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## India Week with Brinda Gill - Threads of Tradition: Exploring Santhal Textiles

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In today's feature, the first in our exclusive week-long series exploring Indian textile culture, Brinda Gill interviews Surendra Kumar Patra, former Deputy Director of the Ministry of Textiles, Government of India. Read on to discover the rich textile traditions of the Santhal community, a vibrant tribal group from eastern India.

### Could you tell us about the Santhal community, Mr. Patra?

The Santhal community resides in the eastern Indian states of Odisha, Jharkhand, and West Bengal. They are known for their rich and distinct cultural heritage, evident in their unique administrative system, Majhi Paragna. Their language, Santhali, boasts its own script, and the community has vibrant

festivals, rituals, and belief systems deeply connected to nature. The Santhals practice nature worship, which lies at the heart of their traditions and way of life.

### **Do textiles play an important role in the lives of the Santals?**

Textiles, known as *lugli* in Santhali, hold deep significance in the lives and rituals of the Santhal community, accompanying them from birth to death. The tradition begins at childbirth, where the newborn is handed to the mother using a leaf from the Atnah tree (*Terminalia elliptica*), believed to have medicinal properties. Following this, the mother, father, and baby are gifted textiles by family members and the community, symbolising a shared celebration.

Textiles are equally integral to weddings, where specific pieces are exchanged and worn, each holding unique meanings and roles in the ceremony. Even in death, textiles play a vital role. At funerals, family members and relatives exchange new textile pieces at the cremation site, signifying respect and continuity in their customs.



### **Which textiles are required during weddings?**

During a wedding, there are specific textile pieces needed. They are used for different purposes and symbolic significances. Among the most important are *Raibar Lugli*, *Goglo Lugli*, *Jhal Parlag*, *Bariat Lugli*, *Baret Lugli*, *Titri Lugli*, *Sasang Dahli*, and *Sindoor Lugli*.

*Jhal* means "long" and *parlag* means "border." Earlier, saris were shorter in length, evolving later into longer woven saris with long borders. Thus, these came to be known as *Jhal Parlag*.

*Palat*—which refers to the number of textile pieces given and received by both parties—depends on their mutual understanding. It is important that the total number of textiles should not be even. The number of textiles starts from three, and sometimes as many as 31 pieces are exchanged when the families are wealthy.

Textile designer Puspita Marandi offers insight into the meaning behind these wedding textiles. According to her, *goglo* translates to "related to weddings," making *Goglo Lugli* a textile specifically connected to wedding ceremonies. This piece is traditionally presented by the groom's family to the most senior member of the bride's family as a mark of respect. Similarly, *Khanda Lugli* is a cloth gifted to the groom's mother and paternal aunts, with the *Goglo Lugli* being slightly longer in length.

Both textiles undergo a meticulous quality check performed by a community committee known as the *Mone Hol* (literally "five people"), representing the bride's side. These inspections assess defects such as black spots, yarn flaws, uneven density, or cuts, each carrying specific symbolic meanings. This practice reflects the community's emphasis on precision and tradition, ensuring the textiles align with cultural expectations.





The *Raibar Lugli* is a textile presented to the mediator of the wedding, with its quality symbolising the wedding's overall status and arrangements. Similarly, *Bariat Lugli*—deriving its name from *barat* (the wedding procession)—is a textile gifted to the groom's family and friends who accompany him to the bride's home. The quality of these textiles reflects the importance and mutual understanding of the families regarding the wedding. In parallel, the *Baret Lugli* serves as the equivalent cloth used by members of the bride's side as they escort her to the groom's home.

The *Sasang Dahli* holds ceremonial significance as a turban cloth of respect, given to key figures such as the *Majhi* (community head), the *Raibar* (mediator), and participants in the *Bariat* and *Baret* processions. For young girls and cousins accompanying the bride to the groom's place, a special textile called *Titri Lugli* is offered, emphasising their role in the ceremony.

Among all these, the *Sindoor Lugli* stands as the most crucial textile in Santal weddings. Historically woven by the *Pene* community under sacred conditions, including fasting and refraining from washing their faces, this textile represents purity. It is worn by both the bride and groom during the *Sindoor Daan* ritual, where the groom applies vermilion to the bride's forehead or hair parting. These pieces are naturally dyed with fresh turmeric by a happily married couple from the village, nominated by the *Majhi*. This process is deeply rooted in the collective agreement and traditions of the community, making it an integral part of the wedding's sanctity.

### **Are hand-woven textiles worn every day?**

Santhali men and women have traditionally embraced hand-woven cotton textiles as their everyday attire, reflecting both functionality and cultural identity. Men typically wear a *phutta kachha*, a length of cloth wrapped around the lower body, and pair it with a *gamcha* or *panchhi*—a lightweight stole draped over the neck or shoulder.

For women, the customary choice is the *Phutta sari*, a coarse cotton sari measuring 5.5 meters. It features a white base accented with red or green borders and an intricately designed end-panel. This distinctive end-panel showcases the *phutta* design, a ribbed weave enhanced with extra-weft techniques to create vivid, broad stripes in striking colour combinations, giving the sari its name.

Efforts to modernise and popularise this design include the work of the Weavers Service Centre in Bhubaneswar, which has developed fine cotton versions of the *phutta sari* for urban markets. Beyond traditional saris, *phutta* yardage is also crafted, allowing for use in tailored garments, and the *gamchas* serve as versatile stoles for both men and women. These hand-woven textiles remain an enduring symbol of Santhal culture and craftsmanship.

*Text: Brinda Gill*

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