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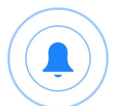
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Knots of freedom: How women carpet makers are crafting story through rugmaking

Women carpet makers from Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh channel their emotions to weave a tapestry of their everyday lives

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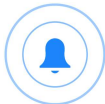
A woman gives final touches to a rug;

By Shilpi Madan

Shanti Devi personifies empowerment in the dusty village of Manpura, in Thar, Rajasthan. As braids of sunshine beat down on the tin roofs in the monkey-marked hamlet and a concert of the looms continues through the otherwise still afternoons, women in colourful ghunghats squat, deftly pulling the yarn to lace, knot and then cut the thread with a small, sharp dagger-like tool and levelling each complete line with the vicious-toothed panja. Shanti flits across, sizing up the warps and wefts with the practised hawk-eye of a bunkar sakhi—the master weaver-friend—in charge of 55 women weavers in the village.

Leading the loom league through the firm-chinned execution of hand knots by over 40,000 underprivileged women, Jaipur Rugs is crafting a story of financial growth through rugmaking. Eighty-five such rich, textured expressions in wool and bamboo silk—the handiwork of over 350 artisans—peg themselves proudly in the new Parliament building, inaugurated recently in Delhi. The brand also opened a baori-inspired showroom in Dubai last month.

“I have been working with Jaipur Rugs for 15 years now,” says Shanti. Over two decades ago, middlemen would employ the weavers with meagre pay, not any more. “I am financially independent and it is a life of dignity,” says the 42-year-old, flipping hot







Manju Devi with one of her latest creations

It is a saga of sweat and supple work, as thousands of women weavers from Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh pour their lives and emotions into the rugs, called manchaha (meaning ‘as your heart desires’) locally. It is this unique design grammar, created through community building, which lends a powerful dimension to hand artistry at Jaipur Rugs. All wool is purchased from the bazaars in Bikaner in Rajasthan and the dyeing facilities are centralised in Mirzapur in Uttar Pradesh.

With no pre-determined design graph to follow, the weavers choose to let their creativity flow in abandon while crafting a manchaha. The stunning Sawan ka Leheriya, an award-winning rug, was the result of the bickering between the newlyweds Parvati and Bhagchand, which led to her giving vent to her pent-up thoughts by colouring her weaves with inspiration from Rajasthan’s typical leheriya strokes in a delicious toss-up of hues.

Manju Devi, whose last manchaha—Aas Paas—was awarded for its designs of everyday things around her, like chulha (stove), cellphone and wall paintings, is now busy creating her third piece. The 32-year-old has been weaving carpets for over a decade. “This time I have used different forms, like the shakkarparas (local



munchies), zanjeer (chains) and leheriya,” shares the weaver, as she resumes work with the yarn, under the parchhatti (rain insulation cover) after finishing her household chores.

“People come to us for our distinctive designs,” says Yogesh Chaudhary, owner of Jaipur Rugs. A weaver’s love for the tarbooz (watermelon) brings in greenish-blue zig-zags on a carpet. Another one reflects the maker’s fascination for the movies, with popcorn tubs woven in. The zebra lining at the back of the Freedom manchahas mark the creativity of the rugs woven by the inmates of Jaipur jail.

Powering the skills of primarily women weavers, giving them global dignity and a robust financial voice is what the brand aims to do. It has been an uphill task for founder Nand Kishore Chaudhary, who started the journey in 1978 with two looms and nine artisans. “People refused to shake hands with me initially when I started out, as I was working with ‘untouchables’, they said,” recalls the man often referred to as the ‘Gandhi of the carpet industry’.

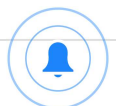
From there to currently nine stores across India, and swelling exports to over 90 countries worldwide, the company is targeting a 1,000 crore turnover by the end of the year. The formula for winning is simple and clear though. “We put our weavers at the centre. They grow, we grow,” says Yogesh humbly, as Shanti looks on with a smile.



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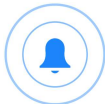
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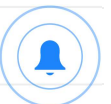
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