

Home > Lifestyle > Fashion

Magic carpets empower women and fuel their creativity

The only sound with this silent melody are the lyrics of their folk tunes.



Published: 18th February 2019 08:06 AM | Last Updated: 19th February 2019 05:51 PM

 | **A+** **A** **A-**



Gauri Khan with Suman ji and Shanti bai

By Rebecca Vargese

Express News Service

If the world's greatest guitar solos could be judged purely on the nimbleness and dexterity of finger techniques, the women carpet weavers from Manpura would rival the likes of even Jimmy Page and Van Halen. Here, in a nondescript village in Rajasthan, about 40 km from Jaipur, an unassuming loom replaces the fretboard of a guitar as their choice of instrument, while the number of knots per square inch determine the speed at which their fingers move. The only sound with this silent

melody are the lyrics of their folk tunes.

It is at one such loom, at Jaipur Rugs, manufacturing centre of Manpura, that Shanti bai keeps herself engaged. An unschooled third-generation carpet weaver—whose design inspired Gauri Khan's maiden carpet collection that launched at the Maison & Objet, Paris in 2018 — the 36-year-old has been with the Rajasthan-based brand for over a decade.

Keen to meet the woman whose name has resounded throughout the hour-long drive, I conjure up the image of a shy rural woman, possibly hidden behind a veil. Turns out my imagination had been working overtime. Dressed in a bright red sari, Shanti bai's beaming gaze meets us directly. No ghonghat veiling the smile lines and hardy creases on her face. And she's not alone. Five other unveiled faces greet us, smiling, as we walk into the front yard of Shanti's house that doubles up as a manufacturing factory for Jaipur Rugs' hand-knotted carpets.

Native luxury

Well into their workday at half past 11, these local women artisans hum as they labour over their latest consignment of rugs for the brand—three of them working on a single loom. Perched on a low wooden bench, next to the base of a vertical loom, the women weave in intricate designs using either woollen, silk or cotton yarn, creating the horizontal weft pattern on the warp.

Taking anywhere between three to six months to complete a rug, an experienced weaver can string together up to 30 Persian knots in a minute. My awkward fingers, however, barely managed to strum up two after multiple attempts. "It can take a few months to master," says Shanti, a single mother, who has trained other artisans and overlooks the production from the Manpura looms that are solely run by women weavers.

Imagined communities

Though, one in a network of 600 villages spanning the five states of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Jharkhand, stories of women like that of Shanti bai from Manpura do not exist in isolation. In fact, they abound at the Jaipur Rugs empire founded by Nand Kishore Chaudhary (NKC), whose workforce consists majorly of women. While this in part springs from his legacy of having three daughters—Asha, Archana and Kavita—NKC has often attributed it to the advice his historian friend Ilay Cooper gave him, "Women are more efficient and receptive than men." From recording a profit of USD 2.65 million in 2016 to being cited as an example of a social business which helps in tackling world poverty by CK Prahalad in his book *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid*, the success story that started out in 1978 with nine weavers and two looms, is undeniable.

Off the map

While social initiatives continue to empower women, a balance between craft conservation, creativity and design aesthetics is being led by chief designer, Kavitha Chaudhary.

Voiceless verse

An artisan original, Anthar, a rug from Kavi's Project Error collection became Asia's only rug to win a special mention in German Design Award, 2016.

The outcome of a disagreement between the three weavers over who had created the rug, the resulting pattern was an amalgam of unaligned motifs that progressed into unified design. Offering up to 196 knots per sq-inch, every knot created on a carpet is predetermined by a master map. This dictates not only the design of the rug, but details like colour and material of yarn to be used.