

From left, on Shruti:
Multicolour 'Jenni' single-
breasted blazer, silk shirt;
both **Gucci**. Earcuff,
Tanzire. *On Haima:*
'Palace' blazer, cotton
ribbed T-shirt; both **Gucci**



When Haima

In a post-377 India, the country's LGBTQ+ community is finding greater acceptance and is voicing its experiences. **Haima Simoes** and **Shruti Venkatesh**, the first same-sex couple to make it to the cover of *Vogue* India, talk to **Neville Bhandara** about the need for greater inclusion through a love story that is primed to inspire every generation today

Photographed by **BIKRAMJIT BOSE** Styled by **PRIYANKA KAPADIA**

On Haima: Blazer, trousers; both **Little Things Studio**.
Earcuff, ring; both **Tanzire**. Hat, **Gucci**.
On Shruti: Blazer, trousers; both **Little Things Studio**.
Earcuff, **Tanzire**

m e t S h r u t i

On Haima: Embellished blazer, trousers; both **Dhruv Kapoor**. Boots, **H&M**. *On Shruti:* Monogrammed bikini, earrings; both **Dior**. Tie-up skirt, **Dhruv Kapoor**. Ring, **Dhora**. 'Heart' ring, **Misho Designs**. Socks, **Bata**. 'Air Force 1' shoes, **Nike**

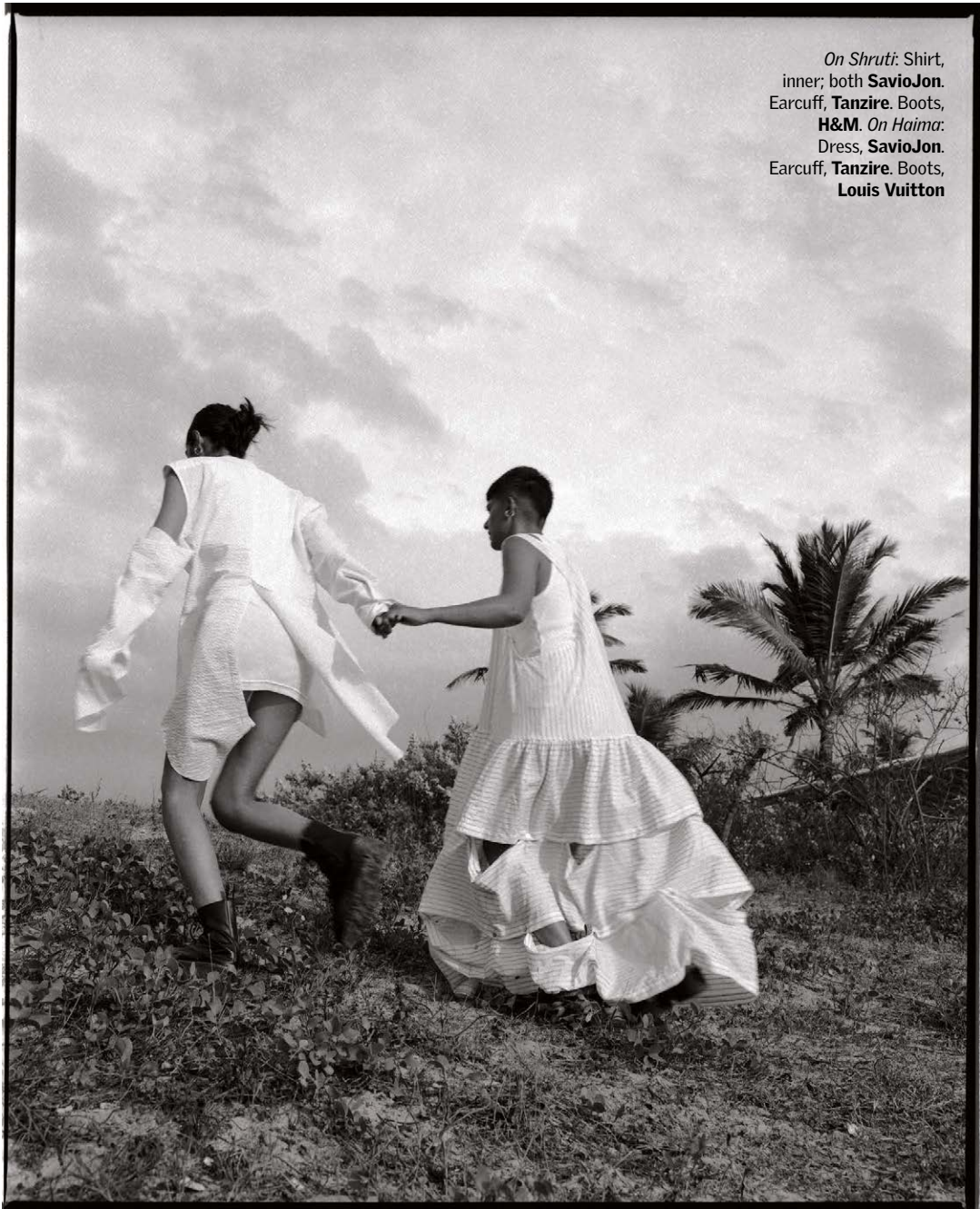




On Shruti: Tulle gown, **Ralph & Russo**. Hoop earrings, **Dhora**. *On Haima:* Double satin asymmetrical draped gown, **Ralph & Russo**

On Haima: Embellished shirt, **Simone Rocha X H&M**. Jeans, **Levi's**. Earrings, **Dhora**. *On Shruti:* 'Wolf Wing Skeleton' dress, **QUOD**. Faux leather trousers, **URA**





On Shruti: Shirt, inner; both **SavioJon**. Earcuff, **Tanzire**. Boots, **H&M**. *On Haima:* Dress, **SavioJon**. Earcuff, **Tanzire**. Boots, **Louis Vuitton**

Most of us will agree that our college years are our most formative. When you're straight and surrounded by people whose trajectories match those you see in pop culture and real life, it's not difficult to relate and map a version of life for yourself—you will graduate, get a job, get married, maybe even have kids. If you're queer, however, there is a dissociation between what you're exposed to and how you feel. All you see around you are heteronormative interpretations of a happily ever after. So how do you begin to imagine and then actualise your own?

STARTING OUT

When Haima Simoes, 25, came out at age 13, first to her friends and later to her sister, things were difficult. She was bullied at school but was lucky to have a solid support system at home. "My family has always been accepting. They are my biggest allies," she says over Zoom. Before returning home to Goa, where she's riding out the pandemic, Simoes lived in Mumbai for six years, where she attended Sophia College and graduated in advertising.

There, in 2017, she met 22-year-old psychology student Shruti Venkatesh. "For us, college was an amazing experience, inclusive and welcoming in every way," says Venkatesh from her Zoom square. "There's a running joke [at Sophia's] that the homophobes are the ones who can't come out."

College offered them the space to come into their own and meet others like them. Embracing their identities was the first of many milestones they've marked together (the second is the joint adoption of their tuxedo cat, Zola). "We're not just a couple," says Simoes, "we're also best friends. We take on everything as a team." While Venkatesh is punctual and Simoes more laid-back, they've learnt to mould themselves to meet each other's expectations.

THE YEAR THAT WAS

Since March 2020, when COVID-19 began to rage around the country, the girls haven't been able to see much of each other. The few instances they met have been work-related, facilitated largely for assignments like this cover shoot. "It's been a year of poor mental health, of dealing with my anxiety and learning to push through it so that I can function," Venkatesh admits. Simoes concurs, "I've always struggled with my mental health, but the pandemic made it harder and I went through bouts of depression. I'd had to leave behind the life I'd built [in Mumbai]. But I'm privileged to have a safe space at home [in Goa], many queer folk aren't."

Simoes raises a point that's been at the forefront of queer dialogue, even featuring in a series on *Vogue.in*, where LGBTQ+ Indians talked about navigating self-isolation, love and mental health during the pandemic. The ensuing economic carnage, with jobs lost and apartments surrendered, prompted many to return to live with natal families. Some returned to less welcoming spaces, where freedoms were restricted, trans* and non-binary folk continued to be victimised, and violence was a fixture of daily life.

NO COUNTRY FOR QUEER WOMEN?

"I miss Mumbai terribly," admits Simoes. "It was the first place I could be who I wanted to be. I've been lucky to live in its cosmopolitan parts, where I can dress the way I want and do my thing without attracting awkward stares, but it's still never completely smooth-sailing," she says, highlighting gendered washrooms, in particular, as danger zones, where she's faced discrimination for the way she looks. "As women, we're already targets of gender-based violence, but queer and trans* women are even more vulnerable. You need a rock-solid support system to survive."


And while Mumbai may be a physical safe space for queer folk, what about psychological safe spaces? Finding queer-affirming therapy isn't easy, even in a city like Mumbai. As Venkatesh explains, "When your therapy isn't queer-affirming and when the space in which you seek solace doesn't give you the comfort and reassurance you need, it can be triggering and do more harm."

If you look at India's LGBTQ+ movement, you'll notice that it is largely privileged, upper-class, upper-caste cis gay men who are in the spotlight. Where are the women? They might be producing some of the most amazing, sex-positive content (Gaysi), establishing a collective for queer women and trans* folk (LABIA), fighting for trans* rights across India (Grace Banu and Santa Khurai, to name but two champions) and harnessing the power of digital to change the perception of the trans* community (Rachana Mudraboyina, via her YouTube channel TransVision), but we're missing more women on the front lines in terms of visibility. "This is linked to coming out, or the lack thereof," says Venkatesh. "Most of the time, you need some combination of financial, emotional and physical security before you can live the life you want to. That is not a privilege many queer women, especially outside metros, can afford. As women, our access to social, financial opportunities is already limited, and that shrinks further when you're queer."

MODEL BEHAVIOUR

Simoes works at a digital marketing firm and as a freelance social media consultant, while Venkatesh is in the development sector. Modelling is a side gig. After all, few can question the belief that fashion is a welcoming space. "It's been lovely," says Venkatesh. "Everyone has been warm and friendly, though there needs to be more inclusion. Sure, there have been strides in the past few years, but it needs to go deeper. And fashion is one of the strongest ways to achieve that because it has the power to change perception."

The duo is the first same-sex couple to feature on *Vogue India's* cover, a milestone for the community as well as for the magazine. And as a post-377 India inches towards a brighter, more equal future, it makes you wonder what the next generation of queer kids can expect. "I hope they will be able to inhabit a kinder, safer world, with no pressure to come out," says Simoes. "I want there to be greater employment opportunities, especially for trans* folk. We should have the same opportunities as every cis-het person. No one should have to question their identity or whether they belong." ■



On Haima: Trench coat, knitted embellished sweater, skirt; all **Simone Rocha X H&M**. Ring, **Misho Designs**. Boots, **H&M**. *On Shruti:* Embellished trench coat, embellished knitted sweater, skirt, shoes; all **Simone Rocha X H&M**. Earcuffs; both **Tanzire**. Socks, **Bata**

Hair and makeup: Mitesh Rajani/Feat.Artists
Photographer's assistant: Aniket Godbole
Photographer's agency: Feat.Artists
Assistant stylist: Naheed Driver
Fashion assistant: Amber Mascarenhas
Production: Pippip Media
Bookings editor: Prachiti Parakh
Models: Shruti Venkatesh; Haima Simoes/Feat.Artists