

*FASHION*democracy



A GIRL LIKE ME

She may look like a regular teenager, but she is actually a fighter in disguise. Her defiance and strength can be seen in flashes when she lets her guard down. In this very special issue, as we endeavour to celebrate the triumph of the human spirit, we got Payal Singh*, a survivor of human trafficking, to play muse to the pioneers of Indian couture, Abu Jani and Sandeep Khosla. By **Nikita Sawant**



Jaali mirror anarkali embellished with abla mirror and resham work, **Asal by Abu Jani and Sandeep Khosla**, cuff studded with diamonds and uncut diamonds set in 18k gold, **Asal for Gehna**

(Facing page) Art Deco multi-panelled mirror and abla embellished long kurta with resham work, **Asal by Abu Jani and Sandeep Khosla** >



Gota and beadwork sari and blouse, **Asal** by Abu Jani and Sandeep Khosla

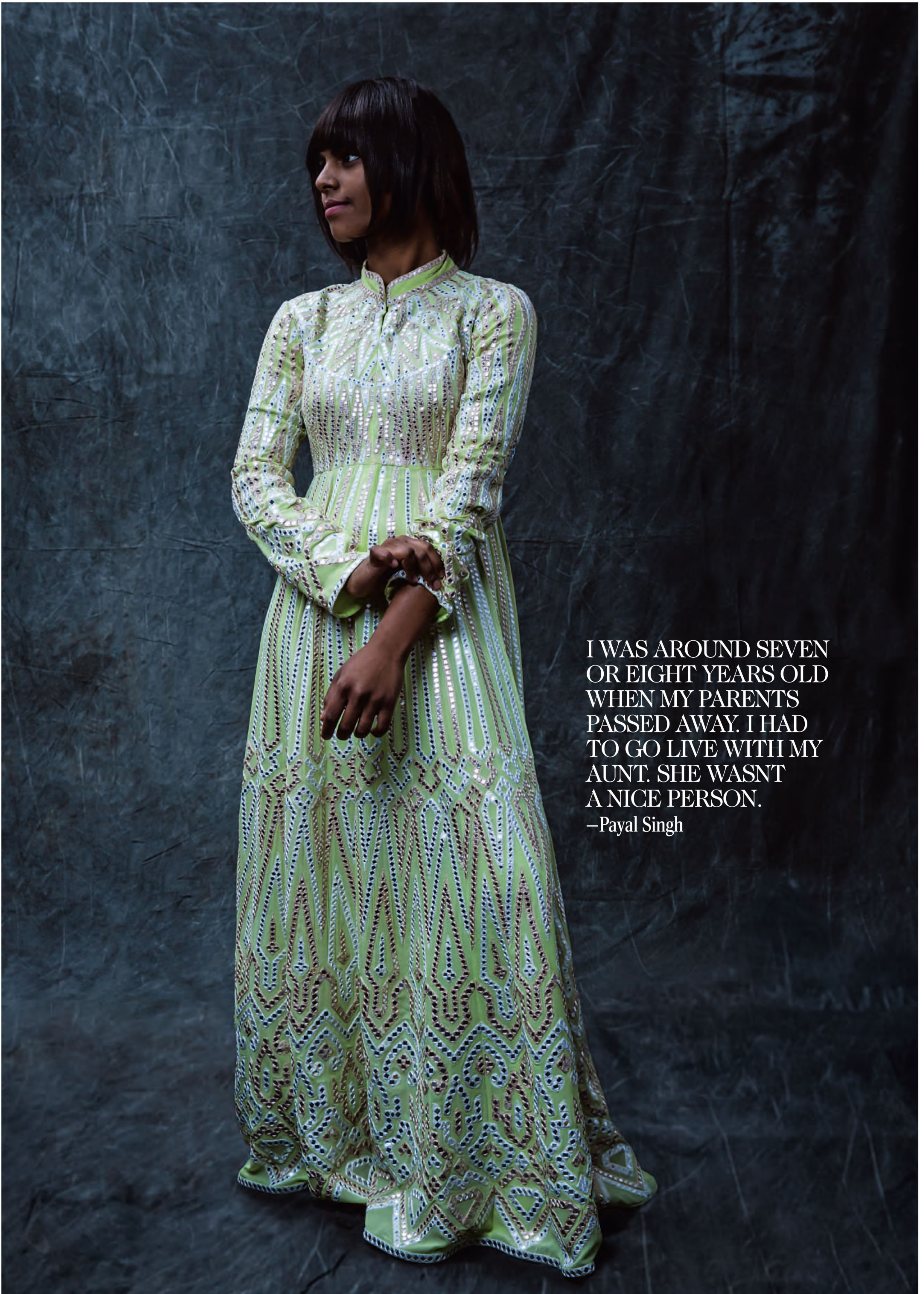
It was an ordinary afternoon until I met her. She walked in for the photoshoot, easy as you please, but you could see that she was quietly terrified. Accompanied by her two caretakers, also her confidants, this girl that I was supposed to interview was putting on a brave face. Her petite frame was dressed in jeans and a hoodie, her hair cut short, her manner waif-like and reticent. Nineteen-year-old Payal Singh didn't look a day over 16.

It seemed incomprehensible to me that this teenager had survived years of abuse and mental anguish.

According to a recent report by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, 19,223 Indian women and children were trafficked in 2016, compared to 15,448 in 2015. Officials in the ministry say the actual number could be higher as many victims were still not registering cases with the police. While speaking to our muse, I discovered that she was sold into the

sex trade by her own family. But her winning smile told me that in the end, her spirit had won the battle.

A self-proclaimed tomboy, Singh timidly confessed to not being too keen on fashion. "Ever since I was little, my mother would dress me up in boyish clothes, so I got used to it." Then she says more enthusiastically, "I also like to fight," and I couldn't help but smile at her innocuous, but loaded, remark. >



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Sandeep Khosla

Of trust and deception

It took quite some time for Singh to open up and trust me, and I figured that's how she must be around new people—always on autopilot, always wary. And who could blame her? After the first two shots, I brought her aside to try to talk to her, and when the initial nervousness faded, she asked me if she could tell me something. "I was around seven or eight years old when my parents passed away. I had to go live with my aunt. She wasn't a nice person," she recalls.

I fervently hoped that her aunt, someone she thought she could trust, had nothing to do with her past. "I stayed with her for a few years. I started out by selling vegetables in the market, but slowly, she made me do some bad things, too. After some time, I went to live with her daughter. She pretended to be nice to me, but she was no different than her mother. She made me do the same things.

"I thought of escaping, but I didn't have the strength or the courage because I had no one I could trust. But one day I gathered the courage to run away." A determined Singh then managed to get in touch with Kshamata, an NGO that works towards rehabilitating women in distress and survivors of different kinds of exploitation, especially those trafficked for prostitution or bonded labour.

A ray of hope

Kshamata's trustee Mona Almeida says, "The law stipulates that rescued girls have to spend some time in a government home. So, Singh was >

Circular ogee jaali kurta and sharara with gota work, *Asal* by Abu Jani and Sandeep Khosla





Multi-panelled kurta with resham and sequin work, *Asal* by Abu Jani and Sandeep Khosla, faux-leather sandals, stylist's own

I THINK GIRLS LIKE ME ARE AFRAID OF THEIR FAMILIES, OF SOCIETY. I JUST THINK THAT IF THEY SHOW EVEN A LITTLE COURAGE, THEY WILL BE ABLE TO GET FAR AHEAD IN LIFE AND AWAY FROM CIRCUMSTANCES THAT ENSLAVE THEM.

—Payal Singh

in a government home before she came to us. Our NGO works in tandem with these homes, interacting with the girls and giving them vocational training. During this process, the girls develop faith in our organisation and they decide to become part of our intervention programme. Our work here involves enabling these survivors to become independent and earn a livelihood, which in turn helps them reintegrate into society and lead satisfying lives.”

After being taken in by the NGO, Singh was quickly assimilated into the system. She was taught how to cook and other basic life skills that would help her in the future. “Kshamata has helped me a lot. I learnt baking and tailoring here as well. Through Kshamata, I got the chance to work at (bakery chain) Monginis, and later at a jewellery store. Then I left that job and completed school. Now I want to take driving lessons and become a cab driver,” Singh says, her eyes twinkling.

As seen by the artistes

The wonderful Abu Jani and Sandeep Khosla came on board to dress up our brave muse. Singh may not be enthusiastic about fashion, but she was delighted to hear whose clothes she was wearing. The designers themselves were keen to meet her and supported the concept wholeheartedly. Khosla summed up the thought behind our *Fashion Democracy* series perfectly when he said, “No one can dictate who comes into a store or what they buy. The very nature of fashion is that it is made for everybody. It’s about the confidence to wear a particular outfit—it could be something sublime, or ridiculous. That is what fashion democracy is all about. There should be absolutely no stigma attached to who wears your clothes.”

The designers also made it a point to get in the frame with Singh. Jani >

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Beaded blouse
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gota jaali work,
Asal by Abu Jani and
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(Clockwise from above) Designers Abu Jani and Sandeep Khosla supervise the details; the hair and makeup in progress; behind the scenes at the shoot; the designers and the muse share a lighthearted moment



A GREAT MUSE HAS THREE QUALITIES: CONFIDENCE, CARRIAGE, AND MORE CONFIDENCE. A GREAT ATTITUDE IS KEY.

—Abu Jani



says, “I think she’s beautiful. She’s just like any other woman; the only difference is she’s had an unfortunate past.” The outfits they chose for the shoot were from their diffusion line, Asal, comprising embellished anarkali gowns, flowy lehengas and exquisite saris. The colour palette was mellow and bold in equal measure, and made our muse stand out quite beautifully. “A great muse has three qualities—confidence, carriage, and more confidence. A great attitude is key. It’s not about your height, or your structure; it’s about your ability to carry off something gracefully, and the confidence you have in yourself. I think Payal did justice to our clothes.”

A girl like her

This being her first photoshoot ever, Singh was extremely nervous in the beginning but seemed to visibly relax as the day wore on. Even while she posed and smiled, dressed in all the couture finery, trying to follow the photographer’s instructions as best she could, she refused to look at her own pictures on the laptop. On being asked why she wouldn’t look at her images, Singh dismissed it with a, ‘Just like that’. A certain guarded defiance seems almost second nature to this fighter.

And what does she like to do in her free time? “I love writing *shayaris*, listening to music, singing, and watching TV. I am particularly fond of Mahima Chaudhry and Preity Zinta’s films... I like Preity’s dimples,” she says happily. Singh is keen to end our conversation on a positive note. “I think girls like me are afraid—of their families, of society. I just think that if they show even a little courage, they will be able to get far ahead in life and away from circumstances that enslave them. I wish more and more people would help girls like me to get into homes and NGOs that will help them leave their past behind,” she says, before hurrying off for her next shot. **F**

PHOTOGRAPHS: VINAY JAVKAR; HAIR AND MAKEUP: NISHA GULATI (INEGA MODEL MANAGEMENT); DESIGN DIRECTOR: BENDI VISHAN; STYLIST: AKSHITA SINGH; TRAINER: KHUSHI BHATIA; FASHION INTERN: MEERA GODBOLE; SHOOT COORDINATOR: SHRADDHA KHARPUDE
 ** DISCLAIMER: THE INTERVIEWEE IS AN ADULT AND HAS DISCLOSED DETAILS OF HER LIFE STORY AT HER OWN WILL. THE NGO DOESN'T PRACTICE DISCLOSURE OF PERSONAL DETAILS OF THE WOMEN IT WORKS WITH.