MIND TO MACHINE

CHALLENGES OF TAKING THE DESIGNS AND WEavers OF NUAPATNA & BARPAlI ONLINE
Digital Empowerment Foundation in partnership with Microsoft Corporate Citizenship has initiated DigiKala, a model that primarily involves inclusive and decentralised use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) in critical aspects of cluster development, especially to improve and scale up weaving skills, designs, marketing and entrepreneurship, besides creating sustainable livelihood options for youth in the clusters.

With this goal, a three-member team from Digital Empowerment Foundation revisited the DigiKala project sites in Odisha recently to finalise events and activities leading up to the inauguration of the project in November. Here is a report on the visit.

DATE OF THE VISIT:
September 15-19, 2015

TEAM MEMBERS:
Shahid Siddiqui, Shahid Ahmed and Udita Chaturvedi

LOCATION:
Barpali in Bargarh district; Nuapatna in Cuttack district
WEAVING IN ODISHA

• According to the state government report of 2012-2013, there are a total of 1,92,339 weavers and 43,652 handlooms in Odisha. There are 1,171 cooperative societies in 38 clusters.

• Weaving is the primary source of income in Barpali. The secondary and tertiary sources of income are farming and daily wage labour work, respectively. In Nuapatna, daily wage labour is the secondary source of income.

• In Bargarh, only the Meher community (OBC) is involved in weaving. However, there is no such caste-based divide in Nuapatna. Members of all castes, including Brahmins, can be weavers.

• Weavers using tie-and-dye technique for ikat in Barpali and Nuapatna don’t necessarily require a graph paper for designs. Most weavers working on the bandhani or tie-and-dye technique, don’t require a graph paper for design. They require one only if the design is new and intricate. Most of them, due to their several years of experience, just imagine a design and start working on them through mental calculations, and then execute those ideas on the tie-and-dye frame and subsequently the loom. However, this is also the reason why there isn’t too much of experimentation in design, especially in Barpali. They’ve memorised a few designs and work on the same design. At the same time, as the design is not to scale on a graph paper, weaving on the loom requires extra precision because the weaver has to often force the threads to manually align with the desired design if the dyed parts of the thread are a little askew. This is the reason why weavers are often only able to weave a few inches in a day.
• In Barpali block, each handloom cluster (such as Kusanpuri, Bandhpali and Bagbadi, among others) is located at a distance of five kilometre from the other.

• While the style of weaving in the different clusters of Barpali is largely the same, there are slight variations in the style of designs and wide difference in their monthly household incomes. While a weaver family earns between Rs. 10,000 and Rs. 15,000 in Kusanpuri, a family only earns about Rs. 6,000 and Rs. 4,000 in Bagbadi and Bandhpali, respectively.

• Handloom weavers are facing a stiff competition from print work. Those involved in the latter simply buy a plain white cotton saree from the market, print the design on it and sell it as authentic ikat for as little as Rs. 400, severely damaging the market for handloom ikat sarees, stoles and dupattas.

• Weavers in Kusanpuri, who only make cotton sarees, buy raw material worth Rs. 1,000 per saree on their own from the market, and sell the finished products to middlemen for about Rs. 2,200. They have no knowledge of how much the middlemen sells it for in the market.

• In Bagbadi, almost every weaver has a Dobby attached to his handloom, which is set up to only make, on an average, about two sarees at a time. Each weaver, thus, produces about four to six sarees a month. In Bagbadi, about 30 weaver families work for a cooperative society while 175 work independently (through middlemen).

• While different middlemen allow deals for all those involved in the process of weaving, cooperative societies only work for weavers (those working on the handloom) and ignore those who’re involved in the other phases of weaving such as tie-and-dye or suttaayi (spinning thread).

• Those weavers who work for a society, get raw materials from their respective cooperative societies. After a saree is woven, the weaver gives it to his respective society in exchange for his wage, which includes the cost of raw materials provided to the weavers.

• Almost every cooperative society, in Barpali and Nupatna, is apparently and allegedly working as a middleman but has been legally registered as a
society. Cooperative society also provides weavers with loans and annual bonus, which could be as little as Rs. 200. Each society has about 20-30 weaver members who get an entry book, which records the quantity of different raw materials received and sarees produced. This notebook also helps calculate the wages of the weavers.

- Most cooperative societies then sell the products to Boyanika, which represents the primary weavers’ cooperative societies of Odisha, or other similar groups like Bastralaya and Utkalika. Boyanika is a state-government society that directly sells the products to the customers through its retail stores across the country. Out of the three, Boyanika leads in terms of popularity and turnover. For self-sustainability, Boyanika keeps 5 per cent of the profit. Weavers do not get any share of the profit. However, the state government is working on a new policy, which may allow 5 per cent profit to weavers and cooperatives, each.

- Weavers in this part of Odisha don’t always depend on ‘designers’. Most of them make their own designs. However, barring a few weaver families, there seems to be a lack of variety in most sarees as weavers use the same tried-and-tested designs for sarees, stoles and dupattas. Alternatively, designs are also provided on graph papers (for idea and not to scale unlike most handloom clusters of India) by cooperative societies, middlemen and master weavers. Once a design is given to a weaver, the latter calculates how much thread would be required, and then seeks the same for the society. A weaver is allowed to negotiate and bargain for his wage after the saree has been made.

- If a weaver has to sell a particular saree in the market on his own, he would sell it for at least Rs. 3,500, which would include the cost of raw material and his wage. When the same saree is bought by a society, the weaver, for example, gets Rs. 1,100 after deducting the cost of the raw materials and the society’s margin.

- Weavers in both Barpali and Nuapatna are willing to learn to design digitally because they understand that if a variety in designs is created, the demand for the sarees will also increase in the market. They also realise that computer-aided designs will increase accuracy and make weaving a comparatively less time-consuming process.
NUAPATNA CLUSTER

- In Nuapatna, there are about 5,000 weavers and 2,200 handlooms, six of which are Jacquard.

- In Nuapatna too, most weavers work for cooperative societies, which provide them with raw material, follow the state government conversion rate, and buy sarees from the weavers.

- Weavers in Nuapatna use both natural dye and wet dye. In fact, Nuapatna is one of the few clusters of Odisha were natural and vegetable dyes are still given importance. However, it’s the older generation that is keeping alive the tradition of using natural dye in sarees, stoles and dupattas. The younger generation of weavers prefers chemical and wet dye as it’s less time-consuming and less labour intensive.
• There are 14 cooperative societies in Nuapatna alone. Some of these societies also produce work which is unique to their society members. For example, Cooperative Society No. 2 is the only society in Nuapatna which works on extra weft. Extra-weft work is usually not seen in Odisha ikat sarees. There are very few clusters across the state that specialise in this type of weaving.

• In Nuapatna, there is a design and service centre from where societies often take designs to give to the weavers. The service centre also tries to inform the societies about the latest trends and demands in the market.

• Weavers, too, notice a change in demand and work accordingly. For example, until some years ago, stoles were wider than they are today. Weavers say that young girls want stoles that are not very long or wide, so that they can be easily wrapped around the neck to accessorise western clothes.

• In Nuapatna, the weavers also manufacture sarees, stoles and dupattas for renowned designer Ritu Kumar and leading traditional garment store Fabindia. Both of them provide weavers with design samples, for example a sketch or a piece of printed garment, and ask the former to replicate it.

• Team DEF also visited the handloom department office in Nuapatna to learn about the various techniques and styles adopted in the cluster. Representatives of the department estimated the annual turnover of Nuapatna sarees at Rs. 26,40,000.
GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION IN HANDLOOM CLUSTERS

• Besides weavers and designers, it is very important to train those involved in the tie-and-dye process in digital designing. After all, it is them who are creating designs on their frames before handing them over to the weavers.

• A matter of great concern for weavers in both the clusters, Barpali and Nuapatna, is that they are scared of their designs being shared or of a design being shared between multiple weavers. After the establishment of the design centre and the design library, it is important to ensure that once a unique design is created, it must not be shared with more than one designer.

• Team DEF also visited the Weavers’ Service Centre (or the Bunkar Bhawan), which was established in February 1992, in Bhubaneswar. Mr. SK Patra is heading the centre as the Deputy Director since September 2014. Interestingly, he also happens to be the younger brother of one of Nuapatna’s National Awardees, Sarat Patra, whose museum we will be establishing in his cluster.

• There are a total of 25 Weavers’ Service Centres operating in various parts of the country. Each centre is specialised with its own skills depending upon the needs of the handloom weavers, exporters, cooperative societies and other organisations connected with the handloom industry in the area. The centre not only provides skill and training but also provides support to marketing and preservation, assistance for construction of worksheds, personal loans and health insurance, sharing of new designs with weavers and creation of a repository for them. They also ensure that no two designers are given the same design in order to protect the uniqueness and the individuality of each cluster/weaver.

• The Weavers’ Service Centre also has a factory with about 10 simple handlooms, one Dobby, one Jacquard and one bigger-than-normal handloom to weave dari (rug) and bedsheets.

• Making bedsheets on handloom is not an easy task. It requires triple the time and effort, simply because a weaver has to manage a width of 108 inches and throw a Fly Shuttle across the width manually in the process of weaving. Yet, Bargarh
is known for weaving these bedsheets that are available in the market for Rs. 1,500-2,000.

• Debashish Samanta is a Textile Designer associated with the Weavers’ Service Centre. A graduate of Fine Arts from the Government College of Arts, Kolkata, Samanta produces designs on paper for weavers and cooperative societies. For this purpose, he studies area-specific designs, their fabrics, patterns, motifs and colours to develop new designs on them according to the local taste, heritage and style. In the last 18 years of his career, in Bhubaneswar and Kolkata, Samanta has created a repository of over 1,000 designs manually and through Computer-Aided Design (CAD) software. Before Samanta joined the centre in bhuvneshwari, the centre was also producing designs on software like Continental and Swati.

• The state government-operated centre recently sanctioned Rs. 2.5 crore for Nuapatna under need-based allocation.

• The central government, too, recently showed great interest in taking up the cause of the weavers. Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared August 7 as National Handloom Day, which set in motion the planning of several new policies and programmes for the benefit of the handloom industry in India. Under the developing policies, are plans for implement computer and Internet training to the weavers and set up an e-Commerce portal, exclusively, for the handloom weavers of India. However, these ideas are only in the planning stage and may take years before they are actually implemented.

• Bargarh, Ganjam, Nuapatna and Sambalpur are four mega clusters where the chief minister has initiated skill development and training programmes. These are clusters where Mr. Naveen Patnaik has also tried to introduce technology in some way or the other. However, weavers claim that most government officials and local-level politicians are corrupt, and don’t allow the benefits to trickle down to the ground level.
• This is where DigiKala could prove to be extremely beneficial. Under the project, we’re not only setting up a design centre but also a digital literacy and training centre, along with an e-Commerce portal, exclusively for DigiKala clusters in Barpali and Nuapatna.

• To take forward the project, DEF recently hired local resource persons to manage Barpali and Nuapatna clusters for DigiKala. Space for the integrated design resource centre has also been found in 3-room (plus bathroom and kitchen) unit. The unit has been taken on rent, and the space will be used for our digital designing & digital literacy purposes.

• Space for the museum has also been finalised. It will be established in National Awardee Sarat Patra’s factory, which is about 300 metres from the centre space. We will invest in framing his art pieces (sarees, wall hangings and stoles), creating posters, other decoration art work, and lights for ambience.

• In the last design competition held earlier this month, we saw participation of 50 designers. We had then scheduled a second handloom design competition in Barpali and Nuapatna. Posters were been put across the blocks to invite weavers, designers, youth and students to participate in the competition. This time, all participants — 140 in Barpali and 110 in Nuapatna — were given certificates of appreciation, and there will be a cash prize of Rs. 5,000, Rs. 3,000 and Rs. 2,000 for the top three winners at both the locations. Winners will be selected by a team of local handloom experts (members of cooperative societies, government officials and national awardee weavers), and will be awarded with their cash prizes on the day of inauguration of DigiKala in Odisha.
CHALLENGES AHEAD

- Team DEF is now busy researching about a design software that can be used for the project to suit the style of weaving of the two clusters, and taught to weavers before the official inauguration of DigiKala. Meanwhile, all procurement requirements will be completed and a digital literacy centre set up at both the locations.

- Through our visits to Barpali and Nuapatna, we have understood that the learnings from Chanderiyaan are not completely applicable to the clusters of Odisha. The style of weaving and designing is very different in Madhya Pradesh and Odisha. Unlike Odisha (barring a few clusters in the state), Chanderi weavers work on extra weft. In fact, there are stark differences between the style of weaving in Barpali and Nuapatna also. While weavers in the former block use the Double Ikat (in tana and bana) technique, weavers in Nuapatna use the Single Ikat (in tana) technique.

- This also means that the same software, which is being used in Chanderiyaan, cannot be provided to the weavers in Odisha. Therefore, there is a need to find a new software or design application.

- Additionally, as the weavers in Odisha are not accustomed to the practice of designing on paper, the process of migrating a design from brain to computer would be slightly slow. This is because, due to lack of practice of designing on paper, the weavers are not good with free hand drawing, which is needed in plenty for computer-aided designing.
SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

• With proper training and personal attention to each weaver or designer, we can overcome the challenge of designing on computers.

• The first step would be to make the local community, especially members of the weaver community, familiar with a computer and adept at basic computer skills.

• It is also necessary to counsel them. Weavers may initially be hesitant to use the computer as, some may feel, it will slow down their designing process. However, this would only be a temporary phase. They need to understand that once they are comfortable using a computer for designing, threads on the tie-and-dye frames would be perfectly aligned. Thereby, reducing the weavers’ time spent on manually aligning the threads on the loom.

• We can start by introducing digital archiving in the first leg itself. This will help build confidence among weavers. Additionally, after a design is photographed/scanned and transferred to a computer, weavers will be able to use it, modify it and then transfer the same to the loom.
DigiKala is a joint initiative of Digital Empowerment Foundation and Microsoft Corporate Citizenship.