



GRA |Group for Rural Activities

Udala Camp Report

23rd Nov - 1st Dec 2025



Group for Rural Activities
Indian Institute of Technology Bombay
Powai, Mumbai - 400 076.
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Introduction

Camp Objectives

- To understand the lives of people living in tribal areas
- To interact with the villagers and get insights about life there.
- To understand how the NGO Yuva Vikas Foundation is trying to make a change in the lives of tribal people (especially women) by providing them livelihood opportunities.
- To understand how handloom weaving, a traditional talent can be converted into a profitable initiative and provide livelihood to the underprivileged.

Camp Schedule

The camp's complete duration from IITB to Udala to back IITB was a complete 9 days out of which we spent 5 days in the camp and rest 4 days in travelling.

Day 1 (23 Nov)

- Departed from IITB for Kharagpur by train in the morning.
- The rest of the day was spent on the train while travelling.

Day 2 (24 Nov)

- Travelled whole the day in train and reached Kharagpur at night

Day 3 (25 Nov)

- Reached Udala in the morning
- Welcome and introduction with Yuva Vikas Foundation - Gobinda Ji who was our host for next 5 days
- Visit to handloom weaving centre in late morning
- Attending the local tribal people pre-harvest celebration
- Round table discussion about reflections and learnings

Day 4 (26 Nov)

- Early morning trek
- Visit a nearby thread drawing unit
- Visit to a small village and seeing rural Oriya houses
- Paddy cultivation by students
- Learnt about tribal customs by observing their drumming
- Round table discussion about reflections and learnings

Day 5 (27 Nov)

- Visit to Similipal National Park - Home to “Black tiger”
- A short trek till Devkund waterfall and Ambika devi temple
- A friendly cricket match with local cricket team
- A dance with people from local tribal community on their music

Day 6 (28 Nov)

- Visit to local embroidery and sewing centre
- Visit to a dyeing centre and doing the process of dyeing ourselves
- Relaxing around a bonfire in the evening

Day 7 (29 Nov)

- Visit to a lacquer (lakh in hindi) based dolls making centre
- Visit to Chandipur beach - a one of its kind
- Depart from Balasore

Day 8 (30 Nov)

- Whole day journey in train till Mumbai

Day 9 (1 Dec)

- Reach IITB early morning

About Udala

Udala is a small town in Mayurbhanj district (the largest district of Odisha). The district of Mayurbhanj is a tribal dominated place with around 60% population belonging to scheduled tribes. Udala is in close proximity with the Similipal National Park which is the only home to the unique “Black Tiger” in the world. It is located around 50 kms from the district headquarter Baripada.



Day 1:

A group of 24 students departed IITB at around 9:30 in the morning and embarked on a long 9 day journey after our tiring end-semester examinations which just got over. We boarded the train from Kalyan at 12 PM and spent the rest of our day playing games and singing and getting to know each other.



Day 2:

The second day too was majorly spent by train and after a lot of delays, the train reached Kharagpur at 9PM after a long 33 hour journey. It was much colder here as compared to Mumbai. We all had some of the best Roshogollas in our life in Kharagpur because Bengal is famous for it.



Day 3:

We took an early morning train from Kharagpur to Balasore and reach Balasore in the morning at 7AM where we met our host and one of the founding members of Yuva Vikas foundation - Mr. Gobinda Ji. He was happy and excited to have us for the next 5 days.

Then we all headed for Udala which is around 30 kms away from Balasore by a bus. While reaching Udala, we crossed the Kundihal wildlife sanctuary which was a beautiful sight of forest. This was the paddy harvest season time since all the rice fields can be seen golden yellow around. After reaching Udala, we all were given a flower as a welcome gift and then after having breakfast, we headed to a handloom weaving centre nearby. There we saw women handweaving clothes with beautiful designs literally from just a group of so many threads. We tried to put our heads around how actually the process works but a very few of us were able to understand the working. But everyone of us surely appreciated the amount of patience that these women had while working.



We then had a round table discussion with all the women working there in the handloom weaving centre. We came to know that the working and earning of women brings a socio-economic impact. One of the women said that after they start earning money, they get better decision making power in their society which is heavily male-dominated. The earning of women has led to their children studying in good schools which is hopeful for them since education is the way they can get out of the vicious trap of poverty. And contrary to what we thought, they said that men too support them in their work now which is a good sign of the socio-economic impact Yuva Vikas Foundation has made. These clothes are then sold in big cities where they get the real value of their work. Due to all their work, the women are able to earn around 20-25k rupees per month.



During our visit at the handloom, the sarpanch of the village invited all of us to their festival ritual which is done just before the paddy harvest starts in which they please their gods by dancing. We were not allowed to dance with them since the villagers believe that only they can please their gods and no-one else. Here is the link to video showing their ritual: 📺 [IMG_9619.MOV](#)

We observed the ritual and then we came back to the guest house, had our dinner and then had the GRA round table discussion. A few noteworthy points that came out while reflection and discussion of our day was:

- Most of us were not very comfortable with their ritual of worshipping their god since most of the men taking part in the ritual were drunk. However, we should not become judgemental about someone else's practices since we are accustomed to the outer world.
- While on the discussion with the women working in the handloom unit, we noticed that most of the women were shy in answering any questions and only one woman was communicating from their side. We came to know in discussion that these tribal people have been the most oppressed and vulnerable parts of the society ever since the time of Britishers. The outside world had exploited them a lot which gives them enough reason not to engage too easily with the world outside their tribes.

This is a glimpse of how a round table discussion looks like:



Day 4:

The day started with an early morning optional trek to a nearby hill where most of us went. The trek was just for fun, organized by Gobinda Ji and in the trek, we all had discussions about everything around.



After the trek, we had our breakfast and headed out to the thread making centre where we saw the process of creation and winding of thread. This was perhaps the most magical process for most of us: the creation of thread from raw cotton. It was something we could never think of. Here is a video of one of us trying to do the same: 📺 IMG_9834.MOV



The process of drawing thread out of raw cotton seemed magical to most of us

Then we headed to the small village besides the thread making unit and saw a few houses from inside. Although most of the people live in pucca houses, a few structures to store grains and other stock were made up from clay and cow dung mixture with the rooftop made of twigs and bushes. Here is the image of houses we saw:



In one of the houses, the harvested paddy was being dried out in the open. The drying out is necessary before the storage of paddy for consumption.

We also saw the process of paddy husk removal in the traditional way and here is the link of the video showing the same. 📺 [IMG_9840.MOV](#)

We then went to assist the village people in harvesting the paddy. (Paddy is nothing but rice with its protective coating of inedible husk). The golden paddy fields were ready for their harvest.

Here are some of the images:



We all had an amazing experience in cutting the paddy crop by ourselves.



We all had a great lunch which was prepared on wood-fire in the open. It was simple traditional simple Oriya food. In the evening, we had an online meeting with Bindu mam who is the founder of Mauna Dhwani Foundation. She had been working in the corporate field but deep down, many years ago she felt that something needed to be done for the country. She wanted to be present with all of us but unfortunately due to some work, she met us online. She said that years ago, Mayurbhanj was one of the poorest and most backward parts of the country and the local tribal people too were resistant to let someone else help them to get them out of poverty. She saw that these people had a traditional handloom weaving art which was gradually disappearing. She saw a market value in these handmade products and saw the potential to turn their traditional art form into profitable business which in turn would benefit the local tribal people. The journey was long and full of difficulties but she continued and what we see all today is the result of years of effort.

Then we had a drumming session with 3 tribal men who played their drums and told us that they use different drum sounds on different occasions like on birth of child, they play drums in one way; and on marriage procession, they play in another. This drumming altogether was an integral part of their tradition and identity as a tribe.



After the dinner we had our GRA round table discussions and some of the noteworthy points of discussion are:

- The online session taken by Bindu mam was very important for us to fully appreciate the things we saw around us. As visitors for a few days, it's difficult to grasp what it takes to create such an infrastructure and more importantly trust in these tribal people.
- Some of us felt that while we were seeing the houses of tribal people in the village from inside, it felt like intruding into the personal space of someone and it might be offensive to them. But then one of us pointed out that there is a trade-off that these people are being given employment by the NGO so in return, the NGO can show their places to guests like us in return.

Day 5:

Today, in the morning, we all went to Similipal National Park and Ambika Devi Temple. The national park was the only place in this world where the unique “Black Tiger” is found. The forest area was lush green and quiet.



An illustration in the information centre of Similipal National Park

We all went then to Devkund Waterfall which is a famous tourist attraction there.



Devkund waterfall

In the afternoon, we had lunch that was prepared in the open under a wood-fire for us. We noticed a ritual of tribal people that before they eat food, they present food in thali to a goat and only then they all eat food.



Food offered to goat

In the evening, we had a friendly cricket match with the local cricket team and we lost badly in the game but we all enjoyed the game completely. Here are some glimpses of the cricket game:



Some glimpses of the friendly cricket match

Before dinner, we joined the local community for a vibrant dance session. It began with a traditional performance by our hosts, but they soon invited us to join the circle. For a while, we all moved together to the rhythm of their songs, bridging the gap between guest and host through the shared language of music.



After the dinner we had our GRA round table discussions and some of the noteworthy points of discussion are:

- Many of us felt that during the cricket match, we all have lost physical fitness due to our poor lifestyle habits which involve us remaining seated for most of the day. And most of us don't even realize this until we do some physically demanding work like trekking or playing sports. We should take care of our physical length alongside all the studies we do.

Day 6:

Today started with a visit to the sewing and embroidery centre in the morning. Here all the toughened fabrics which are used for making travel bags and carry bags are made. Since stitching is done for bags which have to be strong, it was done using electricity powered stitching machines which were imported from Japan. These all were heavy duty stitching machines eliminating the use of human hand stitching which is difficult and error prone. The items like bags which are manufactured here are sold to companies like Infosys which place bulk orders for these.



All the designs of bags were first visualized through different softwares virtually and then put into reality by the workers working there. It was good to see technology being put in use to create innovative products and benefit the people working there especially the tribal women working there.

Then we all were taught the process of hand embroidery and a few of us even tried it by our own hand. The women working there were able to create such amazing designs by their own hands which was good to see.



Hand Embroidery

After the hand embroidery session, we all moved to a dyeing centre where the work of dyeing the fabric is done. We were told the whole process of dyeing from natural colours. We came to know that most of the synthetic dyes are very polluting to nature and are carcinogenic too and this gives us enough reason to shift towards the process of natural dyeing. We were shown how different colours are extracted from different elements in nature like orange color extracted from Marigold flowers and indigo colour extracted from the indigo plant. We then got hands-on experience on dyeing a piece of cloth ourselves so that we could learn the process of dyeing ourselves.



Some glimpses from process of dyeing



After the dyeing session which went on for a few hours, we had our lunch and then we all collected paddy straw from the recently harvested paddy crop to make for a bonfire and as it grew dark, we lit the bonfire up and all of us sang their local songs or songs they loved. We then danced around the bonfire for some time. These times will stay memorable with every person who joined the camp.



After the dinner, we all had a round table discussion with our host Gobinda Ji and we all reflected on our experiences of the last 4 days. They enquired how the camp was organized from their side and got a positive answer. We all thanked Gobinda Ji and all others who made this camp successful and enjoyable.



Day 7:

This was our last day of the camp in Odisha. In the morning, we all went to a guesthouse and lacquer based dolls making centre which was on a small island surrounded by a stream and had to be reached by boat. The stream was full of water lilies.



We got to witness how the traditional lacquer dolls are made and how different types of dolls signify their different deities.



Making of Lacquer-based dolls



Lacquer-based dolls

We then headed towards Chandipur beach. This beach has a speciality that during low tides, the ocean water recedes 2-3kms which is a unique element. When we went there, it was a low tide due to which we were able to walk so much ahead of the beach. During the high tide, the water again reaches till the beach.



Chandipur beach during low tide

We also came to know that near the Chandipur beach, there is a DRDO missile testing centre. Infact Balasore is known as the Missile City of India. The former president and Missile Man of India Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam spent a decade here researching missiles contributing significantly to India's missile power.

We then had our lunch and left for Balasore railway station from where we had a train till Khagpur. We all wished goodbye to Gobinda Ji and Odisha there. We reached Kharagpur late evening and took the train till Mumbai at night.

Day 8 & 9:

We travelled the whole day in train on day 8 and on the morning of day 9, we finally reach Mumbai from where we went 9 days ago.



These 9 days were surely the most memorable days for most of the participants.

Acknowledgements:

GRA would like to thank IITB management to encourage and support such field visits because due to such visits, students of IITB are made aware of the realities of India.

We also want to thank Yuva Vikas foundation director and our host Gobinda Ji who assisted us all the times during the rural immersion and made sure that we all get the best experiences and learnings out of this visit.

A special thanks to IITB alumni Sameer Misra who helped us in choosing this place for our rural immersion camp.

Participant's experiences summary:

Veeresh S K: "The handloom visit was the most significant part of my immersion; it completely shifted my understanding of empowerment, which I used to think was just an urban concept. Seeing the craft firsthand was eye-opening. I would also love spending that extra time actually learning the craft myself rather than just watching. The coordination was good, and having organizers around to clarify doubts was helpful, but we must ensure that our visits don't inconvenience the locals just for our entertainment. Poverty remains a visible challenge, but the work being done here is a strong step forward."

Amit Dubey: "I was deeply moved by the reality of tribal life. Watching the cotton-to-thread process and seeing the sheer effort that goes into the handloom industry was beautiful yet humbling. My perception of rural struggles changed drastically when I saw students crossing a river just to get to school—it made me question my own complaints about life. The planning and accommodation were excellent. I'm very interested in how women are being trained in handloom, and for future camps, I'd love to see more interactions with the children to help them understand and value their own culture."

Pranjal: "Traveling to Eastern India was a unique experience for me. The highlight was definitely cutting paddy and joining in the tribal dance and music; those moments of connection were unforgettable. I learned that just because an industry exists nearby, it doesn't mean the benefits reach the local community. The organization is tackling the mindset that holds people back, which is crucial work. The coordination, food, and stay were all excellent. While I don't have many suggestions for change because the experience was already so engaging, I simply hope this initiative continues so others can experience what I did."

Archishman Ray: "This immersion gave me a profound appreciation for the intricacies of the handloom industry and the self-sufficiency of tribal culture. My biggest takeaway came from the 'Mauna Dhwani' success stories. I used to view tribal communities as 'backward,' but I realized they are evolved, knowledgeable, and deeply connected to their environment. Seeing the dyeing process was fascinating, and I now understand the challenge of

generating sustainable employment in these areas. The team was flexible and supportive, though I honestly wish the trip had been longer. My most memorable moment was spotting a wild fox! I am eager to learn more about the organization's future projects because this experience proved that sustainable market linkages can truly transform lives."

Afreen Ali: "This trip redefined 'development' for me. Seeing a positive, working model in a rural setting was inspiring. I loved learning the thread-making process and interacting with the women weavers; it bridged the gap I often feel between urban and rural worlds. The coordination was excellent, and the team was very flexible. Almost every day was a memorable moment for me. The work being done here to connect these communities with the wider world is vital, and I hope future camps continue this perfect blend of education, fun, and sightseeing."

Yogesh Jangid: "The hospitality we received was incredible, and I learned so much about the complexities of the handloom industry. However, I feel the interaction could have been even deeper if we had the chance to stay in a local's house rather than just visiting. The picnic was definitely a highlight. I also observed that making handlooms more women-friendly is a key challenge you are solving. Overall, it was a great experience, and I'm interested in understanding more about the mentor-mentee dynamics in your centers."

Tsewang Dolkar: "I was struck by how the organization empowers individuals while fiercely preserving cultural values and eco-friendly practices like natural dyeing. It's clear that while the community has faced exploitation in the past leading to some mistrust, they still live in beautiful harmony with nature. The food and stay were excellent, though I would strongly suggest using alternatives to disposable cups for tea to align better with sustainability. The way this initiative addresses cultural loss and women's empowerment is inspiring, and I hope to see these values protected as the project grows."

Rohit Parmar: "Coming from a village myself, I realized how disconnected and stressed I had become in my city life. This camp helped me find perspective and value living in the present. I really enjoyed the cotton-to-thread process and the meals we cooked outdoors. However, I felt the field visits could have been more engaging; perhaps adding more

structured interaction sessions would keep everyone interested. It's clear the organization is working hard to improve the social status of women and generate employment. The experience was grounding, and adding engagement during all field visits would make it perfect."

Vaidehi Agrawal: "I was humbled by the immense patience required to make a single piece of cloth. It made me realize the disconnect between policy and on-ground reality. I used to take my clothes for granted, but seeing the effort behind them and how this income supports entire families changed my view completely. The hospitality was warm. The lunch under the tree canopy was magical. I was inspired by women's self-reliance, and for future workshops, demonstrating the indigo extraction process would be a great addition for me."

Anica: "Learning about the origins of the NGO and the labour that goes into everyday items like rice was eye-opening. I valued the sessions with the founders and chatting with employees. I think future participants would benefit from more guidance on how to respectfully engage with local communities. The nightly group discussions felt a bit repetitive, but the intersection of poverty and sustainability is a complex challenge that was interesting to explore. My most memorable moment was speaking with the local women on the final day."

Jahnvi Sharma: "I gained incredible insight into what it takes to build an organization from scratch and resolve conflicts in a community. While I enjoyed learning about the tribal culture, there were moments where the cultural displays felt a bit like a 'showcase' for us, and I'd suggest finding more natural, respectful ways to share traditions. The natural dye unit has huge economic potential, but I noticed the physical strain on the women and believe technical improvements to the loom ergonomics are necessary. The stay was comfortable. It was a journey of understanding the dignity and patience that define this community."

Aarushi Roy: "I learned so much about the weaving process and the real struggles of initiating social change. My perception of tribal communities completely shifted; I used to think they might be aggressive, but they were so friendly and open-minded. The team management was great, though on a minor note, I wasn't a huge fan of the rice variety served. I think integrating simple technology could ease the physical burden on the

women weavers without replacing their craft. My most memorable moment was the visit to the Devkund waterfall."

Prem Kant: "Overall, the camp was a very meaningful experience. I learned a lot about the rural community, especially how traditional skills, when supported by the right platforms, can even meet international demand. This completely changed my perception of how rural communities can contribute to society. I really appreciated the hands-on sessions, especially the wool-to-thread activity—it felt magical. The ongoing experiments in natural dyeing were also inspiring, and I would love to see more exploration of natural colours in future. The idea of preserving old items, like wheelchairs and traditional tools, through a small museum at the temple was also fascinating. Overall, the camp provided valuable insights, engaging activities, and a deep appreciation of rural craftsmanship."

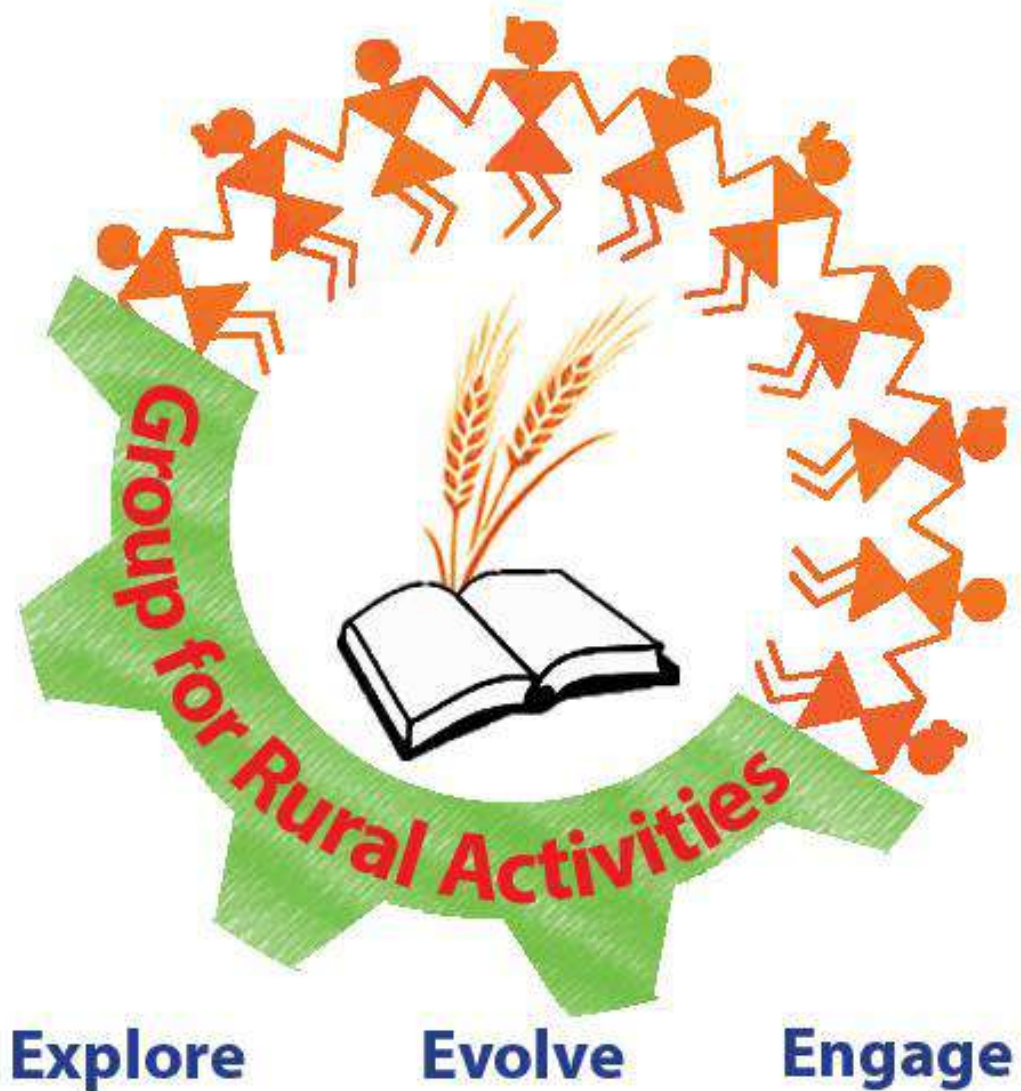
Vanshika Nalamasa: "This immersion was deeply moving. I witnessed a 'soul sister' bond among the women that showed me development is a relationship, not just a project. The resilience of these women is powerful. The virtual meet with the founder Bindu mam and the visit to the spinning unit were my absolute highlights. The planning was smooth. I think using storytelling and digital tools could really amplify these women's voices and products. This wasn't just a trip; it was a journey into understanding the dignity, patience, and community that holds rural life together."

Margaux Massol: "I appreciated the exhaustive view of the NGO's work, especially the cloth-making process. I think the experience would be much more powerful and consistent if we were guided by the women from the community themselves—seeing them present their work and take ownership would be impactful. I was particularly interested in the training that allows women to manage their own boards. I also noticed the physical toll of the work and suggested focusing on loom ergonomics. The conversations on the bus were my most memorable moments, though I wish we had more time to actually try the workshops ourselves."

Arush Narayan Srivastav: "The amount of effort that goes into hand weaving and the mythological importance of indigo were fascinating to learn. I was completely unaware of tribal culture before this, and the immersion opened my eyes to their way of life. Everything was well planned, though the language barrier sometimes made me feel out of touch."

I would suggest removing or reframing the drum-beating activity, as people lost interest quickly. The challenge of reviving lost arts while empowering women is being handled well. Being welcomed with flowers was a beautiful moment I won't forget."

Daisy Srimayi Katakam: "I learned a lot about tribal life and the spinning process. The cloth dyeing activity was the most valuable part for me, and I really enjoyed seeing the Juko weaving. The coordination was perfect. I feel the organization is successfully connecting people with village life and its economic culture. My most memorable moment was definitely the waterfall visit. For future camps, I'd love to see even more interaction with the village people and perhaps an exploration of the Dunku community in Chhattisgarh."



Thank You