

# EXOTICA

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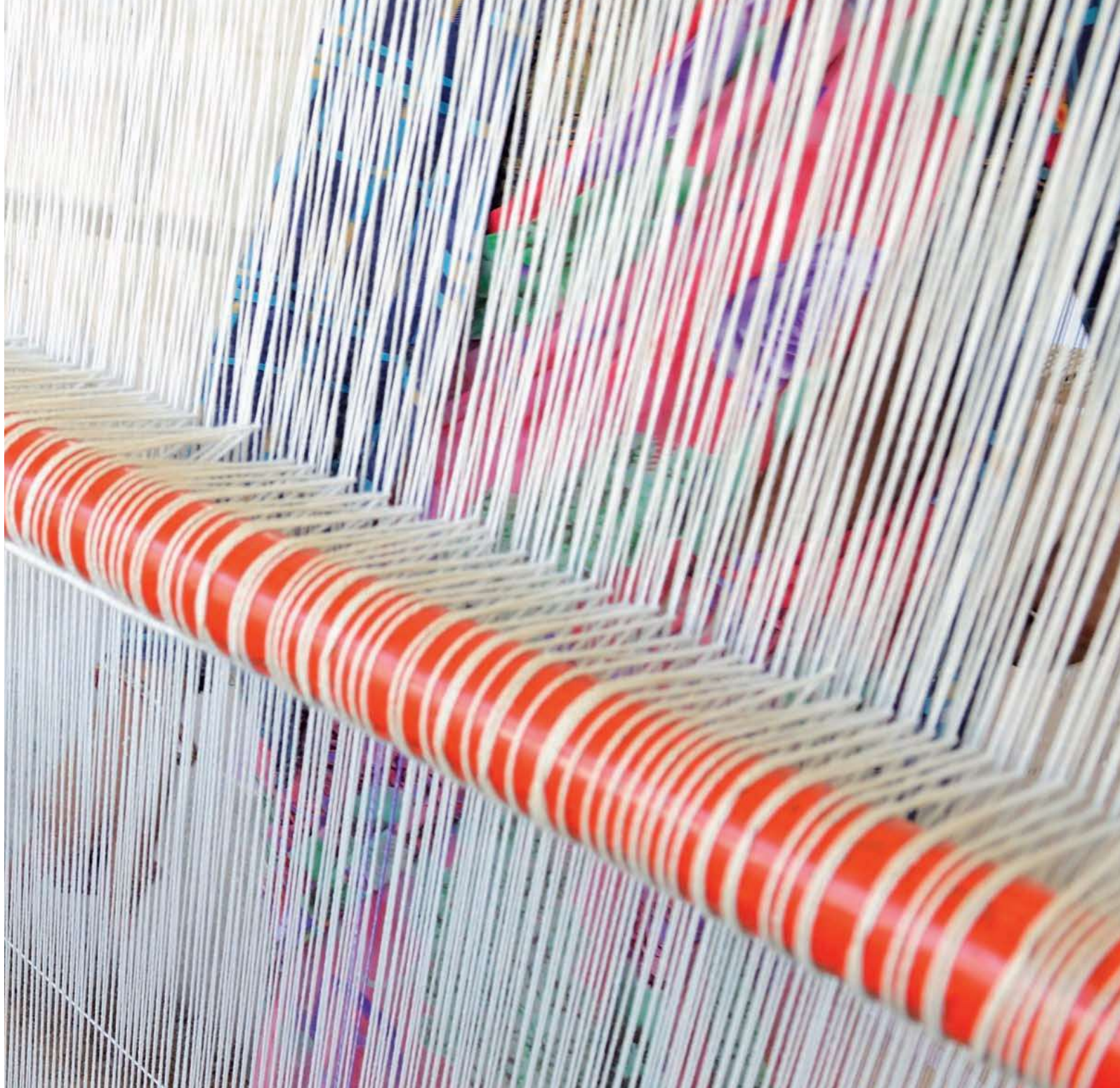
HERE COMES THE SUN

**FUTURE  
BECKONS**

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COVER STORY

# WARP AND WEFT OF SISTERHOOD



*The success story of Jaipur Rugs is primarily told through its women,  
says **SAIMI SATTAR** as **PANKAJ KUMAR** captures the  
many-splendoured layers of the carpet work*

**A** guffaw goes up and the faces of the three women light up animatedly at an inside joke. Till a few minutes back they were focussed on their fingers flying deftly to create a silky-woolly mass on the looms while carefully watching a digitally-created map. The bonhomie and linkage — where they share lives, small joys, big triumphs and secret sorrows — are woven by the visible and invisible threads of a business that Jaipur Rugs

started in 2009. Sitting in a covered area outside Shanti Devi's house in Manpura village — which lies at the periphery of Jaipur — Sumita, Geeta, Lalita, Susheela and others defy the popular perception of subdued and underconfident rural women. Their poise is powered by a simple fact: They might not have physically stepped out beyond a few kilometres of their homes but the carpets that they weave travel the world.

## LIGHTING UP LIVES

**THE** story of Jaipur rugs and the lives it touches are best personified by Shanti Devi (40) who had grown up watching her brother and sister-in-law weaving carpets. Married at 14, she had her first child at 16. Life was tough as her husband didn't work, so she shifted to her maternal home along with him and her five children in 2007. Initially engaged in unskilled labour, the idea of setting up looms at home appealed to her as it would allow her time to look after her children. When two looms were provided at her house on which eight women wove, it became the first centre of Jaipur Rugs in the village. "Incidentally Bhai Sahab (NK Chaudhary) also came on the day but I hid behind someone as I felt he was an important person... But now, I can talk to anyone," says Devi.

She has stepped up further on the professional front and been designated as a Bunkar Sakhi who looks after 43 looms and 150 people, solves the weavers' difficulties, checks the sacks of coloured threads, explains the placement of colours and fills out the check cards to ensure that everything is in order. She visits each centre every three-four days while 15-16 women work at the one at her house.

Her income ensured that Devi's children are graduates or in college. She also comfortably married off three daughters. While her life has changed, what has remained constant is the first two looms with which she started. "I want to keep

them as a reminder," she says with a hint of a smile. Just like her, 50 of the 150 women run their households with the money they earn here.

On the other hand, her commitment has strengthened the company. "When I visited the factory, I saw that our smallest mistakes took 15 days to rectify. After that, we started paying attention to creating carpets that were 'zero defect'," she asserts.

Incidentally, even the smallest carpet of the lowest quality takes about a month to weave. When it is placed on a loom, a map is attached to it and women come in, weave and leave as per their convenience. When the next one settles in the same place, she can easily pick up the threads from the exact point. To ensure that the payments are as per the quantity of work done, the lines of the knots tied are marked against the name of the person on a chart. At month-end, the work of each is added to make payments.

The multi-layered structure created by the organisation involving the locals has benefitted many. Harphool — who has worked with Jaipur Rugs for 18 years and in the carpet industry for 32 years — supervises 50 villages, 340 centres and 1,200 people which lie within a 55 km radius of his home. He visits each centre at least once a month. "If the design is difficult or if the carpet is not completed on time, I motivate them, iron out the problems and enable them to reach their full potential," he says.

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## THE INCEPTION

**WHEN** NK Chaudhary started Jaipur Rugs — after working as a contractor and, then, a co-owner along with his brother in a carpet export company — he wanted women on board. However, bringing them to the factory was tough as there were responsibilities of home and hearth. Moreover, stepping out of homes was unimaginable in a patriarchal set-up in rural Rajasthan. So, the company implemented a socio-economic model where everything — machinery, loom, raw material, yarn, map — was delivered to the doorstep and the finished carpet picked up. Chaudhary wanted that these artisan-artistes should focus on the artistry rather than being bothered by the logistics.

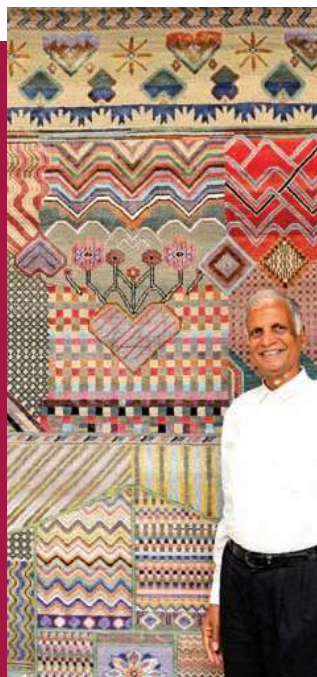
Chaudhary — who has an aura of a man who has done more than his bit and is content with the difference that he has made — says, “I started with nine weavers in 1999 and, today, there are 40,000... of which 20,000-25,000 are active.”

## CONNECTING DOTS

**THE** first step towards the weaving of a carpet is the creation of a weft, locally called *taani*.

Shipra Chanchal, storytelling manager of the brand, points out that to make a carpet of 8x8, the *taani* maker has to walk a minimum of eight km looping the thread in between two poles set eight feet apart. The completed weft is transported to the carpet weaving centre. Here, separating the threads and placing them on the loom takes a minimum of five hours before the weavers settle down to work. In a lay person’s language, an 8x8 carpet would have 64 knots per sq inch and two lakh knots in totality.

The weaving units are spread across large swathes of the country. So, the best quality carpets (14x14) are made in Gujarat, the lowest quality *durries* in Uttar Pradesh and the average quality in Rajasthan. Yarns are dyed primarily in Mirzapur while the *taanis* are made across six-seven states.



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## FACTORY FINISH



Once woven, the carpet is sent to the factory to go through 18 finishing processes.

- ❑ The first step is **Measurement** so that the carpet fits the intended standard sizing.
- ❑ Each knot is manually **counted**. If any is missing, the line is checked against a map and surgically repaired.
- ❑ **Pile Height Checking** ensures the quality.
- ❑ For discrepancies in the knot count, **Repairing (Raffu)** with a large needle and thread is resorted to.
- ❑ A large iron nail and hammer knock the knots along the warp and weft to align the pattern during **Knot Beating (Thukai)**.
- ❑ **First Shear (Kachi Kainchi)** ensures that the pile is levelled by cutting the yarn.
- ❑ To prevent the blurring of design, the yarn is untangled and the design is given its intended definition in **Design Correction (Sua Birai)**.
- ❑ The carpet is singed by a flame at the back to clear loose strands and tighten knots during **Back-burning**.
- ❑ The singed particles are brushed off during **Back-burn Cleaning**.

### WHAT'S ON OFFER

**THE** company started with 20-30 designs in basic colours. Today, 10 new designs are created every day. "We have moved from a carpet company to a lifestyle company," says Yogesh, Chaudhary's son, who looks after the company's sales.

The company maintains an inventory of 200 crore carpets in sizes that vary from 2x3 ft to 14x20 ft in different colours and price points. But if you still find it difficult to find that perfect carpet there is always the option of customisation... provided you are willing to wait for six-eight months.

While the United States was the biggest market earlier where the company retailed 90 per cent of the carpets. It has now expanded its footprint to Europe, Dubai, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and Russia. It, of course, helps that globalisation and the internet have ensured that homes everywhere have a similar aesthetic and universal design language. "So, we can make one design and sell everywhere though 10-20 per cent are specific to a place." The current turnover is ₹750 cr.





- ❑ The carpet is soaked to remove impurities during **Dipping**.
- ❑ The carpets are laid on the floor and water, mild cleansing solutions are poured. An oar-like paddle flushes out the trapped dirt in **Washing**.
- ❑ The shrunken yarn and the cotton warp and weft are brought to the prescribed size by stretching the carpet on an iron frame during **Stretching (Khinchai)**.
- ❑ The original binding is cut off the carpet during **Cutting**.
- ❑ The edges of the carpet are bound together for durability during **Binding**.
- ❑ The intended pile height is set onto the **Shearing** machine.
- ❑ During **Detailing (Kalam Birai)** a carpet needle is used to sharpen the design.
- ❑ During **Snipping Visible Cotton (Chinte Nikalna)** extra strands of cotton thread are snipped and removed.
- ❑ **Carving (Khadi Gultarash)** gives cuts in the design while **Embossing (Put Gultarash)** gives a high and low effect on the rug.

## CHANGING MINDSET AND THE BRAND

**THE** brand has not just grown nationally but left its imprint on global design by snapping up every possible award during the journey and being featured as a case study by several brand gurus.

What jettisoned Jaipur Rug to the position was changing the mindset of the weavers who were taken for exposure visits. Work was also afoot to create a supply channel connecting these weavers — who were the poorest of the poor — to the richest of the rich across the world by enhancing their capability. Simultaneously, the idea that the weavers belong to one family also took root. This was despite severe opposition from Chaudhary's family and community as the carpet-weaving Regars are untouchables. Chaudhary insists, "We don't sell carpets, we sell family blessings, we sell stories, we sell experiences and the carpet is free."

Parallely, a foundation works on skill development to train 800-1,000 weavers every year. It facilitates artisan cards for them to access

different government facilities. The Foundation also develops the weavers' leadership potential.

## THE 'DESIRED' USP

**JAIPUR** Rugs might have been just another carpet company had it not been for the innovative Manchaha initiative. Chanchal recalls, "Initially in 2012, it was called Artisan Original." Weavers were given raw material and asked to create 'whatever they desired'. They were happier making these pieces as they could express themselves and make mistakes. So, more weavers asked the Branch Manager and supervisor for carpets that they could weave according to their *mann* or *manchaha* which led to the collection being renamed.

"We have 15 designers in the office and 40,000 artisans whose creativity can be tapped into. The scope of experimentation has increased manifold," says Chanchal. To further hone their creativity, a pilot programme was done with Rajasthan Royal Foundation where 25 women from Aaspura



were trained for six months by designers like Kavita Chaudhary and Matteo Cibic. “We had 25 masterpieces at the end as they learnt from the designers and peers. It was a journey from being a weaver to becoming a designer and an artiste,” says Chanchal. A similar model is being implemented with British Council Library.

But the Manchaha initiative did not stop here. Chaudhary started a programme with Jaipur Central Jail three years back despite apprehensions of the staff as unlike the Regars who know the weaving basics, the inmates have varied backgrounds. However, the founder was on to something. “When an inmate — accused of a grievous crime — who has not narrated his story to anyone, weaves it in a Manchaha, it is beyond anything that we’ve seen,” says Chanchal. The new collection, christened Freedom Manchaha, caught the fancy of customers. The programme has extended to jails in Dausa, Kota, Bharatpur, Bikaner, Alwar and Ajmer and will gradually be operational in jails across Rajasthan.

Yogesh points out, “My father is against charity and wants to make people capable. Manchaha has put this philosophy into action.” It is also the company’s most awarded collection having won the German Design Award (twice), El Decor, Europe Product Design Award. Some of these were won by an Indian design company for the first time.

## DO THE NEW

**CHAUDHARY** has handed over the baton to the next generation and believes that he’s lucky as each of his five children brings different qualities to take the business ahead. “Yogesh understands sales and marketing, my elder son works on the supply chain, my eldest

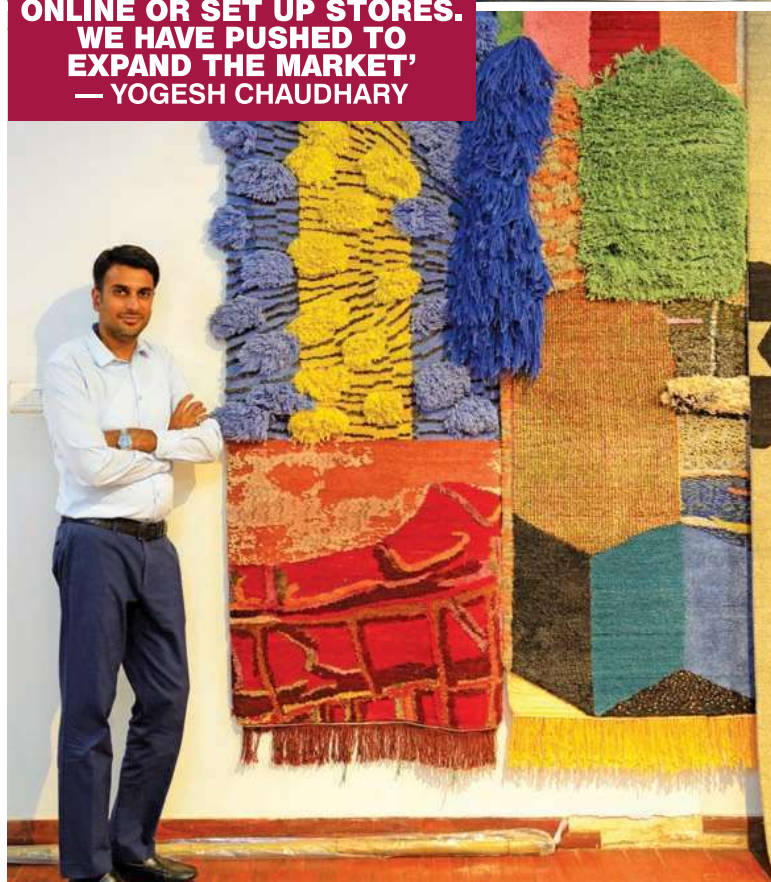
daughter understands business management, the second daughter is good at operations and the designs of my third daughter, Kavita, have been copied across the world.”

Yogesh, who drives the business, was doing a four-year undergrad programme in Boston when he came home for a month at the end of two years. He stayed back for some time to tide over organisational problems that had cropped up in 2006. He never went back. He was 19.

His naiveté, in some instances, worked in the business’ favour. When participating in an international carpet exhibition in Banaras, Yogesh went with just six carpets while people had come



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with piles. The display, of three carpets on the walls of the stall and three on the floor, made it seem that the products were special. During the show, the brand got several international clients and created quite a buzz.

There was also the realisation that the products were way superior and the prices lower as compared to the competition. When Yogesh tried to revise the prices, one of the old wholesalers started shouting. Unlike his father, who would have given in, Yogesh did not back off rather the wholesaler did. The times were changing.

### HIGHS AND LOWS

**FROM** 2006 to 2010, the company expanded its footprint setting up production units in Jharkhand, Orissa, Nagaland, West Bengal and Bihar.

The 2008 recession threw up another challenge as there were losses of about ₹20 crore in forex. “A \$5 million order, the biggest in the history of our business, saved us. We’ve never got such a big order after that. In fact, we wouldn’t have been the Jaipur Rugs that we are now without it,” says Yogesh thoughtfully.

In 2012-13 Yogesh asked an Australian to design a collection which was praised a lot but didn’t transform into sales. Soon after, his sister, Kavita, a designer, launched a collection inspired by the kiosks of India which redefined the carpet industry. “In three days we sold carpets in 30 countries!” he remembers. Earlier it was only the German designers who were known to be modern carpet makers but, with this, an Indian company had arrived. The other change it entailed for the company was a switch from making 90 per cent of traditional carpets to 70 per cent of modern ones in two years. “Today we make 95-96 per cent modern carpets,” he says.

The company forayed into retail with a store in Delhi in 2016 and added its footprint in Mumbai, Ahmedabad, Bangalore and Hyderabad later.

Along the way, the brand worked on making carpets a cool home accessory by running quirky campaigns. “Every month two-three companies start selling online or set up stores. We have pushed to expand the market,” says Yogesh.

And the women continue to guffaw as they weave.

