

A TALE OF KNOTS

Tracing the history and evolution of the carpet weaving industry in India

BY SCHENELLE DSOUZA

India has many undiscovered crafts to its name, many of which date back centuries. The carpet weaving industry, although not a hidden craft, is often one of the most overlooked industries dating back to centuries. Today, it is one of the largest handicraft industries, not just within the country but worldwide.

Carpet weaving dates back to the medieval times when the craft borrowed the skill and expertise from Persia, China, and Afghanistan. Back then, the skill was popularised only in villages and small towns across North India. However, the modern carpet weaving industry is flourishing across different states with each having its own rendition of the craft. While Uttar Pradesh prides itself in carpets in bold colours and Persian motifs, Kashmir is known to produce some of the finest silk carpets and rugs, and Rajasthan's hand-knotted woollen carpets hardly need an introduction.

There's no shortage of carpet companies today. However, only a handful of them have been around for a very long time. And so, to know more about the industry, its scope and evolution over the years, **LuxeBook** spoke to experts – Angelique Dhama – CEO, Obeetee Carpets Retail, Yogesh Chaudhary – Director, Jaipur Rugs, and Ali Akmal Jan – Managing Partner, Carpet Kingdom.

History and origin

The history of carpet weaving in India can be traced back to the Mughal reign in the 16th century. Babur who was unhappy about the lack of luxuries available in the country often spoke of the luxuries in Persia, one of them being Persian carpets. And so, wanting to establish the carpet weaving industry in India, Akbar brought some of the finest carpet weavers in Persia with him to India and ordered them to train Indian prisoners in the craft. This led to the establishment of carpet weavings centres in

Agra, Delhi and Lahore in 1580 AD which promoted the production of carpets in India.

As more artisans trained in carpet weaving, the art began to grow and flourish. It was then modified to fit royal preferences. Although mostly Persian in design, Indian motifs were added to the designs which included scenes from court life, animals, flowers and plants, scenic landscapes and more.

Artisans would often use a combination of materials including silk, velvet, wool and even cashmere, using only natural vegetable dyes to add colour. One of the most interesting factors back then was that each carpet had a unique design; one would never find two carpets that share a resemblance of any sort. The royal Mughal courts had some of the most beautiful carpets. Most carpets found in the royal courts were made from pure silk and featured as many as 4224 knots per square inch.

Today, India is among the world's largest producers and exporters of handmade carpets. A reportedly 75–85 per cent of carpets manufactured in India are exported abroad, given the value and demand of the quality and design of handcrafted Indian carpets.

Modern Indian carpet weaving industry

One of the most labour-intensive industries in the country, the carpet weaving industry is seen to be flourishing most in north India, especially in regions like Kashmir, Jaipur, Agra, and Bhadohi-Mirzapur where hand-tufted carpets have been popularised. Angelique Dhama, the CEO of Obeetee Carpets shares that although the industry itself is flourishing, the hand-knotted carpet sector might not be doing so well. Obeetee Carpets is among the oldest hand-woven rug companies in the world, founded back in 1920 in the town of Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh. Since its inception, Dhama points out



Jaipur Rugs



Yogesh Chaudhary,
Director, Jaipur Rugs

the different factors that have led to the slowdown of the hand-knotted industry. “Factors like recession and shortage of weavers and trainers have put the hand knotted carpet industry in a tough spot. These along with tight deadlines on deliveries have led to a double on manufacturing costs, while buyers demand the carpet at the same price, making it a tough business,” Dhama adds.

On the other hand, there is a growing appreciation for carpets worldwide. Jaipur Rugs’ Yogesh Chaudhary talks about people beginning to see carpets as more of a lifestyle product than just an accessory which has helped promote the craft both in and outside India. “Designers collaborating with carpet companies aim to give the consumer a unique experience, which is testament to the fact that carpets have now become an integral part of the home furnishing segment. Companies today are more focused on the designs and patterns to attract new customers which was not as prominent earlier.”

While talking about the changes in the industry, the work culture is one that has seen the most change. The industry is labour intensive and usually provides employment to approximately two weavers per carpet, although the overall employment rate is close to 20 lakh workers and artisans across the country.

Social initiatives

Jaipur Rugs has had a significant effect on the work culture in the industry, with its Jaipur Rugs Foundation. Established in 2004 by Nand Kishore Chaudhary, the foundation works for the upliftment of rural artisans. Its vision is to make sure a society of equality, justice, and peace prevails through opportunity and socio-economic development. In addition to providing them with job opportunities, the foundation also includes initiatives that spreads awareness on subjects like health and hygiene, education and training in various skills.

The brand also introduced the Freedom Manchaha initiative which provides livelihood opportunities to jail inmates, encouraging disengaged inmates to make handmade works of art using leftover yarn from commercial carpet production. This initiative taps into the untamed fashion from the villages of India experimenting with the originality of rural craftspeople and nurturing their creative potential. “Each rug designed in the ‘Manchaha’ collection is a one-off piece and a treasure for those who connect with it. Our rugs are inspired by rural India, which is also what gives us a



Jaipur Rugs



Carpet Kingdom

unique identity and is a pull for eminent influencers to collaborate with us,” says Chaudhary.

Boasting a similar trajectory, Obeetee carpets too has its own initiative, the Women and Weavers Initiative founded in 2015. “The programme was created to provide rural Indian women with the education and opportunities to take up the craft of weaving and support their families with their own resources.” Additionally, the brand also helms Project Mala which offers financial aid to about 120 each year, covering the cost of their schooling, nourishment, medical care, and uniform. Obeetee started this project 29 years ago to provide free land for the construction of school buildings.

Traditional vs modern techniques

Speaking of the changes in the skillset, Ali Akmal Jan of Carpet Kingdom believes that modern techniques of production hold good for only certain types of carpets. “I think there will always be a demand for carpets manufactured the traditional way. Although modern manufacturing techniques have paved its way into the carpet Industry, I don’t think they can replace traditional carpet weaving practices completely.”

The changes in the industry are prominent nonetheless. Right from the procedures involved in the supply chain developed throughout time to the design and logistical system support, change is rampant and irrepressible. “The unique Electronic Data Processing (EDP) code has established a clear traceability in the system so that the real-time status of each individual item/order can be determined. Digitalization has made data accessible in real time across the supply chain,” says Dhama. “Techniques such as mechanised warping for hand-knotted looms, mechanised washing, dying, and printing techniques introduced over time have allowed us to introduce technical innovations in the supply chain, such as online monitoring of the effluent being discharged, which is linked to the Central Pollution Control Board. We were the first to offer the CAD system to our artists, supplanting the popular hand-painted CADs and Nakshas.”

As a brand with a century-old tradition, Obeetee Carpets recognises the significance of preserving the carpet-weaving heritage while also aiming to present every household with something lovely, combining designs with a contemporary aesthetic that appeals to



Carpet Kingdom



Carpet Kingdom

current homeowners. “In addition to the designs that Obeetee and its great designers have created together, we have mostly experimented with weaving methods while being mindful of our ecological approach. From azo-free dyes to the usage of natural fibres, Obeetee has made great strides in redefining carpet manufacturing.”

On the other hand, Chaudhary talks about the lack of the new age technology-based machine-made rugs which although cost-effective, lack the expression found in handmade rugs. “Handmade rugs are surely more expensive than the new machine-made rugs. But they are also much more expressive, durable, and artistic. Machine-made rugs are produced on a large scale for mass production and simply lack the aura that one finds in a handmade rug.”

While the beauty and artistic expression of a handmade carpet is incomparable, its durability is far more accomplished. As Chaudhary puts it, hand-knotted rugs are much more durable and can easily last for 20-30 years as compared to machine-made rugs which may only last for 7-8 years. “Handmade rugs are part of an enduring tradition that can never be surpassed by technology or machines. People who appreciate quality, expression, and chutzpah will always know that traditionally made rugs will always be superior to machine-made rugs.”

Different techniques

Carpet weaving is expansive and the number of different methods employed are many. However, some of the most commonly employed techniques include hand knotting, flat weaving, hand tufting, and hand screening. Weavers will employ one of these techniques to produce the carpet using different fibres, colours, and textures followed by a carpet finishing process.

Hand Knotting

This technique has changed very little since it was introduced by the Mughals. It involves using a special loom, where the warp is set as the base of the carpet and the design is taken across the weft (a filling of yarn in weaving) using coloured threads, determined by the design. Hand knotting is characterised by the similarity of the design, both in the front as well as at the back of the carpet. The quality of a hand-knotted carpet is determined by the number of knots per square inch, where a higher density indicates a superior piece.

A hand-knotted rug will almost always have fringes because there is no binding on the ends of the carpet and will have a flatter pile with less texture.

Flat Weaving

Created by interlacing warp (vertical) and weft (horizontal) threads. The threads are woven on a loom into colourful patterns, without the pile or backing you would find on knotted or tufted rugs. Flat weaves tend to be lighter and more flexible. They are easier to manage, fold, or move and are reversible – since the pattern is the same on both sides of the rug. This is the flat weaving technique. Kilims are flat woven rugs and pile Kilims are with a certain height. This weaving produces a lower range of indoor flat weaves. For instance, Pile Kilims or jute durries are used in places which are prone to tripping. They are made of jacquard and are usually ready in couple of days.

Hand Tufting

A hand-tufted rug is made by punching strands of wool using a hand-operated tool into a canvas that is stretched on a frame. This weaving technique is a little less cumbersome than the hand-knotted weaving technique. This weaving technique involves a tufting gun with needles on its front. This tool facilitates and speeds up the weaving process. Unlike hand knotted technique, this technique saves on time and money. It is cost and time effective. As compared to the hand-knotted technique, hand-tufted carpets take much less time to produce. This technique involves lower quality materials as compared to hand-knotted carpets, and also creates precise detailing of design patterns of the rugs. The gun used in tufting leads to faster production.

Handloom / Power looming

Handloom is one of the oldest techniques that has since come to be replaced by power looming in several sections, although both techniques have managed to survive equally. As the names suggest, handloom uses a looming device to weave the cloth by gripping and interweaving the threads. Power loom works in a similar manner, although these are usually employed in large-scale factories and are electrically automated and controlled by the computer. Hand looming usually uses medium to low-ranged fibres like jacquard, whereas power-loomed ones are made with synthetic fibres like



■ Angelique Dhama, CEO, OBEETEE Carpets, Retail

nylon, silk or polypropylene. These don't have much appreciation value, yet have managed to carve a niche for themselves in the carpet weaving industry.

Design and manufacturing

The process from design to manufacturing is long and tedious in the carpet-making process. The first stage is the design process, the planning for which starts at least a year ahead of the season, with the team conducting research on the current trends in the market to study the colours, patterns and textures for the upcoming season. The design team then works with the management and production teams to ensure the best transition of design from paper to final product. "Our inspiration comes from anything and everything; it can be nature, urban art or textures that we find interesting. The colours that we use are also researched on their positive effect on human emotions," says Ali Akmal Jan.


Jaipur Rugs and Obeetee Carpets take the research process a step further and study the interiors spaces that will house the carpet. "The design team comes up with the concept by looking at the potential of the interiors, and target audience and after that the layout process takes place. According to the layout, the team then decides on the best-suited technique," says Chaudhary.

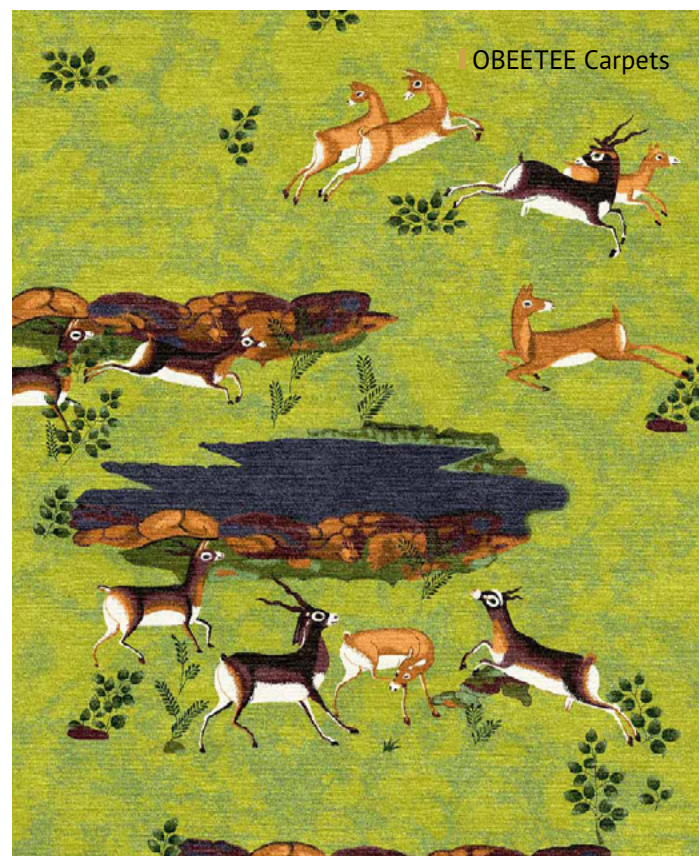
Dhama draws paints a picture of Obeetee's practices with the example of different homes. "If we develop a carpet with the view of a palatial house, we employ more

antique or intricate patterns, whereas if we develop a carpet with a modern house in mind, we use more contemporary or abstract design elements."

Once the design and layout of the carpet has been decided, the manufacturing process begins, starting with the sourcing of raw materials ranging from wool, viscose, silk, cotton and jute etc. After the design team picks out the yarns, texture, and finish, a texture testing and sampling process is conducted followed by the texture development process to deliver a sample piece of the carpet. Once approved, the raw materials go through a spinning and dyeing process after which the yarns are sent to rural artisans. "Once the rug is weaved then it goes through 18 finishing processes which include measurement, knot counting, pile height checking, repairing, washing, etc.," adds Chaudhary.

The duration of the manufacturing process usually depends on the type of carpet being designed. According to Jan, "...a simple geometric tufted carpet takes around fifteen to twenty days to manufacture with five to six people working on it.

On the other hand, a hand-knotted intricate traditional design takes an average six to thirty six months with eight to ten people working on it." Jan pints out a Carpet Kingdom masterpiece, the Aradabil carpet which took almost four and half years to produce. "The carpet was made of pure silk and incorporated a total of 17,91,15,904 knots!" 



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