

## Women weave



### The ancient art of making carpets becomes a tool for women empowerment in Jaipur

Anita asks me to try my hand at it, but I am reluctant.

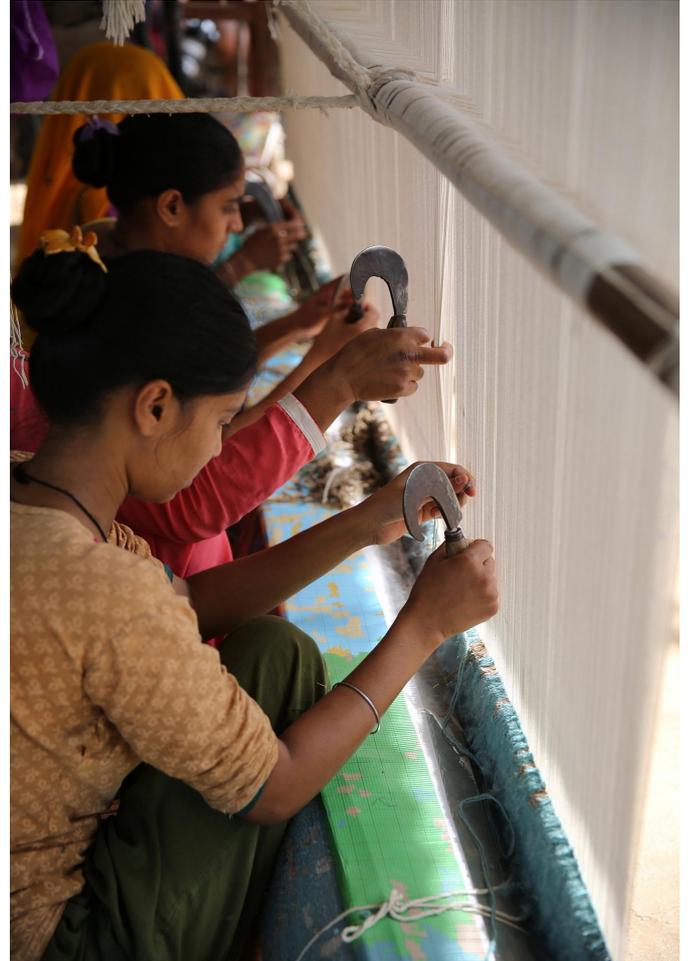
A moment before, she had told me how a single wrong move on the weaving loom can ruin an entire carpet, that takes an average of three months to weave. “Come on, go at it,” she urged, and I sat down on the thin wooden plank elevated by a metre from the dusty ground beneath, next to the three other women, and held the two rows of threads, sort of like holding a guitar. The tani (white cotton thread strung on the loom) was surprisingly easy to interlock in my fingers, and I slipped the blue wool through the two rows of the tani and finished a knot, following Anita’s demo. And there. I had learnt the first note in this orchestra, as I understood how weaving carpets, is not very different from writing a piece of music. To elaborate, there is a structure and rhythm to it, a grand narrative, but one can have delightful parallel conversations within the larger piece that stand on their own. The women in this village, Manpura, work for the Jaipur Rug Foundation, a social enterprise that employs women such as Anita, as fellow weavers, across villages. Each village has its separate weaving community. The company was founded by NK Chaudhary, who also set up the first loom of the company, teaching himself, and employing nine weavers. His aim was to connect weavers and artisans to the ultimate buyer, and cut out the proverbial bloodsucking middlemen.

Today, the foundation works in over 600 villages, and supplies carpets in over 140 countries with over 40,000 artisans. Buyers are welcome to visit the site where carpets are made, before deciding upon what to take back home.

How rug-making, an Iranian art, flourished in Jaipur is not exactly noted in the historical annals. This story lies more in the sung narratives of trade routes, exchanged in caravans that passed through these gated kingdoms in the desert. What can be surmised, however, is that since the State always had a thriving trade route across the world, the city has attracted the exotic arts of blue pottery (from China), and Persian rugs. Why the desert state has a Hathi Gaon, a village for elephants, is also down to the same reason.

Weaving isn’t usually for a solitary artist. Just like any other collaborative art form, it involves multiple pairs of hands, and sometimes

multiple visions that are realised on the same canvas of 10 by 12 feet, or less. While the Jaipur Rug Foundation has rugs of all shapes and sizes, it is their Artisans Originals collection that caught my eye. The company claims it is their most popular collection, and each artisan weaves in her name into the rug. Under their postcard project, photographs of their finished products are sent back to them. Here, no artist is given a brief; they are supplied materials as required, and they design the carpet they want; some even six months to make. While other carpets are designed digitally in the organisation's design room, and a printed brief the size of the carpet is supplied to the artisan, in this case, they make carpets the traditional way, without any prototype, banking on instinct and memory over math for finesse. Himanshi, my guide and employee at the organisation, informs me how often these rugs are bought off the loom itself. She later shows me a favourite of hers, called Dilliwaali, a rug in which the weaver Gulabi Devi has depicted the tale of her surviving cancer. She travelled to Delhi alone for treatment, and she wove in the shapes of her cancerous growth into beautiful designs.



The foundation's rugs have won several international design awards for these carpets, including the prestigious German Design Award in 2016 and 2017.

'Anthar', a rug from their chief designer Kavi's 'Project error' collection, became Asia's only rug to win a special mention in German Design Award, 2016. Himanshi has an interesting story on this rug as well. Apparently, it was the result of a fight between three artisans who disagreed on the final design, while working on it simultaneously. As a result, the entire rug is full of unpredictable designs, and stark contrasts, an accidental piece of art. Cast out at first as a defective piece, the design tells the tale of a human journey as three weavers struggle to find their rhythm while working on the same piece. Their rugs often incorporate both traditional and contemporary cultural influences, with wide-ranging motifs from nature, personal stories to even shakkarparas (traditional sweets)!

Their headquarters are built along sustainability principles. The office décor includes items made with waste material generated from rug-making: a very eye-catching wool giraffe installation sits at the entrance. The showroom has shown restraint; not your average glitzy home décor place with chandeliers, but a more naked space, where I'm taught the intricacies of rug-making, from thread count, to the difference between hand-woven and hand-knotted, embossed or engraved. Predictably, this experience has changed what I feel about carpets. I won't walk all over them without giving them a second look anymore. And I'll be more interested in what's under them, than over, to see the artist's signature, to understand the true difference between a masterpiece woven painstakingly, and a mere pretender.

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