



FLAGBEARER
ALOK uses colour in clothes
as their personal fingerprint
on the world

Louder and prouder

Fashion at its best is a deeply personal and political portrayal of our past, our present, and a hopeful future. To illustrate the sartorial experiences of two notable names in the LGBTQ+ community, *Vogue* India patches a call between Paris-based fashion designer and casting extraordinaire Manish Arora and New-York based poet, activist and style icon ALOK. What transpires is an intergenerational dialogue on dress, freedom of expression and the joy that is born out of despair. AKANKSHA KAMATH listens in on how they each use fashion for a larger purpose

BRONSON FARR @BRONSON PHOTO

ALOK: It's nice to finally meet you, Manish!

Manish Arora: What a phenomenon you're becoming. You're a movement now, I would say. Did you imagine it would ever be like that?

ALOK: You know, one of the biggest joys of being queer is that I constantly exceed my own imagination of myself. So in that way, the answer is yes and no.

MA: I don't know what to call you. Artist, poet, performer, fashion star...

ALOK: I just call myself happy and I take it from there.

MA: There's something about your story that I connect with so much. Perhaps it is because of our Indianness, or maybe it's because I've been through this same journey some 20 years ago.

ALOK: I think it's also about what it means to live a creative life. You just have to become a sponge or a mirror and continually observe the things around you. Every conversation, every encounter, every colour you see on the street becomes a part of your mood board. You take that back and you create from that.

MA: Yes, and speaking of colour, when I was younger and living in India (I now live in France) it was very normal to see women wearing red, blue, green, purple, orange all together and they'd look very convincing and aesthetically perfect doing it. And this is what I carried within my work when I came to France. Colour for us is very normal, isn't it?

ALOK: Exactly. I grew up with my very colourful Indian community, but in a largely white, conservative town with absolutely no colour whatsoever and it always confused me. People described my style as "clashing" or "too colourful". But when it comes to Indian fashion, those words don't really make sense. It's not that we're clashing, it's just that the way we compose an outfit is not us actively trying to be colourful. It's already the prototype that we're operating from.

MA: I've always compared the Indian use of colours to the way we eat. We have ten different things on a plate, which we call a thali, and all together it tastes amazing. This is what my relation to fashion is. We can use any colour we want. There's no rule.

ALOK: I think many people get dressed to disappear, which feels like such a contradiction.

MA: I do the opposite. When I walk into a room, I want everybody to notice me, obviously.

ALOK: That's the point of fashion, truly. I think fashion should be the opposite of a uniform. It should be something that is your personal fingerprint on the world. Something that people are reminded of your singular identity and point of view. It's about your creativity and individuality.

MA: But you know, it used to be like that.

ALOK: What do you think changed?

MA: I don't know. I think now it's become all about brands. When I was learning fashion, I used to look up to Thierry Mugler or John Galiano for Dior, both really visual characters. They made such strong statements. You could recognise their clothes from afar. I think, over time, fashion has become about making what

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will sell. Today, one makes clothes for the consumer instead of telling the consumer what they should wear.

ALOK: It's also the rise of social media. People continually have to look like someone else or have a frame of reference. It disincentivises looking at yourself. It's so much about looking at other people, what they're doing, observing externally. But for me, fashion is kind of a spiritual process of looking internally. To say what emotions I have, what my points of view are and how I communicate them externally. You've got to do that internal work first.

MA: It's about what makes me feel good. I am dressed like this because it's for me. My partner and I live together and we go buy vegetables from the market right

outside our house wearing the best of dresses. Because, why not?

ALOK: What you are saying is so threatening to the fashion industry, which often relies on what looks good to other people. I think that's really what it boils down to—that fashion has become so concerned with other people's approval rather than prioritising one's own joy. The people who I admire creatively are the people who you can tell are pursuing their own joy. Even if other people don't understand what they're doing. So some of the worst-reviewed collections, I love.

MA: Trust me I've got bad reviews quite a few times. I'm very proud to say that I managed to do just what I wanted, including at my last show in London. To gather a cast of characters—I call them creatures, they are my family—and to do a show with them takes a lot of courage. Yet, at the same time does it result in that many sales? Maybe not. Does it creatively satisfy me? Yes, it does.

ALOK: We are constantly told that fashion should be without restriction. It should be about creativity. And I see that in my own work too. It's so annoying as an artist to have to put yourself into categories. How can I do that when I don't know what form my creative process is going to take? I'm thinking more about putting out energy or ideas. That's why I champion so hard for gender-free fashion. It's because, in the same way, I think that it's absurd that we say certain clothes are Indian clothes, certain clothes are non-Indian clothes. I think it's really strange that we say women's clothes, men's clothes, when in fact they're all just garments that can be worn by anyone.

MA: It's simply clothing. Now it's up to you if you want to wear it. You could be a man, woman, whatever you like. In the history of Indian fashion, centuries ago, men probably took longer to get dressed than women. And the number of jewels, and creations and collections they had was immense. I don't know what happened in-between. Maybe you know, ALOK? What happened between then and now?

ALOK: I know it's a story of conformity and colonialism, power and misogyny, and that is why I am embarrassed when other Indian people get mad at me for what I wear, when they regard things as too feminine.

MA: What do they say?

ALOK: Harsh judgements, like boys shouldn't look like this, or that Indian



ALL OUT

Arora's runway shows are a rainbow of characters whom he chooses to spotlight for their talent and unique stories. *Above:* The brand's latest show at Kornit Fashion Week in London where technology met a Pride showcase. *Opposite page:* Arora and ALOK in conversation over Zoom

“In so many ways the kind of freedom that your generation was styling for us made it easier for us to come in and expand. My generation always thinks that we’re unprecedented, but people were dealing with the same pushbacks decades ago. The importance of intergenerational connection has become very clear to me”

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men are being feminised. It’s just homophobia, transphobia and sexism, but I wish they knew their own history. That only a couple of 100 years ago they’d be wearing those jewels too and looking like me too. For people to hold on to their beliefs so vehemently, it doesn’t harm me, it harms them. I mean, look at their outfits. They’re so boring! If only people actually allowed themselves the permission to be free and to express their gender on their own terms and their beauty on their own terms, they’d be wearing so many more exciting things.

MA: Yes, and I read that you said gender neutrality is not the death of fashion but rather the renaissance of fashion, which is exactly what we are talking about right now. You’re a strong influence in that. You’re a messenger, carrying that flag, in a way.

ALOK: It’s interesting because a lot of designers agree with what I’m saying but they are also afraid that their market isn’t ready for it yet and that they’re going to isolate potential customers or irritate people who buy their clothes for their brand. But I don’t get to opt out of homophobia and transphobia, I have to deal with it every day and everywhere I go. So when a lot of brands during Pride Month come out to support the community, I don’t understand how on one hand they can congratulate us on our visibility and yet be so timid in their own. What we need in the fashion industry is more people who are willing to take bold and unapologetic stances. That’s how you make changes.

MA: Fashion was always about taking risks.

ALOK: Yes, and I’ve always admired the way that you cast your shows because I’ve seen people whom I’ve followed as an artist included there. For a long time, casting a model meant finding someone who was supposed to be only a canvas for the designer. But with you, it seems like you are working with artists who already have a very developed personality or sense of style, and it feels more collaborative—like you are accentuating what they’re bringing to the table in terms of their art. What is your approach to casting?

MA: The era of using models as hangers, quite literally, was so early 2000s. I don’t believe in it. I consider myself more of a visual director than just a fashion designer. So for me, it’s all about who’s wearing it, where it is... I sometimes even adapt my collection to the characters that

I’m going to use on my show. For example, drag performer Charity Kase wanted to wear this kind of a creature-y mask with a big mouth. I said okay, let’s match the garment with that. This is my family. In fact I call my shows ‘We are Family’ Part 1, Part 2... Because this is my chosen family.

ALOK: Always. The biggest argument I had with my mother was when I was packing up to go to college. I had around five suitcases of clothes and I was persistent on bringing them up.

MA: Guess what, I’ve highlighted that part in my research. I knew I needed to talk to you about it because when I left my family to go study fashion in Delhi, it was drama. But then I asked myself, why did I want to leave? Of course I wanted to learn fashion, but another reason was that I wanted to be free. And I’m talking about India in 1991—it was not

easy to express yourself. Coming from a very simple Punjabi family born and brought up in Mumbai’s suburbs, the only escape was to study. Now India is changing. Do you go to India?

ALOK: I do. I tend to spend a month there every year. I also see a change thanks to people like you. You left in 1991 and that’s the year I was born. So, in so many ways, the kind of freedom that your generation was styling for us made it easier for us to come in and expand. I recently lost my aunt, a very prominent lesbian Indian feminist and activist here in the United States, and the importance of intergenerational connection has become very clear to me. My generation always thinks that we’re unprecedented or we’re the first, but people were dealing with the same dynamics, same crisis and pushbacks decades and centuries prior to us. There may have been a different language at that

time, but it was the same struggle.

MA: My generation suffered a lot. It was dangerous to be a homosexual in those days, when I was a teenager.

ALOK: I see it in your work you know, with your use of hearts and colours and fun catch phrases like “Deep and earnest commitment to hope and optimism”. I, as a comedian, try to explain to people the reason why I believe in hope and levity and humour—because the world is so hard. It’s because I’ve known sorrow that I know joy. So to hear your story now, it makes a lot of your design decisions make sense, because you’ve known suffering, because you’ve known pain. So fashion becomes a place where you’re trying to heal or template the possibility for freedom.

MA: I do believe that. And even if it’s not true every day, I have to say that life is beautiful.



IN CONVERSATION

In a candid, cascading conversation, *Vogue* India patches a call between Paris and New York where Manish Arora and ALOK discuss a life best lived in colour