

HT *wknd*

A PART OF YOUR EVERYDAY LIFE

Akshat
Bansal

More than he seams

inside

LIFESTYLE

Retell therapy P04

Telugu thrillers, memoirs in Marathi, epic poems in ancient Prakrit... Indian literature is enjoying a second life in English translation. Where should you begin? Six translators, including Daisy Rockwell, Jerry Pinto and Poonam Saxena, pick their translated favourites

CULTURE

Ghost in the machine P05

Could a trained Hindustani musician be the father of acid house? A look at the legacy of Charanjit Singh, whose album, *Ten Ragas to a Disco Beat*, was released 40 years ago

URBAN

Is this seat taken? P06

From the pharaohs to the Ancient Greeks and Mughal emperors, the chair has shaped posture and posturing. As a new book explores how the seat evolved in India, take a look at five iconic and familiar designs

His label Bloni is only five years old, but featured prominently at Paris Fashion Week. Bansal's designs are gender-fluid, size-agnostic, and comment on post-pandemic emotions and the state of the world. One can't be a fashion designer without a strong point of view, he says

RAJ K RAJ / HT

Anesha George

anesha.george@hindustantimes.com

Fashion designer Akshat Bansal isn't trying to woo the millennials or Gen Z with his unconventional designs; he's got his eyes set on the future. "My target is Gen Alpha (the immediate successors to Gen Z), so that when they come fresh into the fashion scene, the industry doesn't seem too redundant," he says.

The Delhi-based Bansal, 31, is the man behind the fashion label Bloni. It's only five years old, but featured prominently at the recently concluded Paris Fashion Week, where his collection, *Preamble*, was showcased alongside collections by Balenciaga (whose models walked through a muddy pit, as a metaphor for digging for truth and being down to earth), Dior, Saint Laurent and the Parisian brand Coperni, of the now-famous liquid-polymer spray-on dress worn by Bella Hadid.

"I've always envisioned Bloni as a global brand and the showcasing on an international platform gave this dream a huge kick-start," Bansal says.

At the Paris event, Bansal showcased heat-sensitive polyester dresses that change colour in response to temperature changes; glossy rubber jackets in geometric silhouettes; recycled PET mesh trousers; and bodysuits made of econyl or regenerated nylon sourced from fishing nets.

"I do not make simple clothes for everyday wear. Every piece is born from an ambiguous thought, a challenge to myself, and from an opinion that I want to share with the world. I don't think one should become a fashion designer if one does not have a strong point of view," Bansal says.

His collections seek to take the concepts of emotion, art, nature and a technology-driven world and translate them into apparel that is size-agnostic and gender-fluid.

His latest collection, a continuation of *Preamble*, comprises 40 looks that explore the post-pandemic emotions of separation liberty, constructive lethargy (a sense of achievement in feeling languid) and neo-narcissism. Separation liberty, which celebrates the sorrow and exhilaration of letting go, is

reflected in garments such as a tube dress that can be reversed into a pair of trousers, and trousers that can also be worn as sleeves.

Neo-narcissism (the idea of embracing your digital self) is reflected in kimonos made of rubber that coddle the wearer.

"Today we feel a lot more than just angry and upset at the world and I wanted to weave all of those extra, unaccounted-for feelings into my designs. The word 'sustainable' has been overused and there is so much green-washing that's happening. I would like to define my brand philosophy as being future-friendly," Bansal says.

Born in Hisar, Haryana, to a homemaker and a successful sari-shop owner, Bansal says he spent more time with craftspeople, playing with beads and lace, than he did out in the field playing cricket. "I was fascinated by the different fabrics my father sourced from across the country," he says.

He knew by age 12 that he wanted to be a fashion designer. He was so convinced, he got his parents to take him to the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) in Delhi, to see if he could get an early start. "I didn't see why I had to waste time studying anything else if this was all I wanted to do. There the dean Vandana Narang patiently explained that a 12-year-old couldn't handle a graduation course and I'd be better off opting for it in the 11th and 12th standard as an elective first," he says, laughing.

He eventually made it to NIFT in 2008, aged 17. He soon set his sights on his next target: London's art and design school, Central Saint Martins (CSM). "By my third year at NIFT, a gnawing restlessness began where I wanted to push myself into unfamiliar, uncomfortable spaces again. I thrive under pressure," Bansal says.

While he prepared for CSM, he interned with Delhi design labels such as Dolly J and Lecoanet Hemant, and eventually with Tarun

Tahiliani. He would work with Tahiliani for three years, from 2013 to 2016. Then came a year at CSM, and a different kind of hustle.

The competition was exciting, Bansal says, with students from Italy, China, Europe, Africa and North America bringing their rich cultural traditions to the sewing table. Classes were challenging and feedback from tutors and peers was detailed.

"In India, not many people understood the concepts I was trying to play with. We rarely went beyond the syllabus," Bansal says. Alongside classes, he managed to secure an apprenticeship with Cad & the Dandy on Savile Row. Here, every tailor spends the day dressed in an impeccably tailored suit and bowtie, on their feet in a sparse space with a work table for each man and just two machines in the entire atelier.

"This is where I learned the importance of discipline and precision," Bansal says. "Everyone was assigned a specific task, be it making arm holes or sewing pockets, and they excelled at doing just that until the end of their stint at the company. Everybody was an equal here. And we worked in suits because we made clothes for executives who have to wear them for hours every day."

In 2017, Bansal returned to India and launched Bloni (drawn from a family joke, 'Be like Loni', Loni being Bansal's nickname). He had one clear aim, he says: to make gender-inclusive clothes that would make heads turn and leave an impression.

In the Indian market, even couture must be functional and utility-driven, so Bansal's biggest sources of revenue are the UK and US. "In India, sales are low and fairly scattered. We can have a single sale worth Rs 3 lakh and then no sales at all for a week. But I am comfortable knowing I am taking a big risk. It's all worth it to me," Bansal says. "If I wanted stability I could have helped my dad run the sari shop, but here I am instead, chasing another difficult dream."



SCAN the QR code to see more of Bansal's designs, and watch him talk about the future of fashion



1

Akshat Bansal, 31, was born in Hisar, Haryana, to a homemaker and a successful sari-shop owner. As a child, he spent hours with craftspeople, playing with beads and lace.

2

By age 12, he was so sure he wanted to be a fashion designer that he tried to enrol at the National Institute of Fashion Technology. He eventually did study there, at age 17.

3

He went on to intern with Tarun Tahiliani, apprenticed on Savile Row, and recently featured alongside Dior and Balenciaga at this year's Paris Fashion Week.