

Woven Identity: The Evolution and Cultural Significance of Santali Textile Traditions

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ABSTRACT

The Santali people of Eastern India possess a rich heritage in which textiles serve as a primary medium of cultural expression and identity. This paper explores the profound historical trajectory of Santali weaving, tracing its evolution from a self-sufficient, ecologically integrated practice to its near extinction under the pressures of modernization, displacement and market economies. This narrative of decline is contrasted with a powerful contemporary revival movement, spearheaded by grassroots organizations, which is fundamentally reshaping the craft's production models, material palette, and socio-economic dynamics. By examining the shift from a male-dominated craft to one, cantered on the economic empowerment of women artisans, and from reliance on market goods to a sustainable "soil-to-shelf" ecosystem, this research highlights the remarkable resilience of Santali textile traditions. The paper ultimately provides critical insights into the adaptation and preservation of indigenous craft heritage in a globalized world, demonstrating how cultural identity can be both reaffirmed and redefined for a new generation.



Figure 1. First generation woman Santal weavers of Mayurbhanj district

INTRODUCTION: THREADS OF A CULTURE

Within the material culture of indigenous societies, textiles function as a critical semiotic system—a tangible language that encodes ancestral knowledge, delineates social structures, and articulates collective identity. The Santali people of Eastern India offer a compelling case study of this intimate relationship between fabric and culture. This paper analyzes the profound evolution of their weaving traditions, charting a course from ancestral techniques rooted in local ecology to the disruptive forces of the 20th century and, finally, to the innovative adaptations and revivals of the present day.



Figure 2, Santhals in Chhattisgarh shows significant diversification from Santhals of Bihar and Bengal and Orissa

The research is framed by a dual narrative that provides the micro and macro lenses for this paper’s analysis. The first account, an ethnographic data point of cultural erosion, is the personal history of designer Shakuntala Marndi, whose memories document the decline of traditional weaving in her village, driven by the introduction of mass-produced consumer goods. The second, representing a powerful counter-force of cultural reconstruction, is the grassroots revival movement led by the Mauna Dhvani Foundation, which exemplifies a new paradigm of community agency and empowerment.

This paper's thesis posits that the Santali textile tradition, while facing near-extinction due to modernization and market forces, is demonstrating remarkable resilience through grassroots initiatives. These efforts re-centre women as the primary artisans, champion a sustainable "soil-to-shelf" production model, and strategically adapt traditional motifs for contemporary markets. In doing so, they are not only preserving an ancient craft but are actively redefining and strengthening Santali cultural identity for a new generation. To fully appreciate the significance of this contemporary movement, it is essential to first understand the historical foundations upon which this rich tradition was built.

Historical Foundations of Santali Weaving

Understanding the original socio-economic structure and material culture of Santali weaving is essential for appreciating the scale of subsequent changes and the significance of modern revival efforts. For centuries, the craft was not an isolated activity but a fully integrated part of community life, shaped by social roles, agricultural cycles, and an intimate knowledge of the local environment. This historical context provides the baseline against which the tradition's decline and resurgence can be measured.



Figure 3: revived heritage of use of natural color and limited heritage patterens in Lugla saree, Photo Courtesy Shakuntala



Figure 4. The torn remnant of Santali handloom saree Photo Courtesy

ETV Bharat

The Santali people are a major tribal community with a primary geographic distribution across the East Indian states of Odisha, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Bihar, and Assam. Traditionally, their livelihood has been dependent on agriculture and livestock, and their material culture evolved to meet the functional demands of this agrarian lifestyle.

The earliest known Santali attire consisted of functional two-piece garments known as the *palhand* (bottom) and *panchi* (top). These were plain, unadorned cotton garments without colored borders, designed for comfort and utility. The design logic was eminently practical; for instance, women gathering items from the jungle could tuck both sides of the *panchi* into their waistband, creating a functional pouch. Furthermore, this two piece construction meant that the more frequently soiled top piece could be washed separately, an important consideration when textiles were a valuable, hand-produced resource.

The traditional production ecosystem was characterized by a symbiotic, specialized relationship between communities. The Santali people did not historically practice weaving themselves; a separate Weaver community, living within or near Santali villages, was responsible for the craft. The Santali people, however, were integral to the process. They cultivated cotton alongside other grains, and Santali women were responsible for spinning the yarn on a *takli* (a traditional hand spindle) and, crucially, were the sole masters of the complex botanical dyeing process. This inter-community dependence formed the backbone of textile production for generations and defined the tradition before the introduction of external market forces.

The Fabric of Tradition: Materials, Dyes, and Techniques

The unique character of traditional Santali textiles is derived from an intimate knowledge of the local ecology, which provided the raw materials for both fibers and colors. This deep connection to the land informed every stage of production, from the cultivation of cotton to the complex preparation of natural dyes, resulting in fabrics that were both aesthetically distinctive and culturally significant.



Figure 5: Different variety of Lagne worn during a marriage gathering in Mayurbhanj. Photo Courtesy Shakuntala

Materials and Yarns

The material foundation of the Santali textile tradition was autarkic, predicated on the cultivation of local varieties of cotton. Community members were skilled in spinning this cotton into yarn using a simple hand spindle known as a *takli*. This self-sufficiency in raw material production was a cornerstone of the traditional textile economy, ensuring that garments were created entirely from resources available within the community's immediate environment.

The Art of Natural Dyeing

The signature color palette and patterns of Santali textiles were achieved through a sophisticated natural dyeing process managed by Santali women.

- **The Signature Maroon:** The most important ingredient was *Chaili*, also known as *Aal* or *Morinda citrifolia*. The roots and bark of this plant were steeped with yarn to create the deep, signature maroon colour that has become synonymous with Santali identity.
- **The Dye Bath:** The dye bath was a complex mixture of several ingredients. Alongside *Chaili*, dyers used castor oil, black *myrobalan*, and the bark of the *danguapaan* plant, which contributed to a vibrant red hue. Each family often had its own secret recipe and proportion of dyestuffs, a closely guarded element of their ancestral knowledge.
- **Sacred Yellow:** For sacred garments used in wedding ceremonies, turmeric was used to dye the cotton yarns a brilliant yellow. This was particularly reserved for the *Sindur Lugli* garments worn by the bride and groom.



First generation Dyers of Mauna Dhvani Foundation preparing yarn dye for weft

Iconic Weaves and Patterns

The dyed yarns were woven into iconic garments with distinct patterns and features that served both aesthetic and functional purposes.

The Checkered Pattern: The signature Santali checkered pattern was developed for a practical reason. Weaving the deep maroon dye into a check ensured a balanced and uniform distribution of color across the white cotton base. This strategic technique prevented the fabric from appearing predominantly white and created the iconic, balanced aesthetic that defines traditional *phuta kacha* and *jhalah* sarees.

Primary Garments: The two primary traditional garments for men and women were the *phuta kacha* and the *jhalah saree*. The *phuta kacha* is a men's dhoti, typically measuring around 5.5 feet in length and 3.5 feet in width. The *jhalah saree*, worn by women, is longer, at approximately 15 feet. It is distinguished by its thick

borders and a heavily embellished *pallu* (the decorative end-piece of the saree), which features additional woven yarns forming thick, contrasting patterns.

The meticulous creation of these fabrics, from spinning the yarn to dyeing it with local plants and weaving it into culturally specific patterns, directly linked the material object to the social and ritual life of the community.

The Socio-Cultural Significance of Santali Garments

Santali textiles are not merely functional items but are deeply embedded in the social fabric of the community. They serve as critical markers of life stages, are central to the performance of rituals, and function as powerful symbols of collective identity. The specific garments worn, the way they are draped, and the occasions for which they are chosen all carry layers of cultural meaning.

Textiles in Ritual and Ceremony

Marriage ceremonies, in particular, highlight the ritual importance of specific textiles, which are exchanged as offerings and worn by key participants to signify their roles and relationships.

Garment Name	Description	Recipient/Occasion of Use
Khanda Lugli	A white cotton saree (16, 17, or 18 ft long as per order) with Aal-dyed borders and wider stripes on the pallu	Gifted to the bride's mother during marriage
Gagla Lugli	A saree (17-18 ft long) similar to the Khanda Lugli but with an additional narrow line next to the wide borders.	Presented to the bride's aunt (father's sister).
Hele Lugli	A shorter saree (11-12 ft long) with a pattern identical to the <i>Khanda Lugli</i> .	Reserved for the bride's maternal grandmother.
Sindur Lugli	Plain white garments (dhoti for men, saree for women) dyed with turmeric just before use.	Worn by the bride and groom during the <i>sindoor daan</i> ritual.

Table 1: variation ,description and use of different Lugli

The Art of the Drape

The method of wearing a saree is as culturally distinct as the fabric itself. The Santali drape differs significantly from other regional styles, such as the Bengali drape.



Figure 6: A sketch of Sidhu, one of the leaders of the 1855 Santhal Rebellion against British rule in India, from The Illustrated London News magazine, 1856. One of the earliest depictions of Santhal and their attire

Santhal Drapes:

Distinctive Features: The Santali style is characterized by a triangular shape created at the front. The *pallu* is brought from the back over the shoulder and tucked into the waistband on the wearer's left side, allowing the thick, decorative patterns of the border to be prominently displayed.



Figure 7 (photo collage of step by step methods of draping female Lugli, 8 Step Santali saree draping

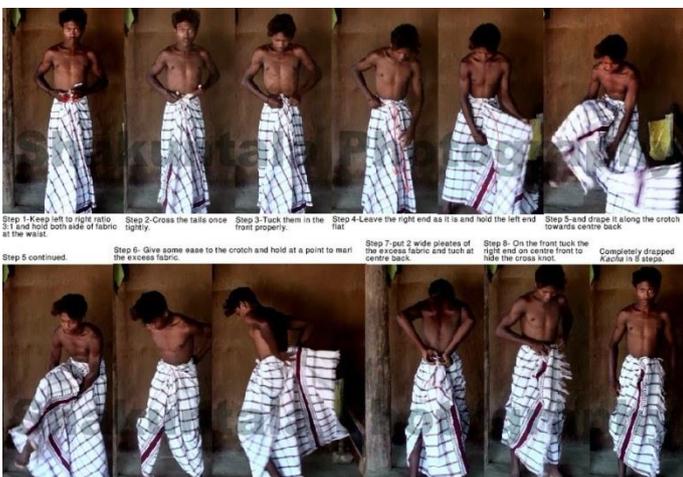


Figure and 8 (photo collage of step by step methods of draping Dhoti in 12 steps

Adaptability: This traditional drape is not rigid. Women adapt the style based on their activity, with variations reflecting the practical needs of different work scenarios. This flexibility demonstrates the garment's role as both a ceremonial and a functional piece of clothing.

Garments as Symbols of Identity

In contemporary times, the act of wearing traditional garments like the *phuta kacha* and *jhalah saree* has evolved into a powerful expression of community unity and cultural pride. At festivals, social gatherings, community meetings, and even political rallies, donning these specific textiles serves as a visible affirmation of Santali identity. This practice reinforces a sense of belonging and makes a collective statement about the endurance and vitality of their culture.

The palhand was wrapped on the waist tightly and folded from one side of the waist to another in the front with the excess length. The panchhi was tucked on the waist inside the bottom wear in the front then moved around back and put on the left shoulder. The extra fabric was again pulled to the front and tucked on the left side waist. The panchhi was being used more functionally. That time people did not carry bags to keep stuffs in it, they make a pouch of the panchhi by tucking it both the sides on waist and keep stuffs in it. When they return from the jungle, they just tie knots to close the pouch during returning to home. The panchhi gets dirty more quickly as it is used as a bag and also can be washed separately likewise. Sometimes the cloth gets stains because of the fruit juice which does not get clean easily. This context made it logical to wear a two-piece cloth, because it was not affordable for them to buy new cloths frequently. The men wore the kachha which was 5 ½ ft long and 3ft in width. They wore the kachha in the same style as it is worn today.

With gradual improvement of economic condition women started using saree supplied by the weavers. The length was then 12ft and width 3 ½ ft. For few time the women wore the white saree with no coloured borders until they know the colouring of yarn. When they knew about dyeing the yarn they either spun it themselves or bought it from the local market, then dyed it and gave the coloured yarn to the weavers. They used aal as the main ingredient for dyeing with harida and danguapaan.

Here are some terms used to calculate the yarn length/bundle during purchasing in local market:

1 lati = 20rounds of yarn with 1 1/2ft fold= 60ft

1 fandi = bundle of 5 lati=300ft

1 machad = 12 fandi=3600ft = 1098m

And the prices were

20s count- Rs4/ machad

40s count- Rs6/ machad

60s count- Rs10/ machad

The Aal tree is seen almost all forests of Tamilnadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Orissa, Jharkhand and West Bengal. The bark and root of the tree is being used as textile dye stuffs from long years in most of the places of tamilnadu, Gujarat, Jharkhand and Orissa. In Jharkhand and Orissa it is mostly practiced by the tribal people of santal and Munda.

From past 120 years the Santhals of Orissa are in practice with this work but from the current young generation no one carried on the techniques. One more problem is that every family had their own recipe and proportion of dyestuffs for the dye bath and it was kept secret in the family members. They did not do it for commercial purpose but for the family. Even though their process was different they were all doing the same dark maroon color which have become quite significant among today's Santhal culture.



Figure 9: Yarns are dyed and being distributed to women artisans.



Figure 10: Returning of traditional saree in Mela stalls.

after the use of dyeing process, the clothing of santals came with a distinct check pattern and wide borders. Based on these patterns there are some sarees and dhotis specially used in marriages. The sarees and dhotis vary in sizes ,they are described below in detail.

a: Khanda Lugli – width 3 1/2ft. length- 16,17,18ft as per order.

This saree is offered to the mother of the bride.

Dyed yarn pattern- 2 1/2 inch border on both side of the saree in warp direction and in pallu 3 wider stripes of 2 1/2 inch.



Figure 11, revived Phuta Kachha

This deeply embedded socio-ritualistic system, dependent on a stable local economy and shared aesthetic values, proved uniquely vulnerable to the external pressures of mass production and novel materials, which began to systematically dismantle the craft's foundational pillars.

Forces of Change: Market Dynamics and Material Transformation

The 20th and 21st centuries introduced profound economic and technological shifts that fundamentally altered the Santali textile landscape. The integrated, self-sufficient ecosystem that had sustained the craft for a

generations began to erode under the pressure of mass-produced goods, changing aesthetic tastes, and new economic realities, leading to a sharp decline in traditional practices.

The Catalyst of Modernity

Designer Shakuntala Marndi's childhood memory of her aunt returning from Rourkela serves as a pivotal anecdote illustrating this shift. Her aunt brought gifts of lightweight, floral-printed nylon sarees, whose novel lustrousness and bright patterns captivated the community. This moment symbolized the introduction of mass produced textiles that were perceived as modern and desirable, signaling a critical shift in aesthetic preference away from the traditional hand woven cottons.

Decline of the Traditional Ecosystem

Several key factors contributed to the erosion of the craft. As demand for fabric grew within the community, the small number of specialized weaver families found themselves unable to keep up. Facing economic pressures and unable to compete with cheaper, faster production methods, these families eventually departed from the villages. With the weavers gone, the crucial link in the production chain was broken. The Santali people, no longer able to have their hand-dyed yarns woven into traditional garments, were forced to turn to the market and purchase power-loom fabric.

A Shift in Palette and Production

This transition to market dependency triggered a transformation in both the materials and the colors of Santali attire.

A New Palette: The subtle, deep maroon of traditional *Aal* dye was replaced by a vibrant, modern palette of green, red, pink, and yellow. These intense hues were achieved not with natural ingredients but with readily available chemical dyes, which dramatically altered the visual identity of the garments.

Material and Market Consequences: The consequences of this shift were significant. Polyester fabrics, often with a yellowish hue, began to be misleadingly marketed as *tussar* silk at inflated prices. This introduction of synthetic materials and chemical dyes necessitates a critical eye; claims of "natural dyeing" for intensely bright colours should be met with scepticism, as true natural dyes typically produce more subtle tones.

This period of decline pushed the authentic Santali weaving tradition to the brink of extinction. However, it also set the stage for a powerful counter-movement aimed at rescuing this invaluable heritage.

Contemporary Revival: The Mauna Dhvani Foundation and a New Paradigm

In response to the near-extinction of traditional weaving, a powerful counter-narrative of revival has emerged. This contemporary movement is focused on cultural rejuvenation, economic empowerment, and sustainable practices, with the Mauna Dhvani Foundation standing as a central actor. By reimagining the entire production ecosystem, the foundation has seeded the rebirth of a craft while simultaneously transforming the lives of hundreds of women.



Figure 12: A big trend of using the traditional colour, material and patterns of different Lugli is being spotted in protest rally and social gathering (photo Birbhumi Santhal Protest rally against land capture for coal mine, West Bengal)

Genesis of a Movement

The Mauna Dhvani Foundation was founded in 2018 by Bindu Vinodhan with a mission to give voice and livelihood back to the artisan communities of Mayurbhanj. Its core philosophy is a "soil-to-shelf" model, a holistic approach that encompasses the entire production chain—from cultivating cotton and natural dyes to spinning, weaving, and marketing the finished textiles.

Reimagining Tradition and Empowering Women

The initiative's most significant social innovation was to challenge and break the long-standing gender taboo that restricted weaving to men.

Training Women Weavers: The foundation has trained over 800 Santali women, who were previously excluded from the craft, to become skilled weavers and micro-entrepreneurs. This has not only revived the art form but has also provided a new and vital source of financial independence for women in the community.

Micro-Weaving Centres: Rather than having women juggle weaving with domestic chores at home, the foundation established micro-weaving centres in villages. These centres provide professional, collaborative, and well-ventilated workspaces. This model ensures fair pay, with artisans earning Rs 6,000 per month during training, a figure that rises to between Rs 12,000 and Rs 18,000 once they achieve expertise.

Sustainable Practices and Cultural Authenticity

The foundation is deeply committed to sustainability and honouring the cultural roots of the craft.

Ecological Production: To create a zero-carbon-footprint textile ecosystem, the foundation has reintroduced the cultivation of desi cotton. In a significant breakthrough, it also successfully sourced indigo seeds from Rajasthan and found that the climate in Mayurbhanj is conducive to its cultivation, providing a local source for natural blue dye.

Reviving and Innovating Patterns: The revival was sparked by the discovery of a torn, 80-year-old remnant of a handwoven saree, which served as the original template. This demonstrates a conscious economic and cultural strategy: reviving authenticity for heritage value while innovating for market viability. As Gobinda Dalai of the foundation explains, "We wanted to give traditional Santali weaving a contemporary touch so that it can be marketed... we ensured to have the nature-inspired motifs like the peacock and arrow... and make them relevant for the modern market."

National Recognition and Impact

In late 2024, in a moment of national recognition, weaver Maina Baskey visited Rashtrapati Bhawan. Dressed in a handwoven Santali saree, she presented another one as a gift to President Droupadi Murmu, a Santali herself. This event, along with praise from Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his *Mann Ki Baat* address, served as a watershed moment, validating the movement's profound cultural and economic impact and bringing well-deserved recognition to the 800 women artisans driving this revival. This successful revitalization of cotton weaving has also opened the door to exploring the untapped potential of other local fibers.

Beyond the Loom: Exploring Other Indigenous Fibers of Mayurbhanj

Expanding beyond cotton-based textiles, the Mayurbhanj region holds significant potential in other indigenous fibers. Exploring these materials is strategically important for diversifying local economies, preserving unique bio-cultural knowledge, and creating new opportunities for artisan communities. The research and

development of fibers like Tassar silk and *lar* represent the next frontier in building a sustainable and resilient craft ecosystem.

Mayurbhanj Tassar Silk

Mayurbhanj is home to a distinct variety of Tassar silk, naturally grown in the Similipal National Park.

Characteristics: This silk is coarser and has a more yellowish hue compared to the more widely known Bhagalpuri Tassar. While fabric was not traditionally woven from this tassar, a growing market demand for tassar sarees has created new economic possibilities.

Livelihood and Promotion: Today, many Santali families are becoming involved in sericulture as a means of livelihood. The state government is also actively working to promote the industry and enhance the weaving capacity of local artisans.

Lar Fiber

Lar is a robust natural fiber traditionally utilized by tribal communities in the Similipal region.

Characteristics and Traditional Uses: Extracted from a local plant, *lar* fiber is initially white but turns an orangeish-brown as it dries. Its natural strength made it ideal for making rope and for crafting the *gungu*, a traditional leaf raincoat that has now been largely replaced by plastic alternatives.

Economic Vulnerability and Current Research: The *Bir Hol* community has traditionally relied on *lar* fiber extraction for their livelihood. However, the prevalence of stronger, cheaper plastic ropes has threatened their economic survival. In response, research is being conducted to explore the fiber's potential for weaving or creating finer products. A workshop organized in collaboration with the National Institute of Design (NID) has produced contemporary products like bags and wall hangings, but key challenges remain, including the fiber's heavy weight and a lack of interest among the younger generation.

As a part of design research in NID, Shankuntala experimented with this rare and almost lost tradition due to invasion of plastic as waterproofing material.

The process of steeping begins with the *bast (lar)* fiber extracted from the plant, soaking it in water for a week, followed by beating it with a stick to remove the starchy material before drying it. The *Bir Hol* community, dedicated to extracting fiber from the plant, relies entirely on this practice for their livelihood. However, with limited exploration into this fiber and the prevalence of stronger plastic alternatives, their traditional ropes are gradually being replaced, threatening their means of living. In Shakuntala's panchayat, where only 32 households exist, many women have married into Santali or Munda tribal communities, adopting their husbands' culture and language, thereby losing their native tongue of *Bir Hol* and starting to use Santali.

Shakuntala experimented with treating the *lar* fiber with alkali to explore the possibility of separating it for spinning and weaving. She envisions the potential for creating fibers, yarns, and fabric from it but acknowledges the need for extensive research. After a joint workshop, the *Bir Hol* community crafted some products from the *lar* fiber, although achieving a clean finish remains a challenge due to the fiber's heaviness. The artisans acquire black-colored strips of *lar* fiber using mud, leveraging its natural iron-rich properties to create a durable, fast color. Traditional *lar* fiber containers, known as *topa*, originally used for oil extraction due to their strength, have now been repurposed as bags. Additionally, contemporary *lar* fiber products such as bottle holders and wall hangings have been created, showcasing the versatility of the material. Shakuntala highlights the presence of another fiber called *shasha*, white in color and equally robust, yet largely unexplored. Darbar Birhol, an artist specializing in *lar* fiber products, along with a few other artisans, still make *lar* fiber products. While their products are in demand, the younger generation shows little interest in the craft due to the fiber's weight and the perceived lack of appeal in the finished products.

Shakuntala shares some images of the flora of her community, including pictures of the 'saal' flower, 'Icha.h baha' used in textile dyeing, 'mahua' from which traditional local liquor is made, and 'murud baha' or palash

flower. Additionally, she shares pictures of one of the festivals that occur in the beginning of March, known as the 'Baha Festival,' during which *saal* flower, *icha.h baha*, and *mahua* flower are offered to *Marang*

Buru and *Jaher Ayo*. People engage in pouring water, singing, and dancing during this celebration. One of the rituals in this *Baha Festival* involves leaving a pot of water in *Naike's* house at night, and the next day, they use it to predict the coming year.



Figure 13: New skill development in Santhal Villages in Mayurbhanj district, to support the newly formed Mauna Dhvani initiative.

The exploration of these raw materials underscores a broader effort to build a diverse and sustainable future for the region's craft heritage.

CONCLUSION: WEAVING A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

The story of Santali textiles is a powerful chronicle of cultural endurance. This paper has traced its journey from a stable, integrated cultural practice through a period of sharp decline driven by market forces, and into its current phase of dynamic, multifaceted evolution. The tradition has proven to be not a static relic of the past, but a living heritage capable of profound adaptation and renewal.

Today, the Santali textile landscape is characterized by the coexistence of two distinct paths. The first is a mass-market adaptation, defined by power looms and bright chemical dyes, which caters to contemporary tastes but departs significantly from ancestral practices. The second path is the grassroots revival model championed by the Mauna Dhvani Foundation. This model consciously prioritizes ecological sustainability, the economic and social empowerment of women, and a deep commitment to cultural authenticity. It is a paradigm that seeks not just to produce textiles, but to rebuild an entire ecosystem of craft, community, and identity.

The critical importance of initiatives like this cannot be overstated. They preserve ancestral knowledge while creating viable economic futures that allow artisan communities to thrive. A crucial step in formalizing this legacy is the ongoing effort to secure a Geographical Indication (GI) tag for the *phuta kacha* and *jhalah saree*. Such a designation would formally recognize and protect this unique cultural heritage, safeguarding it for generations to come. Ultimately, the story of Santali weaving offers a compelling model for how indigenous communities can navigate the pressures of modernity—not by rejecting it, but by creatively and resiliently reimagining tradition to weave a sustainable and self-determined future.

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