



bäänk-e-loom

Digital Cluster of Barabanki Weavers

STRUGGLING TO MAKE A LIVING

THE CHALLENGE OF INCREASING THE HOUSEHOLD
INCOME OF HANDLOOM WEAVERS OF BARABANKI

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INTRODUCTION

Digital Empowerment Foundation in partnership with Ericsson India has initiated Bank-e-Loom in Barabanki, 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 Uttar Pradesh to identify a cluster we want to empower and to check the feasibility of the project.



TEAM MEMBERS:

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LOCATIONS VISITED:

Saidanpur, Masauli and Zaidpur in
Barabanki district of Uttar Pradesh

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WEAVERS IN BARABANKI

The district of Barabanki, also known as the 'Entrance to Poorvancha', is 29 kilometres from Lucknow, the state capital of Uttar Pradesh. Barabanki is one of the four constituent districts of Faizabad division. The other districts being Faizabad district, Sultanpur district and Ambedkar Nagar district. The division is headed by a Divisional Commissioner. As of 2003-04, the district comprised seven tehsils, 17 development

blocks, 154 nyay panchayats and 1140 gram sabhas.

According to an estimate, there are about 50,000 weavers and 20,000 looms in Barabanki and adjoining areas. Each weaver family has about six members in the house, on an average, and very few of them have gone to school or completed Class X.



SAIDANPUR: GEOGRAPHY & OBSERVATIONS

Saidanpur village in Barabanki district is located at a distance of 55 kilometres, east of Lucknow — the closest major town. There is a total population of about 8,000 weavers, including 5,000 voters.

Saidanpur is a village of weavers with at least 200 weaver families. From making *gamchas* and stoles to stitching clothes and *zari* embroidery, the village is a rich artisan cluster with poor wages. Most weaver families roll enough thread on the pit loom to weave 200 *gamchas* in one setting, which takes about a month. However, the weaver families are only able to make eight to 10 pieces of *gamcha* in a day. Each *gamcha* is made of 1,500 threads in the warp or *tana*, and is a metre-and-a-half long. This *gamcha* is then sold in the local market or to a middleman for Rs. 50-60 for four pieces, bringing their daily household income to only Rs. 120.

Weavers who work for middlemen, are provided raw materials by them while those who sell their products in the local market themselves have to buy 4.5 kilogrammes of 32-count cotton for Rs. 1,000.

Razia is a weaver who is only 17 years old but weaves faster than most in the village. While her skill at weaving is unmatched, she is not aware of the market prices of either the raw material or the finished product. It is her father who



buys the raw material and sells in the market. Alike Razia's family, almost every other weaver family in Saidanpur has only one loom or, at the most, two. And the entire family takes turns to weave as it is the only profession they follow. Razia has a younger sister; she is seven years old and is the first school-going generation of the family. This is the story in almost every other household of the village where there is only a primary school — which doesn't serve mid-day meal — within reach; the secondary school is about two kilometres away, and parents avoid sending their children that far.

Over the years, the design and colour combinations have changed but they haven't been able to improve the market price per se even though they are weaving "according to the market demand".

There is a group of weavers who're earning considerably more than the others because they cater to the Middle Eastern market and using synthetic raw material — viscose for Rs. 300 per kilogramme. Naeemuddin makes '*Arabi rumaal*' or square checkered scarves and sells them to the middleman for Rs. 120 per piece. The same scarf is then sold in Dubai, Jeddah and other Middle Eastern cities for a minimum of Rs. 400. The patterned scarves are made on 12-pedal Jacquard loom with 2,000 threads in the *tana*. These scarves are made on order basis, payment for which is only made once the stock is sold — which can take anytime between one to three months.

The art of weaving *Arabi rumaal* only started about three years ago. Before that, the same weavers, used to make simple *gamchas* and earned Rs. 60 a day.



Naeemuddin says it's the competition that is killing the weavers. In the age of competition, each weaver family is willing to sell their products for Rs. 2 less than their neighbour. This has brought down the prices or restricted the increase in prices greatly.

"We should all have a union like that in Farrukhabad where all weavers have agreed to sell similar scarves for Rs. 150 and no less.

While lack of a union in Saidanpur is one issue, the presence of middlemen is another. Hafiz Iqramuddin is one such middleman, who also happens to be opposed to the idea of unions for obvious reasons. About 100 weavers in Saidanpur and around work for Hafiz who pays them a wage of Rs. 70 for every four scarves made. This payment is made every Sunday. He then sells each scarf for Rs. 98 to a higher-level middleman who sells it in the Middle East for over Rs. 200, making at least a 100 per cent profit.

Other middlemen who make a lot of profit in Saidanpur are those dealing in *zari* work. Seventeen-year-old Sahana Bano does embroidery in *zari* thread. Sahana and her brother make designs on paper and make a piece of sample on cloth, which is then sent to a retailer in Lucknow. The retailer selects the designs that he likes, and places an order for the same. Sahana and her brother Mohd.



Ansari then embroider on the fabric, earning Rs. 650 for each suit piece that they design, which requires raw material worth Rs. 200. They make about 10 suits a month. While their art of embroidery is nice, their colour combinations aren't very good and this is the design area where special attention is needed.

"This year, the market hasn't been very good. Last year, we were getting Rs. 1,000 for the same designs for which we're getting Rs. 650 this year," said Sahana's mother. Disappointed with the drop in wages, Mohd. Ansari is now trying to get a UAE visa to migrate to Dubai for labour work.

A few among those who want to continue in their traditional profession, have bought powerlooms. There are about 15 powerlooms in Saidanpur, and Mohd. Faisal Ashraf owns two of them. Each powerloom, with Dobby, cost him Rs. 70,000. Unlike handloom weavers who take a month to weave 200 scarves, Faisal gets the work done in just 10 days, earning a wage of Rs. 12 per stole.



MASAULI: GEOGRAPHY & OBSERVATIONS

Masauli village is situated at a distance of about 47 kilometres, north east of Lucknow and north west of Saidanpur, which is 14 kilometres away.

Masauli is a cluster of extremely poor weavers with the daily family income of less than Rs. 120. In this cluster, there are very few people who're into embroidery work. Most of the weavers make about eight pieces of viscose *gamchas* or stoles a day, and some of their transactions are still done in paise!

A weaver gets 75 paise per stole for knotting of extra threads on the sides of stole and *gamchas*. For the same work, a weaver gets Rs. 8 or Rs. 10 in Tamil Nadu and Madhya Pradesh, respectively.



Masauli is home to about 2,000-2,500 weaver and 1,500 looms, including about 25 powerlooms. This is a dwindling number as youngsters in most families are migrating to other professions in search of a better livelihood. The families that earlier had two handlooms, only have one left. And family members take turns to sit on the loom. Most of the weavers hail from Muslim Ansari families.

Most weavers in this part of Barabanki buy their own raw material, weave and then sell the finished product to middlemen for as little as Rs. 60 for four stoles, making Rs. 120 a day. The stoles are then supplied to retailers in Delhi, Kolkata and the Middle East, depending on the quality of the cloth and the dye. Stoles that are woven for Delhi markets are dyed in *kacha* (local) colour that fades after the first wash or due to perspiration. The stock that is meant for export, however, is dyed in superior quality colour and is, thus, even sold at a slightly higher price of Rs. 90-100 for four. Additionally, weavers have to keep constant pace with the market demands and change designs every two months to keep up with the market. Yet, there is little experimentation that one can see in their designs.

“Weavers in Masauli, alike other clusters, are not educated. However, there isn't even anyone to guide or lead the weavers here,” says Naeem Ansari, a master weaver, who sells most of his stock in the markets of *Janpath* and *Sarojini Nagar* of Delhi. There are about four master weavers (who work as middlemen) in Masauli. Naeem adds that a cooperative society (with a yarn depot) was established in Masauli about four years ago, with the help of a central government grant, after much hue and cry. A building was constructed, a group of people from the non-

weaver families were made stakeholders. However, not for a day has the society been functional. Weavers fear that the various stakeholders of the society have pocketed the money allotted for the betterment of the weavers.



ZAIDPUR: GEOGRAPHY & OBSERVATIONS

About 30 kilometres south of Saidanpur and 46 kilometres east of Lucknow is Zaidpur village where about 80 per cent of the population is either employed in the handloom or embroidery sector.

Unfortunately, however, 90 per cent of the weavers have moved from handloom to powerlooms. Those still working on the handloom earn about Rs. 15 for every viscose *gamcha* or stole that they weave. If, ever, the weaver manages to weave a unique new design, he gets a little more money from his middlemen. Powerloom weavers get the same wage but, unlike handloom weavers who are only able to weave about eight to 10 metres a day, they roll out about 20 metres of stoles. In Zaidpur, weaver families only get Rs. 8 for knotting 12 stoles, a price that is just marginally more than what weavers get in Masauli. Usually, young girls of the weaver families do the knotting of threads at the two ends of a stole.

The reason why most Zaidpur weaver families are able to afford powerlooms, Jacquard, Dobby and generators is because almost every family has a youngster settled in the Middle East, doing labour or other menial work in the Middle East, and sending back home money.

This is the how Mohd. Altaf has managed to buy two powerlooms. Besides the money that he received from his son in Saudi Arabia, he sold his Dobby machine and used the money to buy a powerloom. Today, he has two powerlooms, each of them cost him Rs. 1 lakh. On the other hand, a handloom only costs Rs. 7,000 to Rs. 8,000, and requires minimum maintenance.



“The cost of living is getting expensive by the day but our wages are still the same. In fact, they seem less now. Even a simple wooden fly shuttle costs us Rs. 150 today,” says Kamaluddin, a weaver and father of six children. The eldest of them is 18 — and does embroidery work — and the youngest is six. None of them have ever been enrolled in a school or plan to attend one.

Zaidpur is also a village where people have lost all faith in government institutions and the administration. A number of Muslim weaver families, like that of Kamaluddin, don't send their children to school because they think formal education is not helpful and the Quran is all that they need to know. There are misconceptions about Polio drops, and rumours that the drops kill the children. Quite a few families have no ration card, and so they don't get rice or pulses at a subsidised price.



Embroidery is the second most popular profession in Zaidpur. In fact, in a lot of families, weavers and embroiderers complement each other's business.

Most youngsters, who do *zari* embroidery work, do so in *kaarkhane* (embroidery workshops). *Lehenga* sets are a specialty of the village, while many also work on suit pieces and *dupattas*. Usually, a group of five to 10 youngsters sit together and embroider one *lehenga* set over a period of three to five days, earning about Rs. 150 to Rs. 200 for eight hours of work. Each *lehenga* set requires raw material worth Rs. 1,500, which is bought from Lucknow, and the cost of dyeing the fabric (net or butterfly) comes to another Rs. 150. The process of dyeing is also carried out in Lucknow. These *kaarkhane* are run by middlemen who deal with retailers in Lucknow and the Middle East. The middleman is also responsible for the buying and supplying the raw material to those embroidering. Eventually, these *lehengas* are sold for over Rs. 3,000, at least, to customers.



INFRASTRUCTURE

All the three villages are well connected by road, and have *pakka* roads even within the villages, except in Masauli. The closest railway station and airport is Lucknow, but all the three villages have schools, panchayat office, post office and health centres. Availability of electricity is a problem in all the three villages, and most houses have hand pumps for water.

There are insufficient banking facilities and absolutely no ATMs in the villages. However, access to 2G Internet connection is available through BSNL and other private service providers. In Saidanpur, a local service provider called STAR NET also provides Uninternet through a wireless tower.



GROUND REALITIES

There isn't much the panchayat is doing either. The village head hardly meets anyone, and her husband runs a gas agency in New Delhi. However, things may change soon. On October 13, panchayat elections were held, and its results were expected on October 17, 2015. This time the seat was reserved for a backward woman leader.

It isn't that the government has done nothing to help the weavers but things haven't had the ideal impact. For example, the Akhilesh Yadav government had distributed debit cards with Rs. 50,000 to weaver families to buy raw material in cash (buying raw material in cash or paying for them at the time of purchase instead as a loan is cheaper) but the weavers used the money for other purposes such as to buy a motorcycle or renovate their house.

It is interesting to note that none of the village regular power electricity supply. The three village only get about six to eight hours of power supply — in Zaidpur the supply comes only during the night hours — yet weavers are working on powerlooms, for which they additionally require generators. It is unfortunate that powerloom weavers are investing more money to make quick money but, at the end of the day, are only spoiling the market for themselves and their handloom brothers and sisters

Health is another matter of concern. Most weavers begin to lose their eyesight at a young age due to working on fine threads for eight hours a day, often in dim light. Some weavers also develop deformities between their toes, on their palms and around their tail bone due the constant pedaling, controlling the fly shuttle and sitting on the cemented floor for eight hours at a stretch, respectively.

PROPOSED ACTION SITE:

Based on our recce, our first preference for establishing a Baank-e-Loom integrated design resource centre would be in Saidanpur, followed by Masauli.

Saidanpur is an artisan cluster where weavers still have hope in handloom, and women are as active as their male counterparts. The variety of products is a little better in Saidanpur as well. Additionally, in Saidanpur, Baank-e-Loom would have the support of its royal family, the Habibullahs, and the panchayat. This would greatly help in the process of mobilisation of the weavers. Meanwhile, the possible centre space, that Team DEF has identified, has a lot of artistic and heritage elements in itself, making it an ideal place.



The property is owned by Mr. Wajahat Habibullah, the first Chief Information Commissioner of India. The site has been left unused for several years, and the family is ready to give us the land on a lease for nine years on a very nominal fee for the sake of formality. As the family wants no rent from us, we can use that amount for the purpose of clearing the site and renovating it, without harming the essence of the heritage building that was built over a hundred years ago. We plan to involve an archaeological conservationist for this purpose. The advantage of taking the site would be its large size, easy access to the locals, comfort of the people to visit it, no interference from any individual or body and, of course, its beauty which compliments the Baank-e-Loom handloom cluster development project.

Our second choice of site would be in Masauli where weavers are living in poor conditions. However, middlemen have a strong hold in this region, and it might be slightly more difficult to loosen that connection initially. Team DEF has identified a possible centre space in this village, however, the process to get its lease might be quite timeconsuming as its co-owned by government and private individuals.

Zaidpur, meanwhile, would not be a good choice for Baank-e-Loom as 90 per cent of the weavers have already moved to powerloom. Thus, narrowing down our number of target weavers drastically if we pick this weaver. Alternatively, this village can be seen as a possible Soochna Seva location.

OUR CHALLENGES

The biggest challenge that DEF faces in any of the cluster that we adopt in Barabanki is the struggle to improve the market for the weavers' products and increase their wages. As the weavers of Barabanki work on bulk orders — and not on a per saree basis as is the case in most weaver clusters — it is a little more difficult to create a new market for them. However, it is a challenge that DEF is willing to take and overcome.

The other challenge is to identify the software that will be used in the cluster to teach them digital designing. The CAD/CAM software that is used under the Chanderiyaan project in Chanderi, Madhya Pradesh, will not be applicable to the weaving art of Barabanki as their style of weaving and designing is very different from that of weavers of Chanderi.



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 centre in Barabanki early next year.

These steps include:

- Finalising of the action site
- Identifying local resource persons
- Training of resource persons to carry out a baseline survey in the selected villages
- Analysis of the baseline survey
- Identification of the design software
- Establishing the design resource centre
- Setting up of infrastructure and procurement of resource material
- Creating content for Barabanki cluster for the Baank-e-Loom website
- Mobilisation of weavers and publicity of the integrated design resource centre
- Basic computer training for weavers and members of the local community
- Computer-aided design and design documentation training for weaver families





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Baank-e-Loom is a joint initiative of
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