

## Nirguna: A Journey of Hope or a Lost Battle?

**Leesa Mohanty**

Founder Nirguna, Mumbai

Email: leesa[at]@nirguna[dot]in

### Abstract

The case discusses the dilemma of those entrepreneurs who wake up to empathising with community issues and are eager to put the social cause ahead of the business objectives. The case narrates the personal struggles of an entrepreneur who finds more satisfaction in doing social good than making profits. This is a classic case of balancing social impact with business viability. Nirguna is at Crossroads! Which road should it take ?

**Key words:** *Social Impact, Handloom, Women Entrepreneurship, Retail.*

### The Entrepreneurial Dilemma

A constant tussle between ethical vs unethical, right vs wrong, good vs bad had been troubling Leesa for the last couple of years. She had been striving to find answers to why, when, what, and how much while juggling different aspects of her business, family, and her health too. She never denied the fact that these questions had helped her understand herself better in focusing on strategizing and scaling Nirguna, her business. And finally, she had been questioning her business acumen frequently. She had been caught up in the dilemma between choosing compassion or aggression.

Nirguna seemed to be at a crossroads. Leesa's heart wanted to get involved at a community level in doing revival work, whereas her mind wanted to focus on the handloom and handicraft business as a fashion brand that had a lot of financial growth potential. Leesa was struggling to seek a balance between doing good, making profits and promoting her creative self. A storm within herself needed to be sorted sooner or later—the sooner, the better for Nirguna!

### **The Background Story: Leesa and Nirguna**

Nirguna was opened in Mumbai on the auspicious day of 'Akshaya Tritiya', on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May 2014. Akshaya Tritiya is an auspicious Hindu festival and the perfect day to start new business. Some time ago, opening a retail store would have been the last thing that Leesa would have done, but it seemed the best thing to do then.

Leesa had been an achiever since childhood. She used to actively participate in extra-curricular activities while at school and college that had won her accolades and awards for her acting, dancing, and speaking skills. During her under-graduation studies, she became aware of the Institute of Rural Management (IRMA). Later she managed to crack the entrance exam and studied at IRMA from 1995-97. After passing from IRMA with a specialization in Human Resources, she started her career as the first HRD executive with the industry leader in the Dairy sector, GCMF. Since then, she has dabbled in different roles with various organizations. In due course, Leesa got married, had a baby, and chose to be a full-time mom. But true to her nature, not much later, she soon found an outlet for her creativity. As a planned part-time engagement she opened a dance school to teach Odissi, close to her home in 2008.

It was named Nirguna Centre for Excellence, and the Centre was in Hiranandani, Powai, Mumbai. The school flourished, and Leesa envisioned transforming it into a center for excellence in Indian culture and traditions by expanding its offerings to include music, theatre, yoga, Indian mythology, and values that nurture a child's core development. By 2010, her dance troupe was performing at prestigious events under her leadership, and Leesa began traveling internationally to conduct Odissi workshops. In the same year, she published her successful book, "Dancing is Fun", which was adopted as a teaching aid by institutions like Nrityagram. Leesa also planned to expand by opening additional branches in the suburbs. Alongside her teaching and leadership roles, she started designing sarees, a passion that brought her great joy. This creative streak had been with her since childhood, as she had designed her own clothes during her teenage years. It was a full life balancing her son, home, dance classes, and saree designs, Leesa was even considering opening new centers in nearby areas such as Vikhroli and Chandivali, close to Powai, Mumbai.

### **The Turning Point**

However, things took a tragic turn. In April 2013, during a brief trip to the USA, Leesa fainted mid-flight and was diagnosed with a medical condition called Central Pontine

Myelinolysis (CPM). CPM has a survival rate of less than 2%, and doctors had little hope for her recovery. Despite this, Leesa defied the odds and survived. By the end of 2013, her health had stabilized, but she continued to experience significant fluctuations in her energy levels.

Leesa spent most of her time resting, with minimal movement. The dream of dancing Odissi was no longer possible, and teaching students was out of the question. By October 2013, the Nirguna Centre for Excellence had been closed for six months. By early 2014, Leesa could barely speak or walk, and her reflexes were slow. She was deeply shaken as she became more aware of her miraculous escape from death. Seeing her reflection in the mirror weighed heavily on her, leaving her emotionally drained. It was a time of hopelessness, sustained only by God's grace. Mental turmoil became a daily struggle, with no one to share the burden. Leesa feared falling into depression if she stayed isolated, so she decided to return to designing sarees, a passion she had started in 2012. She had even held a few successful exhibitions in late 2012 and early 2013, alongside running the Centre. She knew her 'center for happiness' lay in doing something creative. As a passionate creator, she found immense joy in bringing new ideas to life. The key was finding an outlet outside her home to keep her occupied, and after much persuasion, she finally convinced her family.

### **Origin of Nirguna and the Early Days**

A small shop was rented near her home in Hiranandani, Powai, and thus, Nirguna was born! Fortunately, she found a shop in a supermarket, just half a kilometer from her home. Due to an ongoing court case, the mall had not gained much attention, despite being in a prime location like Hiranandani, Powai, Mumbai. The rent of ₹14,000 per month was within her budget, so an agreement was signed. However, the real struggle was about to begin. At the time, the mall had only 7-8 operational shops. Located at one end of Hiranandani, Powai, it was not well-known, even though residents passed it on their way to the Western Express Highway. Since the mall wasn't fully operational, the management hadn't turned on the corridor lights, making it almost dark inside. Nirguna's shop was located a bit farther from the main entrance, and the dim lighting made it uninviting for customers. Additionally, Leesa discovered that many women in Hiranandani, Powai, preferred shopping in Bandra, with some even feeling it was beneath them to shop in Powai.

Leesa faced multiple challenges: attracting customers, promoting handlooms and handicrafts, and motivating women to wear sarees—especially handloom sarees. When

Nirguna first opened, word of mouth spread through her friends in Powai. The initial dream wasn't grand; the most important goal was simply to stay engaged and recover from past setbacks. The plan was to design sarees as a creative outlet. Due to health restrictions, travel was limited, and procurement was done locally for machine-made fabrics like crepe, chiffon, and georgette, which were then designed with the help of local tailors and embroiderers.

In the early months, Leesa managed the shop single-handedly, as hiring a sales associate was not an option. Her health also allowed her to keep the shop open for only a few hours each day. Leesa needed to travel to town for raw materials a few days a month, which meant the shop had to remain closed for those days. As a result, the shop was closed for 7-10 days each month. During these initial months, sales barely reached ₹15,000–20,000 per month. Leesa was responsible for sourcing, management, and practically every aspect of running the business to keep expenses minimal, with her health being a primary concern. While low sales sometimes caused her anxiety, she chose to ignore the financial worries, fearing they might negatively affect her mental health. She decided not to focus on profits, instead sticking to a simple "cash in, cash-out" approach. To stay motivated, she often recalled a saying from the Gujarati community: business owners shouldn't expect to see profits in the first few years. So, she focused on building a solid foundation and earning a strong reputation in the market.

### **The Vision Shift: Promoting Authentic Handlooms**

By late 2014, Leesa began experimenting in the handloom and artisanal sector. Early in life, she was introduced to Odisha Handlooms in her childhood through the Raasa Leela troupe of Bansi Bilash, an organization founded by her father to promote Krishna Bhakti. As a classical Odissi dancer, she had also experimented with Khandua, Berhampuri, Sambalpuri, and Bomkai sarees from Odisha Handloom for her dance costumes. Fortunately, the customers who visited her shop shared a similar taste.

Every day, Leesa was addressing customer queries about various types of weaves. She immersed herself in learning about these weaves, gathering secondary data, and reaching out directly to weavers across different states through her network. This marked the beginning of her journey—visiting handloom clusters, meeting weavers at their bases, and gaining first-hand knowledge. Leesa was immensely grateful to her husband, Amit, and especially her son, Soham, without whose support this in-depth understanding of handlooms would not have been possible. While her son's friends

were traveling abroad for vacations, Soham chose to join her and support her on this handloom journey to interiors of India. Although it was an enjoyable trip, with all expenses covered by her husband, it was far from a typical holiday. At the beginning, her family had to accompany her during the day, as her health demanded. But gradually, they allowed her to travel to nearby villages with trusted attendants.

Leesa's health showed consistent improvement month after month. The sense of working with communities and contributing to a meaningful cause brought her a sense of peace—a true IRMAN at heart. As time passed, Nirguna's focus became clearer. Nirguna was among the first shops in Mumbai to promote Handloom Sarees.

### **The Progression of Nirguna**

Nirguna was soon envisioned as a social entrepreneurship venture which worked with weavers and artisans across various handloom and handicraft clusters in India. The concept was conceived to be able to provide a direct and fair price marketing channel for the artisans and to provide consumers with a genuine, high-quality product—100% natural and eco-friendly. The efforts were always to give customers unique and unparalleled products, both in terms of quality and design. The very existence of Nirguna was to celebrate the rich and diverse cultural traditions of India through handloom and handicrafts.

The handloom industry in India has a rich legacy of cultural heritage. It is one of the oldest sectors employing millions of weavers, weaving a rich tapestry of fabric and notably saree traditions, diverse in designs, techniques, and motifs. According to the Third Handloom Census (2009-10), there were 43.31 lakh (4.331 million) individuals engaged in weaving and allied activities, with 87% of looms located in rural areas. Notably, women constituted a significant portion of this workforce, indicating the sector's role in promoting rural employment and empowerment. Each region of India has its own unique designs, including but not limited to Sambalpuri, Benarasi, Kanjivarams, Bhujodi, Bomkai, and different fabrics such as cotton, silk, tussar, linen, etc.

Nirguna's journey had begun in Gujarat, working with Ajrakh hand block printers, Aari embroidery artisans, and handmade jewellery artisans at a few places in Kutch, Gujarat. Nirguna then made inroads into handloom clusters of Odisha such as Nuapatna, Maniabandha, Boudh,

Barpali, Sonepur, Berhampur, Bajpur, Pipili, Gopalpur. It then brought into its fold, the Kantha artisans in Shantiniketan, Kalamkari block and screen printers in Machlipatnam, and hand painting Kalamkari artisans in Srikalahasti, Pattachitra artisans in Raghurajpur, Lambani and Kasuti artisans around Hampi, Bagh Block printers in Bagru, Rajasthan.

One of the decisions was to create unique fusion sarees: a love story between two states. If the sarees were woven in Odisha, then they were painted in Madhubani, Bihar, or embroidered in saari embroidery in Kutch, Gujarat. This was liked by the customers a lot.

Leesa started visiting handloom exhibitions to understand different kinds of weaves. She was very particular about not misleading customers and therefore talked to the weavers and traders at the exhibition and learnt tricks to identify the real from artificial ones. Soon she realized that procurement of authentic handloom sarees at the right price was important to run the business. So, traveling to the interiors, meeting the weavers and artisans in person was essential. During a weeklong trip, Leesa visited 2-3 villages and met with 20-30 families. She gained a thorough understanding of the weave, the involvement of family members, the current production potential, the reach and network with other weavers, and the trust factor, all of which were evaluated subjectively. A straightforward process of selecting a few weavers and artisans from a cluster for recurring purchases was initially adopted. However, challenges arose as some weavers and artisans (chosen as village representatives) sent defective sarees without offering returns or exchanges. In some cases, even after making full advance payments, instances of deceit occurred. Although those weavers and artisans were blacklisted, the money was lost. This deceit was particularly evident in cases involving new design development or the revival of weaves.

### **Anchoring a Base in Mumbai : The Nirguna Retail Store**

During this period, Mumbai had hardly very few handloom saree shops, with only 1-2 government stores in the city. However, certain areas in Mumbai had significant East Indian and South Indian populations, which created the demand for authentic handloom sarees. Fortunately, Powai had a large Bengali community, with Durga Puja being celebrated by the Powai Bengali Association. This became a catalyst for Nirguna. The shop was promoted as a go-to destination for affordable, reasonably priced handloom sarees. Leesa positioned her brand, Nirguna, as “Handloom

For All.” Nirguna began participating in exhibitions in localities like Powai and Matunga, where the response was heartening.

Soon the shop gained recognition among handloom saree lovers in Mumbai, and a few authentic enthusiasts began visiting. As customers continued to make inquiries, Leesa kept visiting new clusters to expand the range of sarees on sale. However, the village trips were proving to be costly, making it difficult to account for these expenses. On the other hand, identifying a genuine handwoven saree was challenging without visiting the weaver's premises and inspecting the looms on which they were made. The rise of jacquard looms, especially double jacquard, became a concern for those seeking authentic handwoven sarees. The village visits were vital also to build rapport with the weavers and to develop new designs. Thus, on the one hand, while Nirguna's reputation as a seller of authentic handloom sarees was growing, the business was not making enough profits to meet expenses. The minimum expense included flight tickets, taxi charges, food, and stay in these clusters. Her husband, Amit, was kind enough to give her 40000/- per month and took care of the village trips.

### **Growth of the Store and Hiring Help for the Store**

A few months later, the founder hired a salesgirl, Shivangi, to assist her in the shop for a monthly salary of ₹8,000. Shivangi had not completed even the 10th grade but was eager to learn. The most important criteria for Leesa were honesty and trustworthiness, and Shivangi seemed to meet those requirements. She came highly recommended by a friend. This arrangement was mainly to ensure the shop remained open from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m., as Leesa believed that operating full-time would boost sales. It was becoming difficult for her to manage opening and closing the shop shutters four times a day seeking the help of her husband, son, or neighbours. Leesa typically closed the shop for a lunch break from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m., but due to her ill health, she often had to close early or open late, around 5 p.m., and occasionally kept the shop closed for a few days each month.

Hiring a salesgirl allowed Leesa to take a comfortable break from 1 P.M. to 3:00-4:00 P.M. each day for lunch. The salesgirl handled the basic functions of the 100 sq. ft. shop and learned the fundamentals of inventory management. Leesa taught her assistant the basics of sales and how to recognize different weaves and handicrafts. To ensure security, three CCTV cameras were installed in three corners of the shop, which was sufficient for the small space. The sales staff was instructed to follow all basic retail processes, including generating an invoice for every sale.

Meanwhile, a few shops had opened in the complex, and a school for mentoring special children had also opened next to Nirguna Store. Some parents would sit in the shop while waiting to pick up their children. Leesa kindly advised the salesgirl to allow these parents to sit, and over the next 2-3 weeks, the parents became friendly with the salesgirl. Leesa found it fulfilling to perform such small acts of kindness. Leesa often reflected on how the urban population in cities such as Mumbai seemed more stressed than those in rural areas due to pollution, higher expectations, and the fast-paced lifestyle. Having been born and raised in small towns, Leesa found Mumbai's pace overwhelming.

Leesa had always instructed the salesgirl to be kind and polite to the customers. However, she began to feel uneasy when two customers started frequenting the shop during her absence. Soon, she was surprised to find inventory missing. The suspicion grew stronger when a few products went missing every month and these customers would not make eye contact with her at all. With sales as low as INR 20,000 -30000/-, the missing inventory became a headache for Leesa. Leesa had to discontinue the practice of allowing parents waiting for their children to sit inside the shop. Such a drastic step was the exact opposite of her nature or approach to life. It also seemed like the right decision, as the flow of customers was increasing daily. However, given the small size of the shop, it became difficult to accommodate them along with the waiting parents inside.

At the end of the first year, Leesa received a notice to vacate the shop as the owner was selling the property. She saw this as an opportunity to relocate closer to the main entrance of the mall. Without hesitation, she secured a new shop near the entrance. However, since sales hadn't picked up yet, Leesa chose to keep the interior design simple and cost-effective. Even the front transparent glass door, which would have improved security, was skipped to keep expenses low. Within a few months, foot traffic increased, and sales grew significantly. By 2016, sales reached around ₹2-3 lakh per month during the festive season. Leesa also started making sales through WhatsApp, and Facebook marketing had begun. She was even planning to launch a website for Nirguna.

### **Customers of Nirguna**

The customers at Nirguna were largely upper-middle-class homemakers or working women. And the time of visit for both these categories of women was difficult for Leesa. The homemakers preferred to come between 1:00 PM and 4:00 PM, and the office goers preferred to come after 8:00 pm. At times, the store would close at 9:30 PM, though the shop closing time was 8:00 PM. The



customers always wanted to speak to Leesa before finalizing the purchase. Leesa simply loved talking to her customers and suggesting the best piece according to their personality, the occasion, accessories, etc. Being a dancer, actor, Leesa had a knack for aesthetics and that helped her give apt suggestions most of the time.

This was the reason that spurred Leesa's into designing. A few customers initially suggested she do the stitching of the blouses to be paired with the sarees blouse stitching for them. Gradually, a few others asked her to make kurtas and dresses. Customers loved her contemporary, boho designs with antique patches and a raw, elemental touch. Thus, Leesa started designing blouses, dresses, and kurtas, etc. on customer request. Suddenly, the sales picked up. The store also started seeing more of the younger generation, especially those in their twenties and thirties, frequenting it. By 2016, Leesa could not take breaks during the daytime as could in the early days of the store.

A welcome trend was the increasing footfall of youngsters. Though the stitched dresses and blouses had a 100% margin, yet these were between INR 1000/- to 2000/- However, it was difficult to keep more than 25-30% margin on sarees. The competition in this segment started building up by mid-2016.

### **Managing the Store: Daily Challenges**

With time, managing the sole staff, was proving to be a major challenge for Nirguna. Late arrivals and occasional leaves had become common, and any reprimand led to staff exit sooner or later. So, Leesa decided to appoint two sales staff instead of one to manage the rush. Since the festival season was approaching, she had to act fast. She hired Sonali, a fresher from a local designing school. The equation between Sonali and the old staff, Priyanka, turned out to be good. But it was soon evident that both got immersed in their mobile phones, and less attention was paid to inventory display or managing the store during the free time. Leesa would provide directions and assist the staff in keeping the interiors and displays visually appealing, constantly reminding them to proactively take on tasks that could help boost sales. She was always open to suggestions and eagerly anticipated ideas from Ms. Sonali, the fashion design graduate, in this regard. Leesa understood it would take some time for the staff to align with her instructions, so she remained patient. However, within a few days, a new trend emerged at the shop. The new fashion school graduate began asking the older staff to bring her 'sevpuri and chaat' almost every evening.

During peak hours, particularly between 5:30 pm and 6:30 pm, the evening snack ritual would take place. The space was too small to have snacks and attend to customers at the same time.

Even though the junior staff was ready to assist customers, Ms. Sonali would often ask them to wait ten more minutes. Leesa was unhappy with this behavior and decided to ask Sonali to leave within a month. Ms. Priyanka, the senior staff member, suggested that one of her friends was looking for a job and asked if Leesa could meet her. Leesa agreed to meet her and hired her, as she couldn't find a better candidate at that moment. However, managing the sales staff turned out to be more troublesome than she had anticipated.

### **Competition arrives**

By 2016, three designer women's garment shops had opened in the same mall. Seeing the flow of customers to Nirguna, these designers began befriending the two sales staff. They would gather as much information as they could, often checking on Leesa's new designs whenever she was away for lunch. The worst incident occurred when one designer instigated the sales staff and lured her away with promises of better prospects. Another designer in the mall began targeting high-end customers, even inviting them from the entrance gate. Although Leesa was initially irritated, this situation proved to be an eye-opener for her. Despite the competition, customers continued to return to Nirguna. This motivated Leesa, and she started focusing on creating a niche for the brand. By the end of 2016, Nirguna had firmly established itself as a treasure trove for handloom sarees.

### **The Burglars arrive**

With every passing day, it became more difficult to maintain discipline in the store, including store opening time, inventory losses, and work sharing. The space was small too. So, Leesa finally decided to have only one staff until they moved to a bigger store. She asked one staff member to leave as she would frequently arrive late or leave early, and take leaves occasionally. However, she found it humiliating and left saying she would teach them a lesson. To make matters worse, the next afternoon, there was a massive burglary at Nirguna. Two women wearing typical Maharashtrian 'Nauvari' (nine yards) sarees entered the shop, probably hypnotized the salesgirl, and stole nearly 11-12 exclusive sarees (each priced in the range 10000/- and 20000/- rupees). They were trained thieves for sure. It could be inferred from the swiftness of their act, and their sarees having pockets. This incident happened around lunchtime when Leesa usually left for lunch and the shop was managed by only one person. She used to check the CCTV images in 15–30-minute intervals from her home. That day she felt uneasy and woke up to check the CCTV, and to her disbelief, she could see those two ladies and immediately knew something was wrong. She called up

the shop number and asked the salesgirl to keep them engaged and said she would reach the shop in 5-10 minutes. But alas, the thieves got a cue and left before she could arrive. The case was immediately reported at the nearest police station, but there were no positive results from this action. It was difficult to even say who was involved in this robbery. The same happened with the store insurance. Their agent came, and the survey was done, but with no concrete actions. It was a long wait only to give up.

### **Need to Grow and Cost Constraints**

Leesa was debating moving to a bigger shop soon. Managing the inventory in the small shop had become a challenge by early 2017. Leesa had been listening to customer demands and was eager to explore sarees across states. In the process, the saree stocks kept increasing. Sarees being a seasonal requirement, sales were higher during August – January. Leesa started traveling a lot into the interiors of different states to meet weavers and source new varieties of sarees. In those days, weavers were not comfortable sharing photos through WhatsApp. Hence, Leesa had to travel quite often to collect authentic varieties from the weavers. Travel, food, and accommodation expenses, therefore, became very high. Leesa had started designing too, and so the stitching expenses also shot up. Leesa also started facing cheating and fraud. Though she placed an order with advance payment, a few times she was cheated with wrong, defective sarees, or the sarees never arrived. Sometimes the appointed village representative of Nirguna absconded with the money.

### **Implementation of the GST and the Challenges it Posed for Nirguna**

Another major economic reform that was debated during 2016-17 was the GST Bill in the Indian Parliament. Though it was a historic moment in many ways, it was initially devastating for few small businesses. Small businesses not only faced challenges in compliance but also in transitioning to this new regime. Leesa had started discussing it in her network regarding registering Nirguna for GST. She got mixed reactions. Since Nirguna was showing signs of growth, Leesa was sure she had to apply for GST sooner or later. So, she applied for GST registration. But she faced problems from both weavers and customers.

Leesa would try to source the products directly from the small-scale weavers and avoid middlemen or traders to the maximum. The purpose was to give these small-scale weavers a direct connection to the market and, thereby, a better price for their sarees. However, the small-scale

weavers had not applied for GST registration. Leesa could empathize with them completely, as she herself was struggling to understand the calculations involved in GST taxation. Even her Chartered Accountant (CA) was not sure of the taxes applicable for different handloom and handicraft products. The entire tax burden for purchases outside the state was borne by Nirguna as the CA suggested they be safe rather than sorry. He advised charging 12% extra on the MRP while billing. The customers strongly objected to this. Leesa tried her best for a few months to explain it to the customers but finally gave up. Leesa used to give a 5-10% discount to her regular customers, but now it had become difficult to continue giving those discounts without increasing the price. However, such a decision might not have been beneficial for Nirguna either. After the introduction of GST, there was also a dip in sales, which continued for 3-4 months. The point to be noted here is that since she was advocating “Handloom for All,” the profit margin was thin.

### **Pivotal Decisions & Strategic Shift**

Over the years, Nirguna had started engaging with the artisans at multiple levels:

Nirguna had begun working with skilled weavers at the village level and was exploring possibilities of reviving lost designs and crafts in Odisha towards the end of 2014. Nirguna had started the revival work of Dhalapathara Sarees of Odisha Handloom in 2015, a saree that was lost almost a century ago. Initial investment was done on about 30 sarees. However, the weaver, Mr. Sridhar, fell sick in early 2015 and could not weave anymore. Fresh enthusiasm came a few months later after meeting another weaver, Mr. Rout, who agreed to move back to his home to weave the saree. He was then working at a mill in Wapi in Maharashtra. Nirguna had to commit to support the weaver for two years. Then began a phase of experimentation. Towards the end of 2016, Dhalapathara saree revival was in full swing. Traditional designs were being redone on sarees. This was the most challenging phase that Nirguna was getting into. Efforts were being made at the village level to motivate more weavers to weave Dhalapathara Saree. All profits from Nirguna and Leesa's own funds were continuously invested to make Dhalapathara a success story. Thus, Nirguna played an instrumental role in the revival of Dhalapathara saree. It was also a success story of reverse migration. Putting Dhalapathara back on the national handloom map was challenging but an exciting journey for Nirguna. Identifying the weavers, picking up the lost craft, financing, and creating forward linkages gave more meaning and was more satisfying for Leesa.

She also started video documentation of the technique of weaving to promote this weave at various forums. This is when she realized that weaving techniques need to be documented across clusters. Thus, documentation of weaves and crafts with focus on video documentation had become a focus area by the end of 2016. The intent was to document how designs/patterns have evolved over the last few decades and create training avenues to revive the lost forms. Though it began with Dhalapathara, it soon spread to different clusters in Odisha. It was both financially and physically demanding for Leesa, as she had to be present with the camera team.

Leesa was keen on organizing workshops, seminars, and events to popularize and provide a platform for the weavers and artisans. Moreover, she felt regular interaction would bridge the gap between urban citizens and rural artisans. The funds required for such large-scale promotion were beyond Nirguna's capacity. It was quite draining for Leesa. She went ahead and created Nirguna Trust to support weavers and artisans in 2018. She also decided to move to a bigger shop so that it would be conducive to meeting the larger vision of Nirguna. However, Nirguna's focus on creating social value puts its profits at risk.

### **The Crossroads**

Every time she reflected on her dream for Nirguna, Leesa reminded herself, "Take it easy. Keep working at your own pace. This phase will pass, and you will achieve your desired goal." Yet, her heart sank, whispering the inevitable question—"How much longer could it last and in which direction?" Leesa was torn between the compassionate artist and the aggressive entrepreneur. Who will she succeed as finally—the artist or the entrepreneur? Will Nirguna become an NGO or a niche fashion brand or simply focus on e-commerce?