Exclusive: Ace designers Shantanu and Nikhil on taking Indian fashion to a global level

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The ace designer duo – Shantanu and Nikhil believe in integrating the Indian tradition with Western expression. The pair have always worked towards creating a modernised design language with their label. In an exclusive interview with financialexpress.com’s Eshita Bhargava, Shantanu and Nikhil spoke about fashion, upcoming trends, their association with Chivas, and more. Excerpts from the interview:

How and when did the label SHANTANU AND NIKHIL come to reality?

Shantanu: It still hasn’t come to reality! We are constantly evolving. But having said that, 2000 is when it was born and it was given its official shape at the Lakme Fashion Week in 2002. I think that’s when Indian fashion was beginning to be taken seriously, and we happened to be a part of that journey!
The lehenga kali is handwoven in Banaras using the *Banarasi Kadhwa* weaving technique.

It features the sacred *anaar* and *tota-maina* motifs highlighted with delicate *pearl embroidery*.

Handwoven by **40 skilled artisans** in over **900 hours** in Banaras

Handcrafted over **110 days** in Shankun & Nikhil’s atelier
How has the two-plus decade-long journey been like? Changes in your approach towards creations and business evolved over these years?

Nikhil: You know, when we started, I think it was 2004 when we pressed the cricketers to do something new for the Indian market. Then, in 2008, we introduced the gown for Indian women, which is again, a new start. In 2014, we introduced the drape for men, which is again, a new start. And in 2019, when we merged with ABFRL, we started the new brand S&N and so our journey really has been about newness every five years. And for the next five years, it seems like it's really been a very interesting journey of consolidating the brands that we've incubated for many years. And you'll see a nice wide variety of categories and also a large format of products being sold in different stores across the country.

While representing Indian fashion to a global audience, how do you ensure you portray the right image?

Shantanu: For us, India is a global audience as well. So, we don't always have to look for validation from what's happening in the outside world. But having said that, this is such a beautiful amalgamation of what you see with India right now, what and where it is heading with this beautiful India demographic sitting at the forefront with Gen Z's and millennials. I think this is where there is scope for high-street to contemporary Indian fashion to contemporary ethnic, you name it, and there is the market fitting for that. So, the idea is to represent the true essence of India and bring in a sense of heritage that for us, is what India means in the most contemporary form of art, and just create a bit of a spunk and be relevant. And I think that's what our interpretation is!
• Your take on the present representation of Indian fashion on the global ramp as compared to 10 years ago.

Nikhil: I think the clear-cut validation is of where India is heading in fashion! There is so much pride right now that has become the hallmark of India, as a country and as a brand. In the current scenario, there’s so much inspiration! We always knew that there is a lot of inspiration that is a very big part of India and that the Western world has always sought inspiration from us. But I think it’s gone beyond that.

There is a global acceptance of Indian fashion and Indian Art forms and I think, it’s beginning to happen in a very big way. It started way back in the mid-2000s, but I think the real validation and authentication are coming in right now. What has happened with NMACC, sort of shook the entire world! It’s here to stay and it’s not a fad anymore! It was a fad in mid-2000, I think independent fashion is beginning to be taken seriously now.

• With the dynamic consumer market of today, where and how do you draw your inspiration for your creations?

Shantanu: Just stay relevant! As a brand, we may be old, in the way the brand is in terms of the number of years it has been, but you have to be relevant and see how the market has evolved. And if you have the bandwidth and the elasticity because creativity holds no barriers. It's your imagination, and how you use that imagination to connect with the emotional thought of where the audience is heading. So, for us, we've always had a very surefootedness about India. We've studied India, pretty much deep. We know where India was heading, and India’s reading, and I think we’ve just tried to be as future bit as a brand, with different incubations of ideas, thoughts, brands, categories, etc.

• Tell us about your collaboration and curation for Chivas Alchemy?

Shantanu: Chivas Alchemy in its positioning has always been about celebrating and rejoicing in crafts and art of different forms. And this time, it’s a bit different with ‘Kaleidoscope of Time’ as the main backdrop and inspiration, which means that there is sole emergence and merger of new and old.

Nikhil: What we’ve done with our collection, which we’re showcasing is almost like an art form of what the Indian heritage in terms of the Indian armed forces means to us, but in a more fashionable today’s take. So, I think what we’ve done for Chivas Alchemy.

• What are the pieces you’re presenting today?

Nikhil: We went back to our archives and we’ve taken out some things that we love! The whole military influence of colour palettes, fabrics, silhouettes that we’ve been doing for many years, we brought that, and we’ve layered it immensely. So, it has a strong value of India’s heritage in a supreme heritage form, this is what India would be in 2050.
What is the theme of Kaleidoscope of Time mean to you?

Nikhil: It's a lot like a collection that we're showcasing! It is what we take from the past and how we see the future. Our future definitely comes from India's independence, which was to fight for the right, to fight for the people of India. And then having Indian wear, the influence of integrity and valour is something that India will always have, even in the future.

What inspired you to choose these signature pieces for the evening?

Nikhil: When you get an opportunity to showcase your work at a platform where many other artists are also involved, the ideal thing is to speak and showcase your intent. And our intent is to showcase India in its full glory, and a future that is positive, aggressive, and can be heard and seen by the rest of the world.
1. **What's next?**

Shantanu: A bunch of things!

We’ve done quite a bit in the last four or five years. We’ve incubated a new brand S&N Luxury. Time is to consolidate that, evolve around that with what’s happening around us and revitalized our couture, and look at the bride and the groom from a different perspective. I think that by itself is a way of how we want to evolve as a Kaleidoscope of Time. And take some of the nuances of what made the brand stand out in the past, take those past glorious moments, and make it more relevant than the current existence.