, we added structure so they could move beyond romanticism," says Nikhil, the creative force behind the label. "Our women," he continues, "come from a belief system of being strong-willed. They are anti-trend, because they live their life with complete honesty about who they are, never aspiring to be someone else."

This new chapter of their design vocabulary has been well-received ever since its inception, around 2014, possibly indicative of a larger audience. This, therefore, led them to S&N by Shantanu & Nikhil, their new brand, born of a strategic joint venture with retail giant Aditya Birla Fashion & Retail Ltd (ABFRL). "As a

brand, we lived this dream of having every other Indian wear us," explains Shantanu, the label's business head. "As we brought this new sartorial sensibility under our couture umbrella, we began to feel that there was a huge opportunity if we were to bifurcate the two and give the former more scale."

S&N, as a result, combines sartorial tailoring with minimalism and luxury, a new category being described as 'bridge-to-luxury', in the Indian fashion landscape. "The whole BTL pyramid," Shantanu elaborates, "has been addressed by mass-market brands. The tip is being addressed by us as well as by other designers, but the belly of the pyramid only had a few regional players, especially in menswear." He expands, "The market dynamics of the last few years indicate that the Indian consumer is now ready for that ₹10,000 to ₹1,00,000 spend. This is the 'new luxury', being defined by millennials who are ready to spend."

Expect their now trademark tailoring mixed with the quiet luxury of minimal-

ism, prices starting at ₹6,000 and going up to ₹65,000. Nikhil describes it as "occasion wear without the baggage of Indian techniques and treatments," or clothes aimed at the smaller landmarks of life—birthdays, graduations, cocktails. Key pieces include draped bandhgallas for women and a stately black sari gown, stylish in its severity of neckline and sleeves. Womenswear is anew with masculine suiting fabrics and cutting. Menswear includes their beloved drapes and asymmetry, with military elements and leather trimmings on intelligent fabrics.

They are preparing to open the first two stores in Delhi at DLF Promenade and DLF Avenue. Over the course of the next three years, S&N projects 40 stores across India with an eye on international markets as well. "Organically, you can grow to a certain level," Shantanu admits, "but to be a global player, you need to have a strategic partnership." Nikhil adds, "With ABFRL taking care of manufacturing, logistics, knowledge and technology, we finally get to be designers." >

# STYLE

EDITED BY PRIYANKA KHANNA



SPOTLIGHT

## Liberators of couture

Decidedly anti-trend, and resolutely blurring the lines between masculine and feminine, and the old and new, **Shantanu and Nikhil Mehra** are taking it a step further, diffusing their couture into a new luxury label. Three young women, each a testament to talent and grit, play muse. By **Natasha Khurana**

Photographed by **SAHIL BEHAL**

Styled by **RIA KAMAT**





On Pia: 'Mariner' drape band waistcoat, 'Mariner' side-drape kurta; both S&N by Shantanu & Nikhil

## PIA SUTARIA, 24

### BALLET DANCER

"THE CLOTHES WERE STRUCTURED AND STRONG, BUT STILL FELT SO FEMININE AND DELICATE IN MOTION"

At age five, Pia Sutaria watched the musical *Billy Elliot*. By the time she was 6, she was performing and by 17, heading The Danceworx's ballet division in Mumbai. The next three years she toured the world with Navdhara India Dance Theatre, whilst simultaneously in Mumbai, she toyed with modelling and beauty pageants. "I liked the idea of breaking the stereotype that says shorter girls can't model," she says. After a postgraduate degree at the Royal Academy of Dance, London, she founded the Institute of Classical & Modern Dance in Mumbai, where she coaches and mentors teens and pre-teens for a career in ballet. "My aim is to make ballet accessible," she says. "I've had to single-handedly make a career where none existed, which has been confusing and empowering at the same time."



Hair: Mike Desir/Anima  
Creative Management  
Makeup: Gianluca Casu/  
Faze Management  
Art direction: Niyati Mehta  
Production: Jay Modi;  
Anomaly Production

On Manasi: Drape sari gown, 'Lieutenant' drape waistcoat; both S&N by Shantanu & Nikhil

## MANASI JOSHI, 30

### PARA-BADMINTON PLAYER

"THIS COLLECTION IS WHAT NEW-AGE, STRONG AND INDEPENDENT WOMEN LIKE US ARE LOOKING FOR"

A software engineer, Manasi Joshi lost her leg to a motorcycle accident early in her career. During her post-surgery rehabilitation journey, she turned to badminton, a sport she'd been playing since she was nine. "I wanted to be fit and relearn everything—standing, walking, daily chores—at a quicker pace," she says. She started competing in corporate tournaments, and soon, professionally. She has been playing internationally since 2015 and is currently the World No 2 in Para-Badminton Singles, after she won the gold at BWF Para Badminton World Championships in Switzerland last year. "I've understood that the human body is a completely adaptable, functional work of the universe. The way it heals is amazing." ■