



Luxury brand Jaipur Rugs sparks social revolution in 600 villages

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- > Jaipur Rugs has transformed the lives of 40,000 artisans and weavers it employs, largely women.
- > The business is worth Rs 150 crore and exports hand-knotted and hand-tufted rugs to 45 countries, besides retailing them under their brand name in India and through an online retail platform.
- > Last fiscal, the weavers made one lakh carpets, offering a peek into how humungous the operations are, a rarity in the world of handmade luxury.



How many luxury businesses can claim to leave such a profound impact on a country's socio-economic fabric? Jaipur Rugs, a business spanning six states, is an outlier in the world of handcrafted luxury that often tends to be elitist. Its army of 40,000 weavers and artisans, largely women, is spread across 600 villages in Rajasthan, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Jharkhand.

The company patriarch and founder Nand Kishore Chaudhary says, "In villages, the men's will often dominate families. But in villages we work in, the homes are also known because of the women. They make more money than the men, who have begun contributing towards running the household and raising children."



N K Chaudhary

Women Weavers and The Art of Hand-Knotting and Hand-Tufting Rugs

Question: Jaipur Rugs about how their business operates, and they will point you to one of the dusty clusters in which their weavers live and work. In the one I travelled to close to Jaipur, the company had set up weaving units and looms within the weavers' homes so that they could work from the comforts of their surroundings and tend to their families. In one such home, a gaggle of women weavers is working at a frantic pace to complete an order that has to be delivered the next day.

They do take out time out to talk about how their lives have been transformed: they are able to send their daughters to school, make decisions in a male-dominated society, and receive a salary at the end of the month, a matter of pride. Shanti, a 'bunkar sakhri' (a 'weaver's friend' who supervises the work done by women weavers in her units) tells me, "Ab humme lagta hai ke hum aur hamari betiyaan kuch bhi achieve kar sakti hain." Each weaver earns anywhere Rs 20,000 and more per month, depending on the amount of work they put in.



Another weaver in the same village, a solitary worker, is weaving a *Manchaha* or an Artisans Original rug in which they are allowed to take their creative decisions, drawing from their rustic surroundings for patterns, motifs and colours. The leftover yarn is weaved using the labour-intensive hand-knotting technique in which the weaver ties individual knots. One of the *Manchahas*, the *Ujjval* area rug weaved by Dhafali Devi, won a bronze at the European Product Design Awards in Germany, in 2018.



Rangell Dewar by Tahira - an Artisans Original

Back in the company headquarters in Jaipur, Chaudhary tells me, "Manchaha brings a fresh perspective to the area rug design as it is inspired by the weavers, their culture and their relationships with nature, their village, their animals and their family."

Creating a Legacy

In the world of Indian luxury, Chaudhary is a legend for having defied every rule in the book, flouted every social norm to create an Indian company with a global footprint. He hails from a conservative Jain family but gave his ancestors' business a miss. He faced social censure for working with artisans who came from backward communities in a state known for its rigid caste biases.

"The pressures were several," Chaudhary says unassumingly, his perennial smile not leaving his face. "But then you have to do what you believe in. I believe there should be a purpose to the business you do; it should be sustainable and inclusive. If it leverages our strength as a culture, it will bring about change on the ground level."



He also faced family pressure because his first three children were daughters. Back then, a dispirited Chaudhary turned to his British friend, art historian Ilay Cooper for advice. Cooper, who continues to close, not just advised him to offer his daughters the best opportunities possible, but also guided him to set up his first two-loom weaving unit in a weaver's home. "The rug business was unorganised and dominated by middlemen. Artisans rarely got money for the work they did," remembers Chaudhary. "We decided to bypass the middlemen and export the rugs after we received a decent sized order."

Twenty-five years old then, Chaudhary borrowed Rs 2,000 from his father (despite family disapproval) to purchase the looms and an old bicycle. "I discovered that some of the most beautiful rugs were made by those who did not enjoy basic rights," he rues. Over the years he moved to Gujarat to teach tribals how to weave, before heading back home, to Rajasthan. Not only did Jaipur Rugs wipe out entrepreneurial middlemen, but they also empowered women weavers and other artisans, creating doorstep entrepreneurship in the bargain.

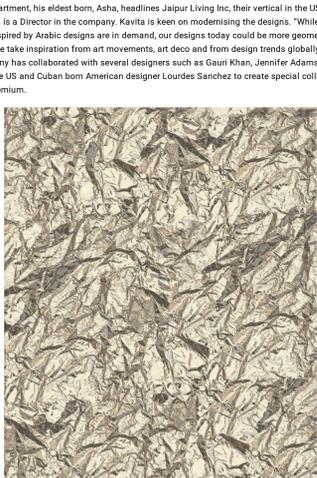
The challenge in those early days was to convince clients that Indian could make quality rugs, and later, that they did not use child labour. The company's headquarters displays a board stating this crucial fact.



The Second Generation Takes Charge

Today, two of his daughters are part of the growing business. While Kavita Chaudhary heads the design department, his eldest born, Aasha, headlines Jaipur Living Inc, their vertical in the US, while his son Yogesh is a Director in the company. Kavita is keen on modernising the designs. "While even today classics inspired by Arabic designs are in demand, our designs today could be more geometric or abstract. We take inspiration from art movements, art deco and from design trends globally," she says.

The company has collaborated with several designers such as Gauki Khan, Jennifer Adams Design Group in the US and Cuban born American designer Lourdes Sanchez to create special collections that sell at a premium.



Kiss Free Verse By Kavita

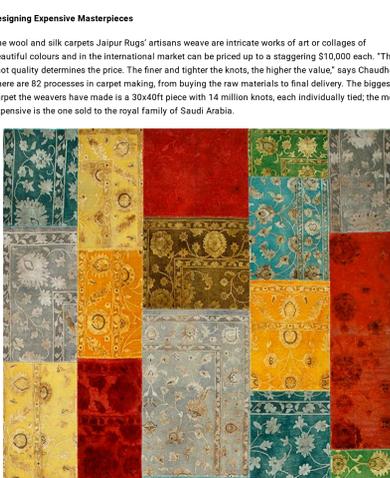
At the Jaipur Rugs headquarters, designers create patterns on their computer, which are then printed on large sheets and sent to the artisans, to be translated into hand-knotted and hand-tufted wonders. However, the artisans are at the core of the creative decisions taken at the company. "Sometimes, our artisans have felt that our colour palette is boring and we have added colour," laughs Kavita, referring to Rajasthan's love for vibrant colours.

Jaipur Living Inc, the US arm run by Aasha Chaudhary, retails in the lucrative US market for which rugs are specially designed and weaved, keeping the American aesthetics in mind. Yogesh Chaudhary, the youngest of the siblings, has helped launch the brand 'Jaipur Rug' in the Indian market, turning the B2B business into a B2C one, though the former category still dominates sales. "In a bid to cater to the Indian market, which has expanded rapidly and is now mature enough to understand hand-woven luxury, we decided to launch the India retail arm under our brand name," says Chaudhary.

Jaipur Rugs has set up three expansive stores in Jaipur, Delhi and the most recent one, in Mumbai, a 4000 sq.ft. industrial-style space in a defunct textile mill in the inwards of Lower Parel. The company also set up the Jaipur Rugs Foundation in 2004 to train new artisans and upgrade the skills of existing weavers.

Designing Expensive Masterpieces

The wool and silk carpets Jaipur artisans weave are intricate works of art or collages of beautiful colours and in the international market can be priced up to a staggering \$10,000 each. "The knot quality determines the price. The finer and tighter the knots, the higher the value," says Chaudhary. There are 82 processes in carpet making, from buying the raw materials to final delivery. The biggest carpet weavers have made is a 30x40ft piece with 14 million knots, each individually tied; the most expensive is the one sold to the royal family of Saudi Arabia.



While Jaipur Rugs faces severe competition from machine-made varieties, Chaudhary is confident that there will exist a niche for hand-made beauties. "It takes hundreds of man-hours to design and produce a rug. But for a machine, copying that design and mass producing it takes just a few days. The loss of opportunity and market for the weaver is huge. The challenge lies in educating the customer about the value of the handmade carpet industry."

His weavers take anywhere between 15 to 25 days to weave one rug. At the rate of one lakh rugs a year, we can only guess the number of man-hours it takes to keep this craft alive. "The millennial generation loves conscious luxury products and likes to connect with the weavers. They visit the villages, listen to the weavers' stories, eat in their homes. That is what makes the experience so luxurious," he adds.