

20 SHOWCASE

The creative business (L-R) Sketch and final design by Noié Noié, Little Things Studio, Zilzom, and Amaaré ■ SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Delhi designers in this Festive 2019 cohort

AMAAARÉ BY SAHIB BHATIA, 28, distills traditional Japanese silhouettes into menswear, and blends in Australian aboriginal dot work into his collection's embroidery @amaarecouture
LITTLE THINGS STUDIO BY ANKITA SRIVASTAVA, 30, is influenced by hand-drawings a la Matisse @littlethingstudio
NOIÉ NOIÉ BY AKANKSHA AGGARWAL, 29, is a zero-waste label with an eccentric, edgy aesthetic (yet to launch)



VANGMAYI PARAKALA

There have been papers written about this: Pashmina, the premium wool that's made of the soft down of the changthangi goat, isn't associated with Kashmir alone. A large portion of raw pashmina that the craftspeople here process, comes from Ladakh's eastern-most reaches. In these harsh terrains, a community of nomadic pastoralists called the Changpas herd pashmina goats, later combing the goat to collect and send out the wool.

26-year-old Stanzin Palmo, a graduate of Delhi's National Institute of Fashion Technology, knew something of this. But the real value and diversity of the fibers and textiles of her hometown never really hit her, until she got involved with Looms of Ladakh in 2017. At the women's cooperative -- it spun off from Project Laksal, a local training programme for women artisans of the region -- Palmo was a mentor to over a hundred women, all at least twice her age. "It took a lot of team work and mutual respect, and now Ladakh itself has become my inspiration," she says.

Grounded in this experience, Stanzin is now one of six designers, picked from over 400 applicants, to be part of Lakme Fashion Week's 28th batch of Gen Next designers. The mentorship pro-

gramme for early-career professionals started in 2005, and has been an entrepreneurial incubator for some of the biggest names in the Indian fashion industry: Masaba Gupta, Pero's Aneeth Arora, and Rahul Mishra, to name a few. The USP is of discovering young fashion-design talent, and a stated intent to nurture it.

Palmo, like the programme's alumni, is pointed in her identity as a designer, through her label Zilzom (@zilzom on Instagram). "My motive is to get Ladakh on the textile map of India, where right now it's only known for its natural beauty," she says.

These designers aren't greenhorns. One comes from a family that's been in textile trade, some have gone to the best design schools ranging from NIFT to Parsons School of Design in New York. Others have interned with big labels or designers internationally, or worked in grassroots-level initiatives.

And yet, at Gen Next, a lot of them find themselves learning in the deep end of the pool. They are all creatives, with limited to no knowledge of how to get their labels off the ground.

The real learning

While the applicant pool has matured over the last 6-8 years -- there are hardly any that apply

straight out of college any more, coming in only towards their late 20s, and early 30s -- many, despite degrees and internships, remain far-removed from designing for the real world.

"What they are exposed to here, is how a designer really runs a business," says Jaspreet Chandok, vice president and head of fashion at IMG Reliance,

A bootcamp for FASHION

The Lakme Fashion Week's Gen Next, which showcases new design talent, is now onto its 28th batch. A look into what it's really about

which jointly organises the LFW. "At school, or in an internship, they don't get to interface with a diverse set of stakeholders. At GenNext, we give them the opportunity to interact and learn from magazines, stylists, and how they can leverage social media," he adds. This includes a two-day masterclass with the likes of the show's director Neeraj

Gaba, stylist Kshitij Kankaria, and Chandok himself. The head mentor is fashion consultant Sabina Chopra, who, through the weeks that lead up to the Fashion Week, handholds the designers to have their collections ramp-ready.

"What we see as fashion in India is very different from the buying of clothes in India," Chopra says, stressing that she spends

most of the time here teaching the designers "the business of fashion". The first stage is guiding them to create for the show. The next is to do a reinterpretation of the show, for the rack. "We take elements of the show clothing, but keep it simpler, across colour and textures, so that they can take that one collection, with smaller capsules which can go to stores every six weeks," Chopra says. The designers then will be free to make a new collection six months later. "Everyone needs to work like that. Start with exaggerated couture, then simplify it till it's value for money."

Staying practical

As a follow up to this, the cohort is taken, post show, to four retailers across the country. Called On the Road, this segment of the programme gives a taste of the market, having included stores like Bombain in Kolkata, Amethyst in

Chennai, Azra in Raipur, Urban in Hyderabad, and Aza in Delhi over the last two seasons.

Of everything they learn, this lesson in market-think and playing for a long innings, is perhaps the biggest takeaway for the batch. With both virtual and brick-and-mortar spaces flooded with designers and indie-labels, an important consideration for the jury is the potential for longevity. The jury consists of members from the Lakme Fashion Week Advisory Board, a mix of designers, editors of fashion magazines, and big garment retailers) makes.

Chopra hopes that in time, as the Indian fashion industry grows, it will attract big investors, better infrastructure and management, freeing up designers to concentrate on their core competency. Until then, they'll need to wear the many hats any start-up founder does.