

MAHESHWARI HANDLOOM WEAVING TRADITION: A LIVING CULTURAL HERITAGE

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ABSTRACT

The handloom weaving tradition of India is an outstanding example of traditional craftsmanship. The heritage of weaving is not only limited to the traditional looms, craftsmanship or the *sarees*¹, but also constitutes of the spaces in which weaving is practiced. The houses of craftsmen are examples of vernacular architecture, which has evolved over a large span of time. Maheshwar *Tehsil*² in Madhya Pradesh, is one such outstanding example, where the centuries old weaving tradition has been revived by the Royal descendants. As the city is growing, the vernacular architecture is gradually transforming to modern style, disturbing the authenticity of the tradition as well as living comfort in the houses and workspaces. There lies great potential in this region which has not been documented and needs to be strengthened. This paper, with a qualitative as well as quantitative approach, is an attempt to establish the significance of Maheshwari Handloom weaving tradition as a living cultural heritage. The data collection has been done on two levels - primary as well as secondary, which was further followed by the analysis (including listing & grading) of heritage components. Weavers' houses as well as the weaving techniques have been documented, along with the inventory mapping of the *tehsil*, and factors impacting the heritage are analyzed to propose appropriate conservation strategies to safeguard the vernacular methods in the contemporary time and style. It has been found out through the study that, the weaving tradition in Maheshwar is in its authentic form, but the various issues of the household handloom facilities and also of the unorganised and dispersed weaving clusters in the region are not addressed by the government while proposing various schemes and providing privileges to the bigger weaving societies. In addition, there is lack of education, adequate working capital, proper infrastructure, poor exposure to new technologies, lack of market intelligence, stiff competition and poor institutional framework. Thus based on these findings, guidelines and recommendations have also been proposed.

Keywords: Handloom Weaving, Heritage, Intangible Culture, Traditional Craftsmanship, and Vernacular Architecture

INTRODUCTION

As per the ICOMOS Charter on the Built Vernacular Heritage (1999), "Vernacular building is the traditional and natural way by which communities house themselves. It is a continuing process including necessary changes and continuous adaptation as a response to social and environmental constraints". This Heritage is unique to different context and indigenous communities. The most important attributes of this heritage are its inherent character of adaptability and perceived sustainability. And, it is comprised of both tangible as well as

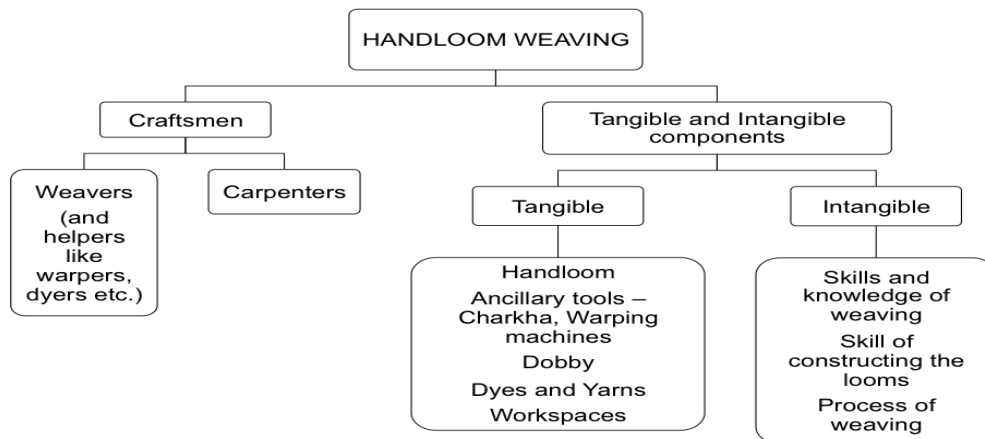
¹ Traditional dress or long piece of fabric worn by Hindu women.

² A *tehsil* (also known as a *taluka*) is an administrative division in India. It is an area of land with a city or town that serves as its administrative centre, with possible additional towns, and usually a number of villages.

intangible values of heritage. The relationship between traditional crafts (as intangible heritage) and their architectural manifestations (as tangible heritage) is very important to be understood to safeguard both.

The Handloom weaving tradition of India is an Intangible Cultural Heritage that has made the weavers' community to adapt and define their living environments according to the craft. Handloom weaving is an ancient art of making cloth and other fabrics and the Indians have been expert of weaving since the ancient period. Figure 1 shows the various components associated with this tradition. Millions of looms across the country are engaged in weaving cotton, silk and other natural fibres. The handloom department of each state has taken various initiatives to safeguard this tradition. The initiative to declare a few weaving clusters of India as a World Heritage has also been taken recently by INTACH, Delhi. On the basis of Criteria iii and v of World Heritage Sites, they have selected 8 cities in India to be nominated. However, there are many more clusters in the country with traditional looms, and vernacular style of architecture.

Figure 1: Components of Handloom Weaving



Maheshwar *tehsil* in Madhya Pradesh state of India is an outstanding example, where the Royal descendants have revived the centuries old weaving tradition. The Intangible cultural heritage of Maheshwari Handloom weaving can be dated back to 18th century during the rule of Rani Ahilya Bai Holkar in the then Indore state. It is renowned throughout India for their unique weave and distinctive designs involving stripes, checks and floral borders. The city Maheshwar has developed through ages in accordance with the needs of the weavers, who spread beyond the city limits with time by migrating to nearby villages in need of more space to work on looms. There are presently more than 1000 traditional working handlooms in the region, including the various household handlooms in the villages around Maheshwar city.

The town of Maheshwar is divided into *mohallas* or residential neighbourhoods. The *mohallas* of the different communities of the weavers are important part of the form and structure of the historic town. The *Chowk*³ area of the city is today stocked with shops of Maheshwari sarees.

The spatial design of weavers' house has been integral to the tradition. Semi-open spaces and other rooms act as additional work areas, and open spaces or *verandas* as dyeing

³ A marketplace or open area in a city or village.

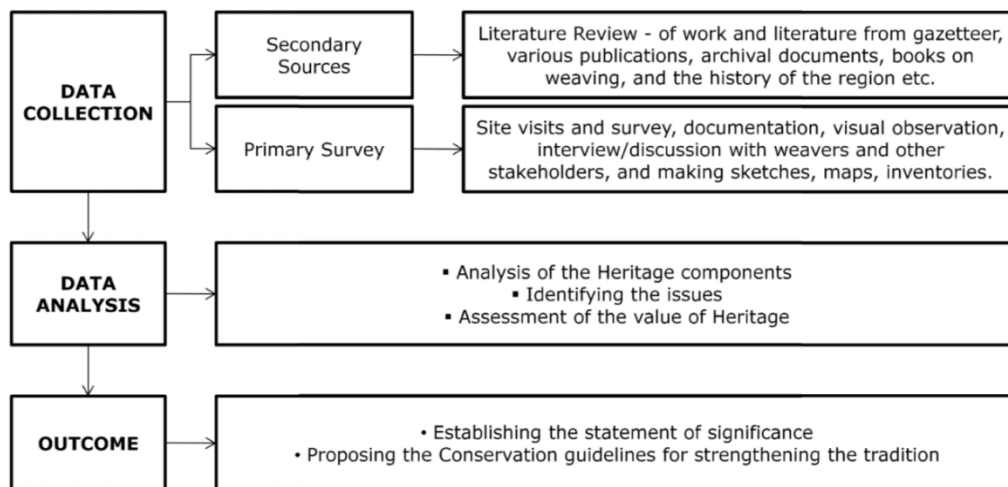
areas. Architecture also serves as an inspiration to the craftsmen. The motifs on *sarees* are largely inspired by ornamentation on the heritage structures. The unique characteristics associated with this traditional craftsmanship are the process of weaving, specific types of looms (Double Box Slay Loom), designs of the border of *saree*, the skill to weave those designs, dobby machine which is also specific to Maheshwar only and the fabric – gossamer thin – a delicate blend of cotton and silk yarn.

There lies great potential in this region that has not been explored and needs to be strengthened. There is also no documentation of the households of weavers. It is very important to document the spaces associated, and to identify the spatial needs. This study has been done to understand the paradigm shifts that have occurred in the traditional weaving methods and the vernacular architecture of this region, and also to address the underlying issues. Further the study would include analysis of the value of this heritage establishing its significance, and proposing suitable measures for safeguarding it.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted for this study includes both qualitative and quantitative methods for collecting and analysing the data. The data collection has been done on two levels - primary as well as secondary, which was further followed by the analysis and thus preparing the outcomes. Figure 2 shows the methodology of the study in detail.

Figure 2: Methodology of the Study



RESEARCH FINDINGS

(i) *Process of Handloom Weaving in Maheshwar*

Through the primary survey, the process of weaving was documented. It begins with the selection and procurement of the raw materials (cotton, linen, silk, dyes etc.) that are brought to Maheshwar from specific parts of the country. The raw threads are then washed and bleached by dipping in solutions. This activity takes place in Maheshwar town only. After this, dyeing of the yarns and then drying takes place only in few houses of the town. The

dried bundles of threads are then untangled and reeled by using a *charkha*⁴. Weavers set up the design for the border of each *saree* in doobby machine that is placed at the top of the loom. After this process the dyed and untangled yarn is now weaved on the looms. Products are then cut and packed for selling.

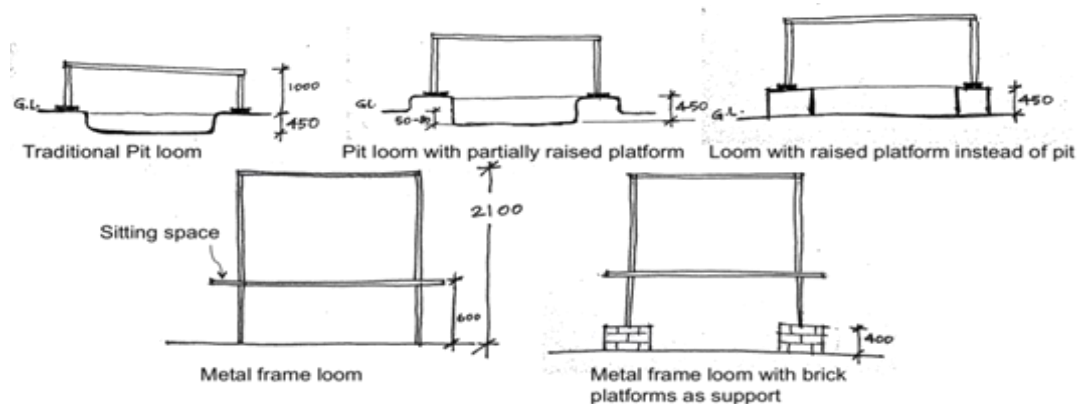
(ii) Transformations in the weaving tradition

Based on the analysis of the data from secondary sources, and comparing with the outcomes of the primary survey, the transformations that have taken place in the whole tradition have been summarised in Table 1 and Figure 3.

Table 1: Transformations in the weaving tradition

| <i>S. No.</i> | <i>Elements</i> | <i>Transformations</i> |
|---------------|--|---|
| 1 | Dyes | Natural dyes replaced by Synthetic dyes, chemical and acid colours |
| 2 | <i>Zari</i> ⁵ in borders | Pure gold wires have transformed to Copper coated nylon wires |
| 3 | Characteristic of the <i>Saree</i> | Difference in the fineness between product of pit loom and frame loom. |
| 4 | Designs | Few weavers innovate with designs, but the basic designs have no change. |
| 5 | Dobby machine | Earlier border was designed by hand. Soon doobby was introduced which is very specific in Maheshwari weaving. |
| 6 | Workspaces/houses | Vernacular style is transformed according to contemporary needs and resources. |
| 7 | Ancillary tools: warping machines and wefting <i>charkha</i> | All other tools were earlier made completely of wood, which are now transformed to metal framings. |

Figure 3: Transformations in the loom design



Source: Documentation on site

⁴ A spinning wheel or a device for spinning thread or yarn from natural or synthetic fibres.

⁵ (or Jari) is an even thread traditionally made of fine gold or silver used in traditional Indian garments, especially as brocade in saris etc.

iii) Weaver's House

On the basis of Primary Survey, it was found out that out of 202 villages in Maheshwar tehsil, weaving is being practiced only in 10 villages and in Maheshwar town. Either the *Karkhanas*⁶ of other villages are shut down, or people have moved to different occupations. Few people are there in each village that visit Maheshwar for weaving on a daily basis. Mapping of Maheshwar town was done by identifying areas where weaving is practiced. And thus the quantification of associated spaces as traditional and modern was also done to find out the significance of the traditional spaces amongst the weavers. There are a total of 973 spaces in Maheshwar town that are associated with weaving, out of which 752 are traditional.

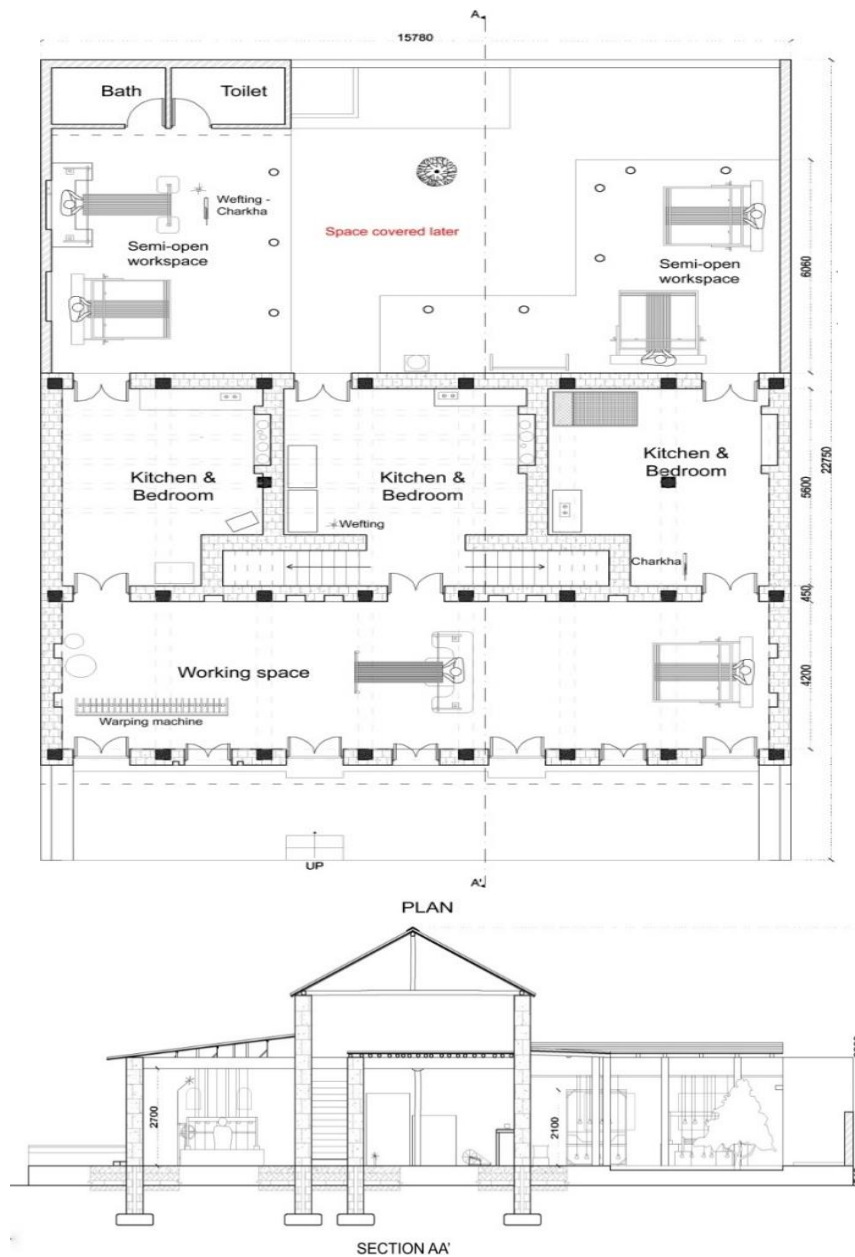
The selection of Heritage sites for the purpose of documentation and listing was done on the basis of few criteria like age of heritage structure, variation in typology and architecture of the houses, and type of craftsmanship involved (like weaver and carpenter, or weaver and dyer). Documentation method also included preparation of inventory of each house/space. Thus, based on the mentioned criteria, around 50 weavers were interviewed from Maheshwar and around 25 weavers were interviewed from the 10 listed villages. Further, 8 spaces (including Weavers' Houses, Workshop and Training Centre) from Maheshwar town were listed, qualitatively analyzed and graded as per their significance and impact. Four houses were documented, out of which one house is described as follows:

iv) House in Shali Mohalla, Maheshwar

It is a 200 years old house of a weaver, originally constructed in stone masonry, timber beams and columns, and lime plaster. The roofing of the house was made in timber and thatch, which is transformed to GI sheet roofing by the weaver due to unaffordability of the maintenance of timber roof. The space added later to the house to accommodate more looms is semi-open, and constructed in brick masonry. The tradition of weaving is being transferred to each generation, and at present all three sons of the weaver are into handloom weaving. The weaver has one pit loom, one pit loom with partially raised platform, four frame looms, and one warping machine. Figure 4 shows the plan and section of the house.

⁶ Workshops.

Figure 4. Plan & Section of the Weaver's house at Shali Mohalla
(Plan and section not to scale)



Source: Documentation on site

DISCUSSION

i) Statement of Significance

The significance of Maheshwar lies in this exceptional craft which is a common interest for the people in the region at present as well as in past. Therefore it is vital to conserve the town and surroundings beyond the preservation of a set of buildings, by strengthening the tradition and people associated with it, and the spaces they work in. Table 2 describes the values and their attributes associated with the tradition.

Table 2: Values and Attributes associated with the Handloom weaving tradition of Maheshwar

| <i>S. No.</i> | <i>Values</i> | <i>Attributes</i> |
|---------------|---|--|
| 1 | Architectural (Typological) Value | Built heritage of Maheshwar saree weaving settlement is intact to a large extent, with a large number of weavers still in their original homes and active looms. Designs and motifs are sourced from regional architecture. Every member of the family is involved in the process of weaving and most of the time is spent in the weaving room, the largest of all the rooms. During construction, attention is given to details pertaining to functional needs, such as positioning of pits built into the floor of the house for placing of the weaving looms, and lighting requirement for the loom through window/skylight. Wet areas for handling dyes are open-to-sky for sunlight. Similarly, details are incorporated for warping/wefting, niches at a low level for keeping weaving-related articles, and storage spaces for threads. |
| 2 | Historical Value | The town has a rich history associated whereby the Ruler Ahilyabai Holkar established the tradition in the region bringing in skilled craftsmen from Mandava, Gujarat and Hyderabad. With time the tradition spread on a regional scale, covering the two <i>tehsils</i> – Maheshwar and Kasrawad. |
| 3 | Ensemble Value | The clusters of houses of weavers together form an ensemble, irrespective of their religion/caste/culture. Weavers represent 25% of the population of Maheshwar. |
| 4 | Economic Value | The Economy of the town depends majorly on Weaving and Tourism. The weaving industry generates employment for a number of people. And because of the high religious and historic importance of the town, it invites many visitors/tourists who also purchase the handloom products. |
| 5 | Cultural/ Symbolic Value | The cultural value of Maheshwar is knitted strongly in the living tradition of handloom weaving. The intangible value forms the traditional knowledge system of the society, which is being carried out by generations. The streets of Maheshwar uniquely sound of the clacking of looms. |
| 6 | Social Value | The tradition holds a lot of meaning to the society as it has joined weavers of different societies and cultures together. |

ii) *Authenticity and Integrity*

Maheshwar is a unique testimony to the living tradition of handloom weaving. The factors of authenticity and integrity are amalgamated in the various intangible and tangible components of the craftsmanship. Essentially, this cluster has existent built heritage, as well as active traditional weaving practice as established by the surveys conducted. Authenticity and integrity for the tangible element identified with weaving is assessed for:

- The vernacular architecture of the weavers' settlements
- The modes of production (such as traditional looms)

As per the survey findings and analysis, the old fabric associated with the tradition is close to 80% of the total number of associated spaces. Hence, the architectural fabric and spatial layouts are quantitatively authentic in nature. The skilled weavers are based here due to the existence of regional architecture of Maheshwar and they don't exist anywhere else in the country due to their exclusiveness, skill and craftsmanship. The traditional weaving practices are inherited from one generation to the next. The skill comes naturally by virtue of

families carrying out the ancillary activities along with the weaver, leading to learning traditional techniques.

iii) Issues Identified

Continuity of the traditional workspaces

- The transformation taken place in the architecture of the houses has led to increasing use of frame looms, which cause vibrations while working and do not produce very fine weaves.
- Weavers are less aware of the vernacular material availability, and because they cannot restore their old roofs they make use of modern materials like GI sheets for roofing. They are aware of the fact that these materials are not climatically suitable for comfortable living. Unaffordability of 'kavelu' restricts them from insulating the roofs.
- The traditional houses are less maintained. During rainy season, it becomes difficult for weavers to work on looms due to moisture, and leaking in the houses.

Continuity of the traditional craftsmanship

- At present the weaving market in the town is run by Master weavers, because of which the weavers never gain profit for their skills.
- There are only two skilled carpenters in Maheshwar who know how to construct or repair handlooms which is very specific to Maheshwari weaving. The skill is under threat.
- People in the villages are moving to other employment areas because of less income and weak market in weaving. Also because of no proper training to the people in village as daily going to the city and coming back becomes difficult for some.
- There is no record of the villages where weavers exist or existed, on paper, by the Govt. Handloom Department.
- There is a gradual transformation to the use of power looms in the town with 4 in use at present.
- Awareness of Govt. schemes amongst the weavers is very less, and majorly the master weavers are benefitted from these.

Lack of promotional activities and involvement of weavers makes the younger generation less interested in continuing the practice.

CONCLUSION & PROPOSALS

Guidelines for the Architecture of Weavers' houses

Conservation of Old Houses – The Non-monumental heritage of Maheshwar

- Walls: Regular maintenance of the lime mortar and waterproofing mud plastering using bitumen-cut-back should be done.
- Pit: Maintenance of the mud plastering in pits to be mandatory.
- Roofing: Provision of wood by the Govt. for the replacement of decayed beams and rafters. Insulation of GI Sheets with interlocking half-round terracotta country tiles.

- Rooms: Provision of materials for construction if the weavers are working in semi-open areas of their houses.

Construction of new houses of weavers

- At least double brick (225 mm) thick walls with lime plastering to prevent water leakage must be constructed, in locally made burnt brick, set in a mixed lime/cement mortar.
- Pit: Mud plastering must be done.
- Roofing: Following the present 'Industry standards', the roof framework must have steel trusses covered by corrugated galvanised iron sheets which in turn, must be insulated with interlocking half-round terracotta country tiles. Together they create an insulating air-gap that keeps the rooms cool. The combination also prevents leakage.
- Rooms: A room of minimum size of 3.5 m x 4.5 m must be made for a single loom capacity. Rooms for working on looms must be closed spaces.
- Loom supports: The loom supports to be provided in steel rods.

The structure must be load bearing and at least one pit loom must be necessarily installed on ground floor; frame loom can be installed on upper floor as well.

Guidelines for the Certification of craftsmen and the techniques

- Dyes and dyeing techniques: Acid Colour for silk and vat Procaine, reactive, Napthal Colours for cotton must be used. Hydrogen peroxide for bleaching of silk and bleaching powder for bleaching of cotton must be used. Synthetic dyes and natural dyes must be certified as the most traditional. No machine must be used for dyeing.
- Winding (Warp and weft): The warp yarns must be wound on bobbins, which are arranged across a wooden frame called reel. The yarns from these reels pass through a reed to be wound around a vertical drum. Metal frames are transformed versions of the wooden frames. Both must be certified, as the warp output is same. For the weft, the yarn must be wound on prins with the help of a *charkha*.
- The weavers in the town and surrounding villages working on pit looms must be certified so as to encourage more number of weavers to switch to the traditional loom.
- The outputs must be categorized on the basis of products from pit looms or frame looms.

Acknowledging the Helpers

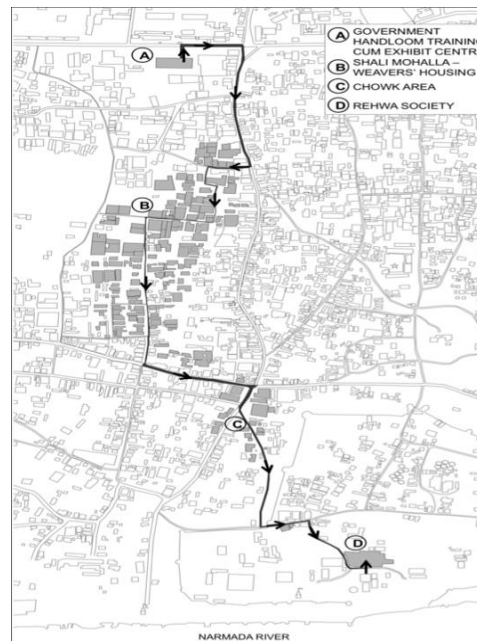
To ensure continuity of weaving traditions, the skills involved in the entire production chain need to be preserved and supported with ancillary occupational workers who perform crucial pre-loom and post-loom operations being recognized as handloom workers and significant contributors. This category will span all ancillary skills mentioned in the guidelines, makers of looms and others.

Heritage Walk: Maheshwari Handloom Weavers' Circuit

A Heritage walk (1.2 km) must be proposed for the visitors to experience the weaving tradition at each level of its process.

- The walk can begin from the Handloom training centre. The centre at present provides training to people. The built structure of the centre dates back to 1921, and needs restoration. Restoring the space and redesigning its function will enhance the tradition and attract more number of people. It must function as training cum exhibit area, where the history of Handloom weaving and its process in Maheshwar will be displayed, and the traditional looms which are not in use anymore will be conserved and displayed.
- The walk then can lead to the oldest weavers' settlement of the town – *Shali Mohalla*, where visitors can experience the traditional form of architecture, traditional methods of weaving inside houses, and the clacking sounds of looms throughout the streets.
- Visitors can then be taken to the *Chowk* area – the old market area of town, where they can see the shops where the handloom products are sold.
- The walk can be ended at the REHWA Society, the handloom cooperative society established by the Royal Descendants of Holkars in 20th Century inside the Ahilya Fort.

Figure 5: Heritage Walk Route



Source of the Base Map for proposing the route: City Development Plan, Maheshwar

Regional Level Weavers' Clusters

Table 3. Proposals and recommendations for the Villages around Maheshwar

| <i>Phase</i> | <i>Proposals and Recommendations</i> |
|---------------------|--|
| I | <p>Proposing 5 clusters of 11 villages each, as Weavers' clusters with one centre in each cluster where following activities must take place:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training of Handloom weaving twice a week • Weavers can practice weaving in the centres daily • Raw material provision must be started in the centres for all clusters • Dyeing must be started in villages at the centre |

- Exhibiting the products at the centres

II

After the revival of the tradition on a regional level, involvement of the clusters in various activities like the Nimar Utsav would enhance and promote the tradition more. Nimar Utsav is a 3-day cultural festival in Maheshwar celebrated in November. Proposal of a regional level activity on National Handloom Day – August 7.

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