



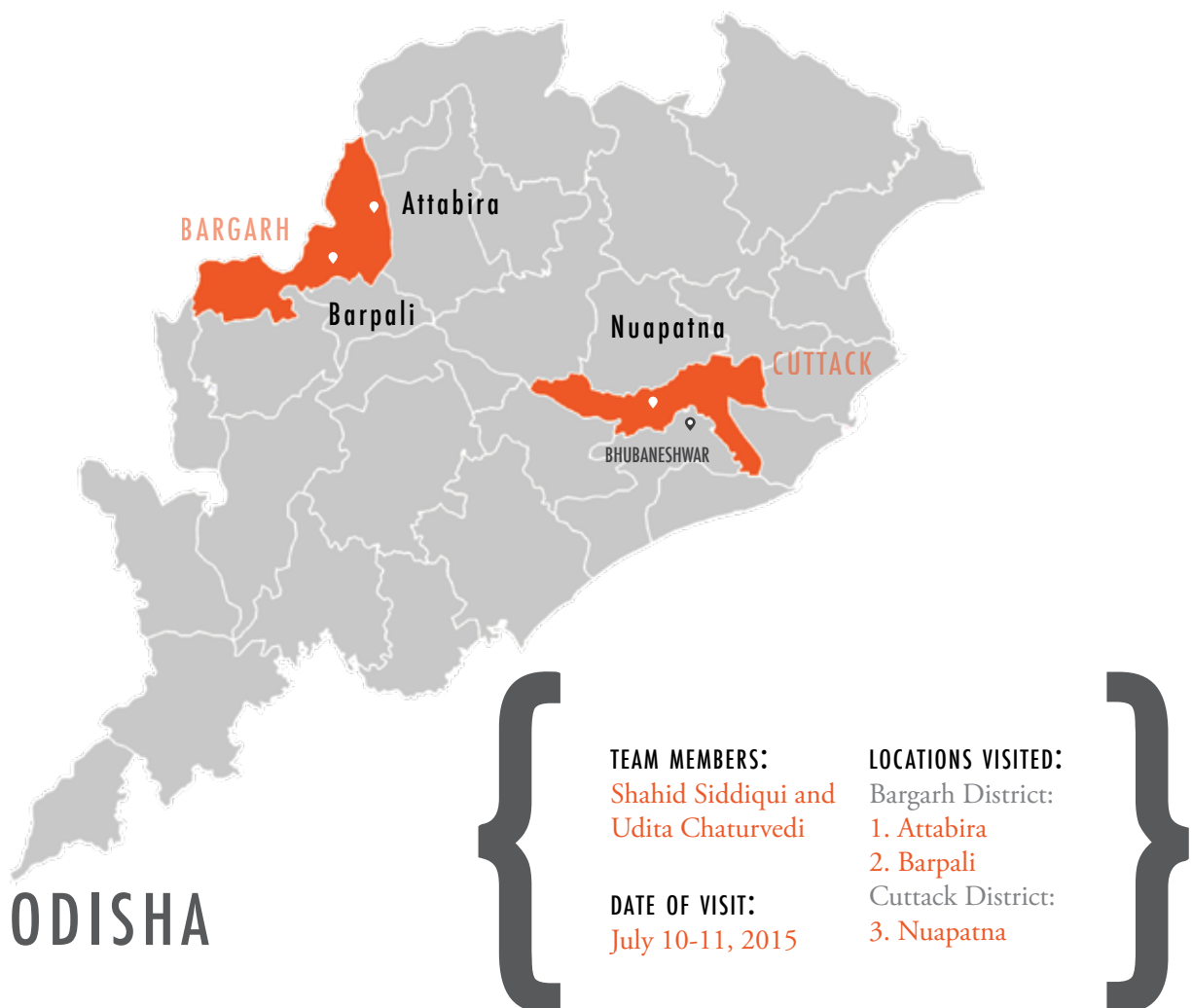
Overcoming Challenges in Weaving Through Technology

A recce report of the community of weavers at Nuapatna and Barpali, Odisha

INTRODUCTION

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 team from DEF visited Odisha to identify clusters we want to empower and to check the feasibility of the project.



OVERVIEW

ATTABIRA

Attabira is a Vidhan Sabha constituency of Bargarh district in Odisha. This constituency includes Attabira, Attabira block and Bheden block. A total of 78 villages, including Tope, fall under the Attabira administrative district, and there are several clusters of weavers in this block. Simple block pattern is a common design for sarees in this block, and weaver households earn between Rs. 8,000 to Rs. 10,000 per month.

BARPALI

Barpali is a town and a notified area committee in Bargarh district of Odisha, known for its handloom weaves. There are about 1,000 handlooms in this part of the state, and weavers here are known for their original square ikat prints on Tasar silk. Women's contribution to the handloom industry is also greater in Barpali than in Attabira, and a weaver household earns between Rs. 6,000 to Rs. 8,000 per month.

NUAPATNA

Nuapatna is a town in Cuttack district of Odisha with a large cluster of weavers, many of them National Award winners. Weavers in Nuapatna are more meticulous in their work, and have still stuck to age-old traditional style of extracting thread and weaving. The Bangalore and Malda silk sarees that are exported from this part of Odisha are sold at high prices but the weaver households are only earning between Rs. 2,000 to Rs.3,000 per month.



ATTABIRA

GEOGRAPHY AND OBSERVATIONS



Attabira is located at a distance of 300 kilometres from the state Capital but it is only 30 kilometres away from the city of Sambalpur, and is well connected by road and railway. Bargarh is a big district with several pockets of weaver clusters.

In this district, it is the Meher community of Odisha that is involved in weaving. The Meher community, listed under the Other Backward Caste category, is further divided into three sub-castes — Kusta, Kuli and Scheduled Castes. Kushtas are the high-earning and high-skilled weavers who usually work on Tasar silk sarees, Kulis are moderately skilled weavers, and the Scheduled Castes are poor weavers who are mostly restricted to making *gamchas*.

Tope also has a Common Facility Centre where weavers often sit, ideate and discuss issues. This centre can be seen as a possible design resource centre for our DigiKala project, especially since there are schools and colleges within a 5-kilometre radius of this block. Interestingly, the Odisha government Minister for Textiles, Handloom and Handicrafts, Snehangini Chhuria, also hails from Attabira.

The place, however, does not have much to offer in terms of tourism or heritage, barring the story of a freedom fighter named Gangadhar Meher and a few temples.

Tope village of Attabira comes under a tribal belt and houses 81 handlooms. A Meher community weaving household earns around Rs. 8,000 to Rs. 10,000 per month in Attabira. They take a minimum of five days to make a saree (starting from tie-and-dye to weaving), working eight hours a day and making about Rs. 1,600 a saree. The same saree is then sold for at least Rs. 2,500 in the local market, or exported to Delhi and the US at much higher prices.



BARPALI

GEOGRAPHY AND OBSERVATIONS



Located 40 kilometres south-west of Attabira and 340 kilometres from Bhubaneswar, Barpali is more densely populated than Attabira.

In Barpali, there are about 1,000 handlooms. Weavers in this part of Odisha are known for their original ikat prints on Tasar silk. Some of them also have advanced traditional weaving machines that have helped them improve their designs and quick pace the weaving process. In fact, several national-awardee handloom weavers hail from this cluster.

Alike Attabira, Barpali too doesn't have much to offer to tourists but there are several temples in and around Barpali. Less than a kilometer away, there is also a cluster of Barangpali Stone Carvers and a Handloom Sales and Display Centre.

Women's contribution to weaving is also far more important in Barpali as compared to that in Attabira where they were mostly seen separating the thread from the yarn or the cocoon. At Barpali, women help in the tie-and-dye process and also work their hands on handloom.



NUAPATNA

GEOGRAPHY AND OBSERVATIONS



Much closer to Bhubaneswar, about 70 kilometres away, is a cluster of handloom weavers in Nuapatna. When compared to Bargarh and the clusters around it, Nuapatna sarees are far better in terms of design and finish. Weavers in this part of the state actually experiment with patterns, and are more meticulous in their process of extracting thread and weaving Bangalore silk, Malda silk or Tasar sarees.

Women in the clusters manually pull out Tasar yarn from the shells of silkworms after the worms are killed in their cocoon by the heat of a fire below. Children, on the other hand, help their parents in applying starch to finished sarees (starch is a key process, especially for Malda silk sarees). This way, the entire household is involved in the process of making a saree.

Some of their sarees though, that took three years to be made, are priced around Rs. 7 lakh. A wall hanging has been priced at Rs. 30 lakh by the Victoria Museum, London. Interestingly, the Victoria Museum has approached some weavers in the cluster a few times, seeking their approval to display their sarees and wall hangings in London. The weavers, however, have turned down their request every time in the hope that they will be able to set up their own museum in Nuapatna one day.

A National Award-winning weaver family, headed by Sarat, in Nuapatna has several of such sarees that were made 500 years ago. These sarees have been passed down the generations and is matter of great pride for them.

This particular family also runs a weaving factory near their home. With about five traditional handlooms and an advanced traditional machine, this factory also has some extra space that can be seen as a possible design resource centre. At this factory, one can also witness an interesting transition in the process of designing that Sarat's family, alike many other weaver households, has been through. Earlier, the patterns and designs were hand-painted, complete with ikat-edge effect, and then copied on sarees. Today, they take print outs of designs from Google Images. In the near future, with DEF and Microsoft's assistance, they can directly make original designs on their computers.



INFRASTRUCTURE

All the three locations — Attabira, Barpali and Nuapada — have decent infrastructure, and are well connected by rail and road, with access to schools, banks, ATMS, hospitals and post offices. They have access to telephone lines (though most people prefer a mobile phone these days), availability of broadband and BSNL lines, 2G Internet service (BSNL and Idea perform better than Airtel in this area), water and power (with three-and-a-half hours of fixed power cut a day). Facilities for printing and e-ticketing are available at a couple of shops in the local market area but rest of the youth's knowledge of computers is none or limited.

GROUND REALITIES

Families earning a livelihood from handloom have been weaving for generations. It's a skill that is passed down by generations. In most families, it's now the third, fourth and even the fifth generation that is earning their livelihood through handloom. However, due to low individual income and a time-consuming process, most of the youth is migrating to other professions. There are very few who are sticking to their family profession and trying to revive the same with the use of technology. One such young man is Dilip Meher of Tope block in Attabira. He designs ikat prints on Windows Paint before copying the same on traditional handlooms. However, his knowledge of computers is limited and designing restricted to Paint, which is not the most flexible software to create patterns. But if we can train him, he'll not only be able to design better sarees but he'll also be able to encourage more youth in his village to stick to handloom weaving.

Youth's disinterest towards the profession is a major issue being faced by weaver families today. Most youngsters are not keen to participate in their family business due to low individual incomes. According to an estimate, there are about 2,000 traditional skill-based clusters in India. Unfortunately, most of them are suffering from exploitation, poor living conditions, extremely low wages and inaccessibility to market. The story is no different in the clusters of Attabira, Barpali or Nuapatna. Hence, reluctance of younger generations to engage in their traditional arts and handicrafts is causing its rapid decline.

In Nuapatna, especially, children start learning the skill of weaving from a very young age. According to master weavers in the cluster, it takes 10 years to learn the art and skill of weaving. However, often these children grow up and decide to quit the profession due lack of income. Several youth, between the age group of 20 to 30, migrate to Pune and Surat in search of work in factories. Quitting the profession after learning the skill for 10 long years is not only a waste of time and energy but also a waste of talent for these youngsters.

Involving and engaging youth from the community is, thus, not only an integral part of the process of reviving traditional craft but also of ensuring that it sustains as a viable employment or entrepreneurial option.

Another factor that makes handloom a less profitable option is it's a time-consuming nature. Handloom weavers take at least a week's time to make a simple cotton saree while a natural-dye silk saree, with finer patterns, can take anytime between three months to even seven years. The latter is commonly made in Nuapatna — a fact that Nuapatna weavers are proud of. Yet, their monthly household income is only about Rs. 2,000-3,000. In Barpali, the economic situation is a little better and household incomes averages Rs. 8,000.

Meanwhile, the government's efforts at improving the condition of weavers and promoting handicraft and handloom through its Cluster Development Programme have not had the ideal desired impact. While there are cluster development offices in Attabira and Barpali, and even a raw material bank in Nuapatna, the household incomes of weaver families have only marginally increased since 2005. Besides this policy, the non-functionality or inefficiency of other government handloom/handicrafts promotional institutions have led to lack of awareness about market prices, availability of raw material and middlemen's profit margin.

Exploitation at the hands of middlemen is, in fact, worse in Nuapatna than in Bargarh district. In Nuapatna, weavers have absolutely no idea of the actual cost of raw material or of the selling price of their sarees, stoles and suits. They are not even aware of how much profit the middleman is making. Suresh Gui is one of many such weavers. These weavers are so poor and uneducated that they can neither go to the market to buy their own raw material or sell a finished product in the market.



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OUR CHALLENGES

Prior to our visit to Orissa, we had envisaged challenges pertaining to finding a resource person, a place to rent and connectivity but all the issues have been taken care of.

Connectivity is not an issue in either of our proposed sites but lease line still remains a challenge, which will be figured out in the first quarter of the project. We have also found resource persons to conduct the baseline survey in both the proposed locations. As for a place to rent for the purpose of a design resource centre, a designer in Nuapatna has offered us his factory on rent. In Barpali, meanwhile, we have found a resource person who can help us find a place to rent.

PROPOSED ACTION SITES

Based on the ground realities and the challenges, we propose to adopt weaver clusters in Nuapatna and Barpali.

Between Barpali and Attabira, we realised that we have our own staff in the former location while we'll have to depend on a partner NGO in the latter. However, the NGO that has been working in the cluster for over a decade in the region has failed to substantially improve the economic condition of weavers and individuals from the organisation have also been working as middlemen. This will, thus, restrict our independence over the project and jeopardise our vision. There is also a stronger political influence in Attabira as compared to Barpali as the state handicraft and handloom minister is from Attabira.

More importantly, there is less awareness in Barpali about the market and government policies than that in Attabira. Establishing a design resource centre in Barpali would, thus, help weavers in the community economically and socially.

In Nuapatna, meanwhile, the economic condition of weavers is far worse than that in clusters of Bargarh. Weavers have absolutely no knowledge of market, cost of raw material or price of finished goods, and the profit earned by the middlemen. There is also a greater digital divide in Nuapatna. But what makes Nuapatna more needful of our assistance is the fact that even though their designs, their skill, their knowledge and their collection of handloom sarees and wall hangings are far richer, they are earning far less than the weavers in Attabira or Barpali.

It must be noted that the needs of weaver clusters in Barpali and Nuapatna are quite similar, yet different. While there is an urgent requirement of cutting out the middlemen and enabling access to information, especially in Nuapatna, weavers in Barpali need to experiment with design and infuse contemporary elements to traditional patterns. At the end of the day, individual and household incomes have to be increased in all the clusters to ensure handloom is not just a profitable profession but also ensures engagement of the youth to avoid migration and the eventual death of the art.

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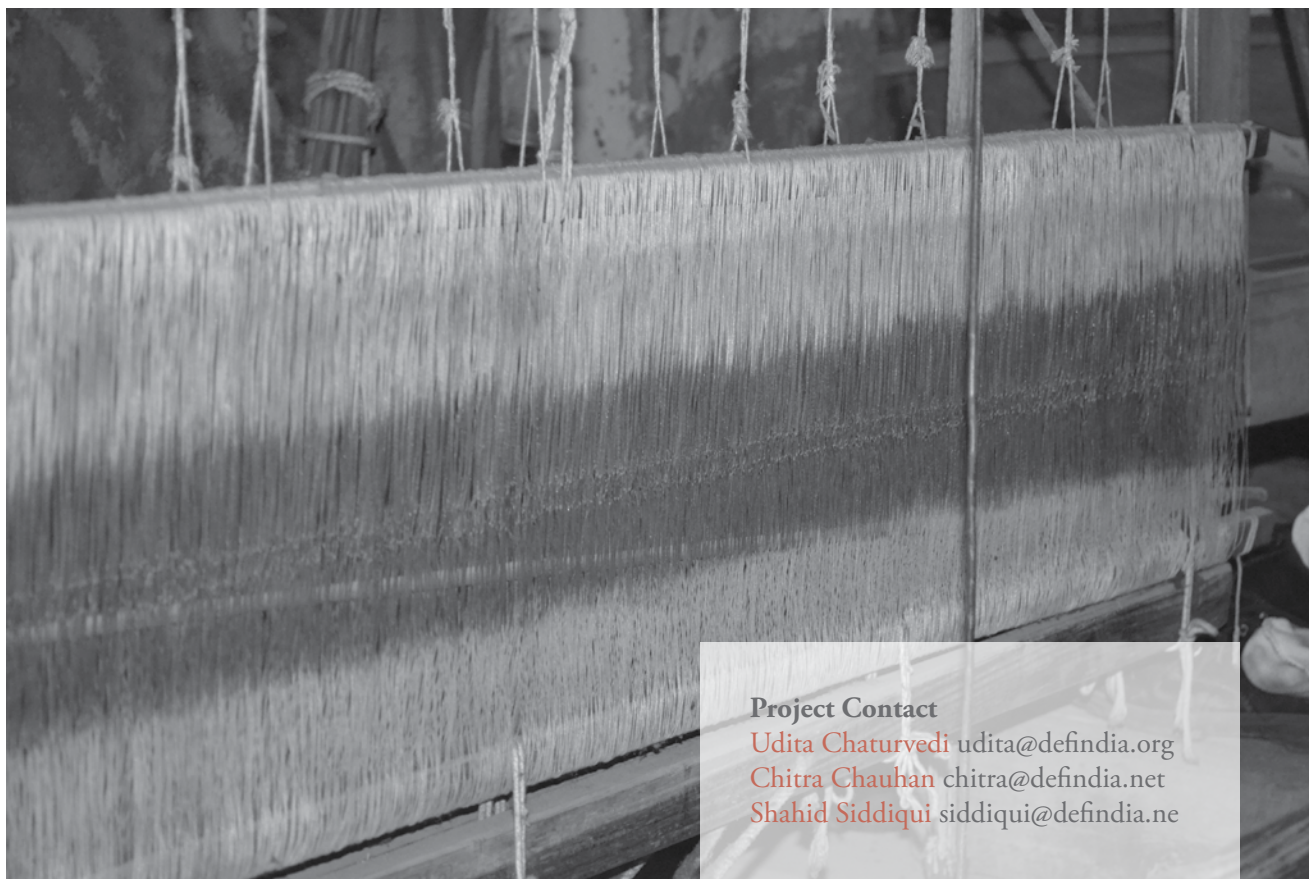


ACTION PLAN

Our action plan now involves a series of steps, immediate to mid-term, that will be implemented in the next few months ahead of the formal inauguration of the integrated design resource centres at Barpali and Nuapatna. These steps include:

- 1 Training of our resource persons to carry out a baseline survey
- 2 Analysis of the survey
- 3 Identifying and renting spaces for integrated design resource centres for both the clusters
- 4 Setting up of infrastructure and procurement of resource material
- 5 Identifying local human resource for managing the centres
- 6 Creating an exclusive website, equipped with an e-Commerce portal, for DigiKala cluster weavers
- 7 Basic training of human resource
- 8 Mobilisation and publicity of the integrated design resource centres
- 9 Basic computer training to weavers and members of the local community
- 10 Computer-aided design and design documentation training to weavers
- 11 Establishing a basic design museum for weavers of Nuapatna cluster





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