CARPETS

MORE THAN A REVIVAL

We look at the carpet industry in India through one producer in Rajasthan, typical of so many springing up across the north of the country. At present skilled labour is being used merely to copy straightforward 'safe' designs from the classic Middle Eastern centres of Iran and Turkey. Should we permit such a waste of talent? Given this reservoir of skilled craftsmen, India could easily become the world centre for hand-made carpet manufacture. Producers can create any design, but where are the new designers? What is at present, a group of fine copyists can be turned into pioneers of new shapes and colours only with the injection of new ideas, a fresh approach.

Text and photographs by Ilay Cooper

The worldwide demand for carpets appears to be insatiable. Foremost among the buyers are Japan, Germany and the USA; among the producers, Iran and Turkey. But the rising cost of labour in the Middle East and the current crisis in Iran, which has reduced her exports from 400 crore rupees in 1978 to an estimated 200 crores for 1979, have recently put both India and Pakistan in a highly competitive position as producers.

India's carpet exports have reached 100 crores per annum and the government is giving relatively easy loans to encourage more producers. It seems that it does not, however, follow up its enthusiasm by at-

Choudhury's looms are used to produce two identical and symmetrical rugs of 6 feet by 4 feet each which are separated only after completion.

tempting to encourage original designs or by checking on the quality of the product. Quality control is in the hands of the middle-men—who have sharp eyes for flaws which reduce value, but, given the present demand, would only refuse outstandingly bad specimens. The demand itself tends to suppress any originality in design. All carpets will sell, as long as they follow conservative patterns and colours.

Across the country in villages and towns, small carpet-manufacturing units are appearing. Carpet making is a lucrative foreign-exchange-earning industry, made more desirable for the government because it is highly labour-intensive. All of the raw material required is readily available in the country—wool, dye and cotton, the wood and iron for the looms. It is an ideal village industry, since it requires no form of power.

Should we be content with being merely a source of cheap labour? We have the market, we have the raw materials, we have the skilled workers and the low prices—but could we offer something more?

In the context of India this would require more than the revival of an old craft, it is the creation of a new one. Let's look at one individual starting in the industry.

Nand Kishore Choudhury had for several years been running a shoe-shop in the bazaar of his native Churu in Rajasthan. Business was good but there was little room to expand. He was dissatisfied—he wanted to get into something on his own, to face a challenge in which he could prove himself in the tradition of the Marwari entrepreneur. Unlike most young men he did not want to seek his fortune in the streets of Calcutta or Bombay. Churu would do; something could be found.

His eye lit on carpets. He discovered that Rajasthan produces 45% of India's raw wool; of this the bulk goes into carpets. Although the state supplies so much of the wool, government estimates claims that of the 50,000 looms in the country only 3,000 are in Rajasthan. The vast majority of production is in U.P., particularly in the area of Benares. He soon found that the government was actively encouraging small scale industries of this sort, particularly in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. It was now necessary to look more carefully into the feasibility of starting some looms in Churu itself.

No one in Churu had yet started in the business but looms had recently been established in several nearby villages. Although this area does not have a carpet-making tradition (except in Bikaner Jail, where the convicts have been turning out fine specimens for decades). Jaipur is an established centre for carpet production. Looms are already being manufactured in the city, and supplies of dyed, semi-worsted wool are readily available.

In April last year Choudhury committed himself by ordering his first two looms, one thirteen and the other fifteen feet in length. Labour was not a great problem, at least in theory, since the government had run a project for the past two and half years to train boys in this craft. This course, since discontinued was for two months, but none of its students had found employment in this line. In fact it seems that many of the boys came merely for the Rs 60 attendance stipend and had learned little. Choudhury contacted an exporter in Jaipur who was a native of a nearby village. This man made the highest offer for completed carpets—Rs 70 per square foot for 9 x 16 quality work. This '9 x 16' refers basically to the number of knots per square inch—the more knots there are per unit area, the finer the quality and the detail of pattern. In this case there are nine strings to the inch in the warp or 'tana' in the horizontal plane (thus nine knots, one on each string) and sixteen knots to the inch along each of these vertical strings. This means that the carpet has 144 knots per square inch.

The exporter supplied the maps of the patterns which the buyers, many of them Germans, required. As things stand, these buyers order from a standard list of numbered designs, most of which are of Persian origin and are considered 'safe' on the market. The maps, each specific to a design are drawn on graph paper in the correct colours and double actual size; they show a large enough section of the pattern for the whole carpet to be made. Since there is much repetition in the carpets at present being 'mass-produced' it is not necessary to have a map of the whole carpet. However, some of the most beautiful designs in the past have not been the symmetrical medallion carpets—such asymmetrical specimens would require a map of a large part of their area. These would only be made for a special order and the demand for anything 'different' is very small. The foreign buyers represent the big dealers. They have a sharp eye on the market, and what consumers will buy without much sales effort.

Choudhury's looms arrived after a week. They were solid, heavy structures made from sal wood from U.P. and Assam. Sal is the best timber since it does not warp as it dries. It is essential that the 'belan', the massive timber around which the carpet is gradually wound as it progresses, should be absolutely straight. Not without difficulty, the looms were set up in the small courtyard.

PROGRAMMED CARPETS? WHAT NEXT!

While India struggles to make her weaving talent apparent, she is being pre-empted in her efforts by the West. Exquisite hand-made rugs and carpets, no more affordable by the man on the street, are being replaced by computer technology.

Rugs and carpets born in the East, went West in 1755, where handmade 'broad-loom' production was established in Axminster, Devon. These 'handmades' were themselves nudged aside with the advent of machine-made carpeting in 1835, but the name 'Axminster' stuck.

Today, a new manufacturing development called 'Kara-crest' has made it possible for those with a limited budget to own an Oriental-design rug. Art lovers will possibly be affronted by the idea of computers taking over this sacred area, but the manufacturers obviously have their defences ready.

The process eliminates the handwork still involved on an 'Axminster' look, and instead uses a computer to put the design on a tape which in turn controls the fabrication of the dyed yarns. But Kara-crest, it is claimed, is not a printing process; it retains some of the hand-techniques. The skeins for instance, are dyed separately in the wool before the carpet is fabricated.

Along with time and labour, this process saves costs, and carpets are priced at almost half the cost of a traditional.

An ustad from Benares, who had taught at the training centre until it closed, was employed, along with fifteen boys of about thirteen. The boys had all completed the government course, and were fairly equally divided between Muslims and Hindus of various castes. The group that took most naturally to the work all came from one gali and were the sons of weavers of khadi cloth.

Choudhury purchased his main raw materials in Jaipur. White cotton thread is required for the vertical ranks of strings, the warp or tana, and the horizontal threads which follow each row of knots, the weft or bana. The semi-worsted, dyed wool, corresponding to numbered colours shown on the map, is sold there in hanks. Ten or twelve colours are fairly average for these designs. Since the colours must be reliably fast, expensive chrome dyes are used.

The dyed wool costs about Rs 70 per kilogram and a good quality 6 feet x 4 feet rug of half inch pile, such as is in high demand abroad, would use some 8 kilograms of wool. It is important not to be too thrifty when buying the wool for the ground colour, 'zemin', and for the border, 'patta'. These two areas will generally be the same colour in any one carpet. If there is not enough wool to complete the carpet it will be necessary to buy more, and it is virtually impossible to get a perfect match in shade. This failure to match colours perfectly, referred to as 'abrash', is often treasured in antique carpets as a sign of the fallible individual at work. Today such flaws may considerably reduce the value of the article.

Work starts. The ustad takes several reliable boys and they carefully perform the task of setting out the warp on the ground, knotting each of the hundreds of strings into loops of equal length. The total length of the warp will be much greater than that of the finished carpet.

Meanwhile other boys are converting the hanks of wool into the smooth-running oval balls which will hang behind them as they sit at the loom. Each boy will have the full range of colours behind him.

The warp, when ready, is set on the loom and checked, so that each string is equidistant from its neighbours. The double rank of strings that make up the warp are separated to make work easier. After a row of knots is completed the threads of the weft may simply be passed between the two ranks before; by adjustment of the three makras, the front rank is sent back and the back comes forward. Also the double rank arrangement means that there is twice the space between each string than there would be if the rank were just single; thus it is easier for the boys to tie their knots. Before work starts a line of knots, the chain or zanjeer, is tied along the bottom of the warp. Now the loom is ready.

Choudhury's looms will be used to produce two rugs of 6 feet by 4 feet, but they could equally well be used for one large carpet, the size of which will be limited by the size of the loom. Four boys sit side by side at each loom, a fifth is the map-reader. This last crouches at the other side of the warp from the knotters, He follows the map knot by knot with his finger, singing out the instructions—how many knots and of which colours. The instructions apply to all four boys since each is working from border to centre and the two rugs are identical and symmetrical. Such conditions, of course, do not always apply. At each order the kids grab the woollen thread of the appropriate colour, knot it onto the correct string of the warp, and cut the thread with a deft movement of their curved-bladed knives. As they work, they sing back the instruction they have just fulfilled so that the air is full of chant.

After each row of knots two eight-ply cotton threads are run between the strings of the warp to constitute the weft. The weft is thus woven into the warp. This use of two strands gives rise to the description 'double-weft' for such carpets. A single weft carpet uses just one six-ply thread for each line of weft. When a row is completed the weft and the knots are beaten down by means of a special instrument with a comb-like end called a panja. The makra is then moved, so that the back threads of the warp come forward, and the chanting of another row of knots begins. After each two rows of knots the pile is trimmed with scissors.

The two 6 foot x 4 foot carpets on each loom will take about a month to complete. They are made as one piece, only to be divided after they are finished. A test of the completed carpet is to examine the back—the surface should be even, and none of the cotton strands of weft or warp should be visible. Choudhury's first rugs passed that test.

Each carpet has 144 knots per square inch!

The carpets are taken, unseparated, to Jaipur where they are washed, clipped and separated by men trained in such work. On separation the two cut borders are reinforced by the stitching of a 'karni', or strong margin. A similar karni has already been knotted into the other edges whilst the carpet was made. When all is finished these rugs will go on to Delhi from where they will either be flown to some major centre abroad such as Amsterdam, Frankfurt, or Munich, or will be sent to Bombay or Calcutta to be despatched by sea.

The first of Choudhury's carpets were a success, and he has expanded his unit to seven looms and has roofed in another courtyard to house them. He has avoided labour problems by paying his boys rather more than they would get elsewhere, and they appear to find him a good employer. The atmosphere of the place is transitional between child and adult; it veers between childish fights and tears on one hand and the adult responsibility of a skilled craftsman on the other.

What is the significance of Choudhury and his kind to the designer? India is acquiring a large reservoir of skilled craftsmen capable of producing carpets and wall-hangings at very competitive prices. At present there is no doubt that child labour is being exploited—to produce accurate copies of 'traditional' designs that relate not at all to their own cultural surroundings. Rajasthan, for example, is rich in so many fields of traditional design that it seems unfortunate that no one is prepared to risk including some of these local elements in their work. The potential of these little carpets units was brought home to me by the arrival of a French painter in Churu. In the course of conversation with Choudhury he expressed interest in having one of his abstract paintings made into a wall carpet. Choudhury was enthusiastic, and explained that such a project was not complicated—if necessary, wool could be specifically dyed to match exactly the shades required, and the map would be relatively easy to prepare. Thus it is clear that individual patterns can be followed at little extra expense. With this growing reservoir of skilled workers where are the new ideas to launch, a golden age for this craft in India? □