

# cover

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# Putting Jaipur on the map

The Indian rug brand with a holistic approach to business has just launched its first two-part catalogue.

**Rachel Meek** investigates Jaipur

Rugs' intent to create a two-way connection between client and source



**“A business problem is a people problem. If people are happy there will be a happy company and happy products for customers”**

**N K Chaudhary,**  
Founder of Jaipur Rugs

**F**amily values and ethical awareness run deep at Jaipur Rugs. Founder N K Chaudhary entered the weaving industry with two looms, nine weavers and \$200 borrowed from his father in 1978. Since then he has nurtured a global business, all the while keeping ancient Indian philosophies at heart. His five children are all closely involved, but it is not only the individual virtues of his direct family that are recognised. ‘Business leaders too often put profits before people and this is detrimental to the entire organisation. Employees are a vital part of an organisation and must be treated with respect and trust,’ reads one of NKC’s blogs.

These core values have required consistent commitment to ensure sustainable growth. In recent years, NKC felt that he and his team at the head office were in danger of losing touch with the very grassroots that their business stemmed from. He explains: ‘I realised that if we do not listen to the front line, our company will not survive in the future. We needed a way to connect with uneducated weavers in rural locations, who not only have wisdom but creativity too.’

Several innovative enterprises have sprouted as a result, breaking down professional and social hierarchies and working in conjunction with the Jaipur Rugs Foundation’s Grassroots Leadership Programme (carried out in partnership with the British Council), which has trained 25 female *Bunkar Sakhis* (Weaver’s Companions) into local managerial roles. So far, four US-based designers who are novices to rug design have been taken on a tour of the looms in India as a prelude to creating new collections with Jaipur Rugs; the Weavers Engagement Programme has enabled 2000 weavers to visit the head office in Jaipur; the Rural Immersion Project has sent 25 office staff on three-day residential field-trips to weavers’ villages; and the Artisan Design Project has gone far beyond simple training, offering 200 people in eight remote communities the opportunity to take part in creative workshops. In these, various collage tasks give a practical introduction to colour theory and at the end of the five-day training, 25 weavers from each village are provided with raw materials with which to weave their own designs. This alternative to simply following a cartoon to produce a rug destined for a distant market has proven to boost motivation, dignity, confidence and job satisfaction.

In fact, one of the most popular designs from the Project Error collection grew out of the latter initiative in the village of Narhet in Rajasthan. The potential for the original rug, created by three weavers working side by side, had at first been overlooked. But under the savvy direction of Design Director Kavita Chaudhary, the piece was reinstated as *Anthar*, meaning ‘difference’ in Hindi. With a colour palette adapted to western tastes, the pattern misalignment can be read afresh as an authentic quirk of the kind found in tribal weavings of old. Fitting impeccably with the zeitgeist for inviting an element of chance into the creative process (think Abraham Cruzvillegas’ current Tate Modern turbine hall installation *Empty Lot*, or the recent reissue of Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt’s *Oblique Strategies* card game), *Anthar* went on to win an Excellent Product Design Special Mention at the German Design Awards 2016.

The commitment to conscious capitalism is obviously strong, but just how to convey this to a clientele far removed from the vibrant communities that benefit is a challenge in itself, one that Jaipur Rugs has tackled with a new two-part catalogue that clearly separates the products into two distinct price brackets. A departure from the weave-to-order business model, these contain rugs that are in stock and available for immediate purchase.

Tastefully compiled with the utmost care and attention to detail, they contain stunning black and white photography by two Jaipur managers, Sitara Menon and Shekhar Nirmal, and Durban-based photographer Clinton Friedman. Book 1 contains rugs made in Uttar Pradesh. The photos capture scenes of everyday Indian life complete with Hindi captions in Devanagari and Roman scripts. Book 2 contains handknotted rugs with photos that represent the people who make them in Rajasthan, Gujarat and Jharkhand. The fact that many weavers work from home in diverse communities with widely varying cultures and languages provided the photographers with many a memorable experience. ‘We met shy families who live with deer for neighbours in a reserve forest and an old woman, drunk on life, who talked us into buying ice cream for everybody in the village,’ reads Menon and Nirmal’s introduction.

The decision to shoot in black and white came from a practical standpoint – too much colour clashed with the rugs – as well as a conceptual one. The Canadian photojournalist



**Previous spread**  
01 Page spread from the Jaipur Rugs catalogue, Book 2 showing weavers from the Raeger Community in the village of Durgaediya, Rajasthan

**This spread**  
02 *Anthar* rug (detail), Artisan Collection, 2012  
03 The original weaving (detail) that inspired *Anthar*, produced during Phase 1 of the Weaver Design Project pilot in Narhet, Rajasthan



03

04

Ted Grant is quoted as saying: ‘When you photograph people in colour, you photograph their clothes. But when you photograph people in black and white, you photograph their souls.’ And it is the soul of India that Jaipur is attempting to convey through its catalogues.

Maps, weaver profiles and portraits place the products in context, poetically connecting consumer with producer. But it is by no means a one-way street. Another incentive – ‘hi5teweavers’ – invites weavers to create postcard-sized artworks in ink. Along with a photograph of the artist, this then finds its way to the buyer of their woven work, who in turn is invited to create an artwork to send to the weaver with their portrait.

This token of appreciation, recognition and respect is entirely in keeping with the holistic approach of Jaipur Rugs. The philosophies in action set an example of how personal connectivity on a global scale can help to generate passion and interest of the kind that is needed in order to ensure the survival of the handknotted rug industry.  
[www.jaipurrugsc.com](http://www.jaipurrugsc.com)

04 Artisan weaver Shamu Devi with her hi5teweavers artwork in the village of Bhadla, Bikaner, Rajasthan, India. Find more by searching #hi5teweavers on Facebook and Twitter