



ALL

INCLUSIVE

DESIGNER, FEMINIST, PHILANTHROPIST, ACTIVIST—PRABAL GURUNG IS WORKING FASHION TO MAKE A SOCIAL STATEMENT

One of the subcontinent's most visible faces in international fashion, Prabal Gurung has dressed everyone from Michelle Obama and Kate Middleton to Sarah Jessica Parker and Oprah Winfrey. Now, for the first time, fans of the outspokenly political and feminist designer can get their hands on his Spring 2017 collection in India—at a trunk show at Mumbai's Le Mill (till end-February).

A student of New Delhi's National Institute of Fashion Technology, Gurung grew up in Kathmandu, Nepal, and worked in Mumbai for a few years before moving to New York to study. In 2009, he launched his eponymous collection. While he doesn't hold back about why it took him so long to bring his line to India ("It wasn't ready for my clothes"), he also credits it in equal measure: "India opened my eyes to a world of inspiration—most of all, Bollywood." ELLE caught up with Gurung on his recent trip to Mumbai to find out more about his collection and life beyond fashion.

ELLE: Why did you wait this long to retail in India?

Prabal Gurung: India is extremely price-conscious. Accessories are big, but the market for high-end luxury designers is only really starting to take off now. Patrons, too, are evolving. They're no longer seeking validation by the brands they're carrying. It's no longer about loud logos, but rather, a more muted, understated display of luxury—and that is something I can relate to.

ELLE: What did you mean when you called this collection 'modern feminism'?

PG: There's a misconception that feminism in a traditional sense means that you have to hate men

or be more like them. You don't. A woman's greatest strength comes from embracing her femininity and being unafraid of the way she is. I call it 'modern feminism' because I want it to become obvious that, as a woman today, you have a choice—and having a choice, a voice, a vote is the most important thing.

ELLE: What's your take on feminism in India?

PG: There's a clear demarcation between the roles men and women play or are expected to play. It's not as bad as it is in some parts of the world, but if India wants to be taken seriously as a global player, it has to uplift its women. Like Michelle Obama said: the measure of any society is how it treats its women.

ELLE: A lot of your detractors believe fashion, as an industry and all that it stands for, is anti-feminist.

PG: They're foolish. To trivialise fashion by calling it anti-feminist is one of the most ridiculous things to say. Fashion has given the world some incredible influencers—Coco Chanel, Donna Karan, Diane von Furstenberg. As designers, we're giving women the choice to dress the way they want. This very fact is one of the hallmarks of feminism: the element of choice.

ELLE: With the inclusion of gender-nonconforming models, fashion is more diverse right now than it has ever been. But what about diversity in size?

PG: It's very important. In fact, I'm collaborating with Lane Bryant on a collection that focuses on plus-sized women. I also wrote a piece on *LennyLetter.com* about the importance of diversity in fashion. I'm in fashion partly to have a conversation about inclusion. As a brand, I offer all sizes, but retailers don't buy them. With Bryant, we're going to be able to reach out to a lot more people and keep that conversation going.

ELLE: Tell us about the Shikshya Foundation Nepal. Do you think the industry should do more socially?

PG: I started Shikshya Foundation Nepal to educate children by opening schools and reading centres all over the country. I think anyone who has an audience or a platform has the responsibility to give back. The reason I'm here today is because somebody opened the door for me. I just want to make sure I leave it ajar. ●

— NEVILLE BHANDARA