

CREATOR'S CREATIVE CURIOSITY

At the heart of this designer's world are his relationships with people and quality of design.

BY CHITMAN KANWAR AHUJA

On a hot morning, we drove along a narrow street in the capital to meet a Woolmark winning designer, a rather suave personality with a hint of mischief in his eyes. Suket Dhir needs no introduction. Waiting for Suket to arrive we sat amidst racks of his ensembles. From afar one might only see a row of neatly ironed bomber jackets, but as you step up to have a closer look you notice the fine prints of miniature paintings playing golf and riding segways, a representation of the modern day *maharaja* if we may, the element of surprise as Suket says.

We sat down with him to discuss his Woolmark journey and his fluid design creations. Edited excerpts from the interview...

What inspires you?

Everything inspires me. Beauty inspires me. I think my inspiration comes from my own past, present and future experiences. Being an instinctive individual, if something inspires me, I'll start working on it.

As you said your past experiences inspire you, tell us something about your childhood.

I belong to a small town of Banga, Punjab. During the period of insurgency, we moved to Delhi. My childhood was pretty unique than my friends, who are from metropolitan cities.

My grandfather was supposed to be the patriarch who everybody looked up to, but I knew a different side of him, for me he was a doting grandfather. He had a very distinct dressing style, his clothes were always white, spick and span, and crisply ironed. I think people back in the day were more sartorial, in that small town he adorned berets and bomber jackets.

When did you decide to step into fashion?

After school, for four to five years, I was clueless as to what I wanted to pursue in future. *Zero, zilch, nada*. So, I kept on getting



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into something or the other. I joined a call centre and ended up making more money than my friends who had pursued MBA.

A friend once asked me what I wanted to do for the rest of my life, it is a very scary question to ask a 21 year old. He initiated the idea that I get into fashion, and then one thing led to another.

How was the beginning? Did you have to conform to a lot of norms?

Abiding by norms stopped in school for me. I was poor in studies, bad at sports, short in height and to top it all, I was extremely opinionated. I used to get bullied by the bullied. But luckily that never left a chip on my shoulder because of all the love that I was showered with back home. My childhood prepared me for my future in design.

How would you define your eponymous label?

It is a menswear brand with a global aesthetic, but an Indian soul. I am my own muse and like to make clothes for myself. There is an element of *nazaakat* and playfulness both. All buttons are stitched in multi-coloured threads.

All my clothes have a certain detailing on the inside. And these things also depict the softer side of people, especially men because they are not always stiff and strong.

You seem to use a lot of surface texturing. What kind of techniques and fabrics have you come to work with over the years?

I've worked with *ikat*, block printing, *jamdani*, *banarasi* brocade, dupion silk, damask fabric, wool and *ikat* on wool, cashmere from Kashmir, we've woven our own khadis'. We've got our own weavers in West Bengal, the linen comes from Belgium, which is later weaved by a Bengali weaver. There is a magical story being weaved together to create beautiful concepts.

What, according to you, is the essence of men's fashion? Are men forced to dress the same way or is the narrative changing? Can we see more fluid fashion in future?

Men globally today are experimenting more than ever before. The 80s was a cool era, but the 90s were a more somber period. Somehow the masses began abiding by the whole job culture routine, whereas in India there was never such a concept, we used to work all week.

We are already witnessing fluid fashion, men are now breaking shackles, they want to be associated with colours and prints. Menswear market is the fastest growing and changing market now. Its already happening, and you'll be seeing more of it.

What is your take on genderless fashion?

Well, it's a reality, people have started to look beyond gender, it's more about being human. And that's about it. Clothing is an extension of that, the concept of what is feminine and masculine arose in the west. But I come from a different school of thought, I think men believe in colour, there is so much of stigma attached to men wearing what is not manly. There should be no debate about that.



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Tell us something about the “He for She” collection. What is the concept working behind it?

I was happy in observing that my wife has been sort of stealing clothes from me, since forever, which made me think that she might as well get some stuff made from here. I began resizing menswear outfits for her, and that's how this collection came into being. It is unapologetically menswear for women. The silhouettes are absolutely straight, there has been no pretense about any curves or contours, I've only made them in a smaller shoulder size.

It has its limitations it is very niche, it has a certain silhouette, but at the end of the day I never set out to do womenswear anyway. It is only an extension of my menswear.

Indian fashion mostly comes down to wedding wear, especially couture, and most designers seem to jump on the wedding wagon. Do you plan to follow suit?

It's not my aesthetic, but I was never planning to step into womenswear either, and found a way to do it through my own method. Similarly, if it is about the non-blingy aesthetic then I am 100 per cent on board.

Even for my on wedding I wore a plain white kurta with a black bandhgala, and my wife Svetlana who is half Russian and half Telugu, also wore a rather somber ensemble. I've designed for a lot of grooms previously and accessorised the look with *pagdis* and *saafas*. I believe in designing a piece that is wearable even after the D-day.

Do you think being commercially viable is a pressure that kills creativity?

Not at all, it's a myth. Design can be decoded as problem solving meets aesthetic, if it solves problems and looks good too then it is going to be commercially viable, and if it isn't then we need to fix it. It's a challenge to your creativity which brings out great results.

Give us a share of your International Woolmark journey?

When I got the invite to participate, I didn't even think of myself as a designer. I was extremely self-critical and almost ignored it. One day while I was speaking to my mentor, I happened to mention about the invite and she told me “Of course you are participating and winning it,” those were her words.

The concept emerged from my childhood, from the style of pants my grandfather wore. Everyone loved the idea that it was from India, but not Indian, it did not have embroidery, paisleys, elephants, snakes or snake charmers. Their eyes were as dreamy as mine when they saw my collection, it was the representation of true Indian luxury in its subtlest form.

After winning we were flashed all across newspapers and magazines, and I was proud that I was making non page 3 news. Later we started retailing out of international stores such as Saks Fifth Avenue, New York and Isetan in Japan. But ironically, my family back in Punjab was happier that I got a 10 year US visa rather than the fact that I won a Woolmark, it was so surreal.

Did your brand's positioning change after you won the International Woolmark Prize?

No, the brand remained the same. My brain's positioning changed after I won the Woolmark Prize. I used to dream with doubts, after winning the Woolmark I started to dream without it. I still design and make what I like to wear, that was the same back then and remains consistent even now.

What are your thoughts on sustainable fashion? How, according to you, brands and consumers be more responsible towards the environment?

I think it's an overly used term, and clothes that are sustainable are evident and people will see through them eventually. Our approach to sustainability is that we don't worry about it, we focus on longevity. We design soulful clothes that do not come with a shelf life. These are happy products and we are a 100 per cent sustainable brand.