



# TEXTILE TRIP

## *to India*

### Jacquard and plain weave

**W**E FLEW TO INDIA, with one stop in Dubai, and landed in Kolkata, the official name for Calcutta as from 2001. Kolkata was the capital under British rule until 1911, when Delhi took over. Our tour guide, Stina Gärdek, met us, a group of twelve. We would be spending a good two weeks together, visiting two states: West Bengal, which borders on Bangladesh, and Orissa, in north eastern India. Both states are famed for their rich, vital weaving traditions.

Two intensive days spent in the hectic city were taken up with visits to *Mother Teresa's centre*, *The Paresbnath Jain Temple*, *The Victoria Memorial Hall* (where there was an amazing Kantha embroidery) and bustling market areas.

Next up was a trip out by bus into the countryside. While in West Bengal, we were accompanied by a national guide, *Syed Asifur Rahman*, Asif. He was from Kolkata and keen to point out that Kolkata is India's cultural capital. "There is at least one musical instrument in each family home", he told us, to illustrate how deep-seated cultural life is there.

HEAVY RAIN had made the roads difficult to access. For long stretches we were travelling at an average speed of 30 km/hour. Our two drivers' skill and patience were utterly admirable. By the evening we had arrived at the first of the weaving villages, where Jacquards are used for silk and cotton, incorporating metallic thread. The pattern designs are both woven with a shuttle and picked up (lancé and brocaded). Everything is handwoven by men, with the aid of a fly shuttle. Weights, such as the bricks shown in the picture, are suspended from the edging border ends. The loom is called a *Pit loom*.

WHAT THEY PRODUCE is sold there in a cooperative shop. Asif told us that they have several outlets, some here in

the village, some through retailers who sell in the towns and at markets. They showed us some truly fantastic cloths woven in cotton and silk, with Jacquard patterned borders and inlay.

This was the first time on our trip that we came up against the dilemma of pricing. I paid 1500 rupees for more than 5 metres of cloth woven in cotton with edging borders of silk and gold metallic thread. That is about 150 Swedish crowns.

Gaining access to Indian society does not take place in a trice. There is huge diversity in the country, and if you go straight into people's homes and lives, as we did, it becomes a palpable experience.

TIPPING IS AN ESSENTIAL lubricant in the overall economy and a major source of income for everybody working in the service sector. It's more a question of knowing when and how much to give.

THE WEAVING VILLAGE we visited the following day was completely different. Plain weave, *gamsha cloth*, is produced there, a multi-coloured and fine check or striped fabric for a wide variety of purposes: loincloth, turban, straining cloth, food protection, cover to ward off insects over a sleeping child, carrying cloth and towel.

As we approached this weaving village, some distance from Baharampur, we were met by children on bicycles, excitedly ringing their bells. The whole village soon gathered around. Production there is both through handweaving as well as by machine-powered looms in a mill. Synthetic pigments are used for dyeing.

In the evening we were able to take part in a *Diwali, Festival of Lights, ceremony*. This, the most important Hindu festival, happened at the time we were there.

THERE IS SOME SILK PRODUCTION in that area too, but because people had taken time off for Diwali and cocooning was not expected before December, we had to do something else. This took the form of visiting a shop with a wealth of textiles: handwoven tussar silk in several qualities, woollen fabric made with wool from Kashmir, Jacquard cloths and fine, simple plain weaves. We were inducted into shopping procedures in India: show interest, ask if there is more to see and take your time.

The exceptional and rare pieces then can begin to appear.

**top left** / Fine wild silk in one of the weaving villages.

**centre left** / Jacquards are in use in the first weaving village we visited in West Bengal.

**top right** / The ends of the edging border weighted with stones. This type of loom is called a Pit loom. Only the men did the weaving in this village.

**below left** / A woman in a weaving village, weaving gamsha, a plain weave cloth used in multifarious ways.

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## Weaving village, Orissa

WE MET UP with our next national guide in Orissa, *Nimain Das*, in the town of Bhubaneswar. One of the weaving villages we visited lies in a thickly wooded setting. Monkeys scrambled about in the trees and cows sauntered about leisurely. Morning ablutions take place in a little lake. Brightly coloured saris float about in the water as the women go for a refreshing dip.

Great poverty, on a purely financial level, exists in India, but we observed time and again the kind of riches there are as well. A feeling of community (one wonders if there is a word for loneliness), the know-how involved in producing the raw material and creating beautiful textiles and functional objects. The generosity with which we were met. Smiles and warmth. India is very easy to visit as a traveller.

Children ran up, curious, in every village we came to. We did not feel as though we were seen just as tourists, people with money. Instead, they wanted to know our names and where we came from. Many of them have mobile phones, used to photograph us. All the children go to the village school, said Nimain Das, and those who have the opportunity continue on to further education. This means that many of the children do not stick to weaving as a profession, with the result that weavers are ever fewer in number. One solution could be that the weavers get paid more for their products. India has a large middle class, who are well off. But, as Nimain Das pointed out, much of what is handwoven here is used by local people, who do not have much in the way of resources.

There is no question about the pride people take in their skills, exemplified by those we met in the weaving villages. It was here we met a grandfather weaving with wild silk and ikat weft. His son has carried on in the profession, in a workshop just a bit further off. The grandson was beautifully dressed Western style, in a shirt and trousers of wild silk. Marketing was his job, he told us.

Another workshop specialized in patterned textiles, woven with a drawloom: pattern floats on a plain weave ground, the technique known in Sweden as 'opphämta'. The son was drawing the pattern.

Everywhere we saw equipment customized for professional weaving, light, supple and functional. Such as the stretchers, slender and resilient, which provide a good measure of control over the weave.

The village has a co-operative shop, selling all the work. ➤

**top** / Winding off spun wild silk.

**page 41 and top left** / The son of the house drawing the pattern systematically.

**top right** / Resist dyed weft yarn.

**centre left** / Pattern floats on a plain weave ground.

**middle right** / Silk cloth woven with ikat weft.

**below left** / The warp is arranged outdoors.

**below right** / One of three generations weaving in his workshop.

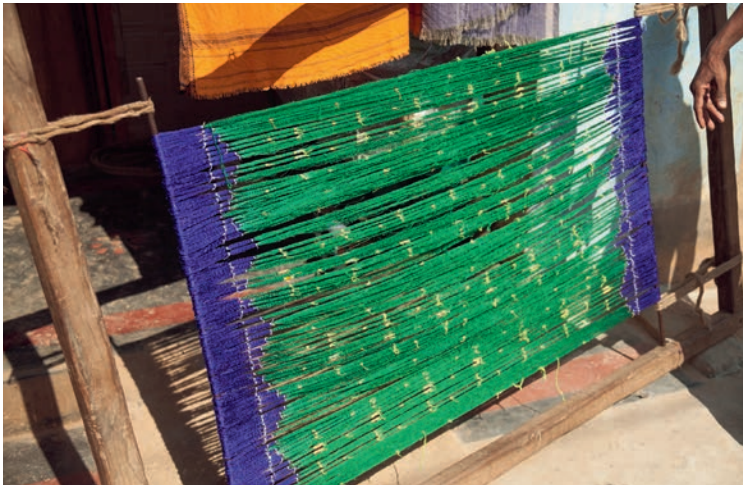
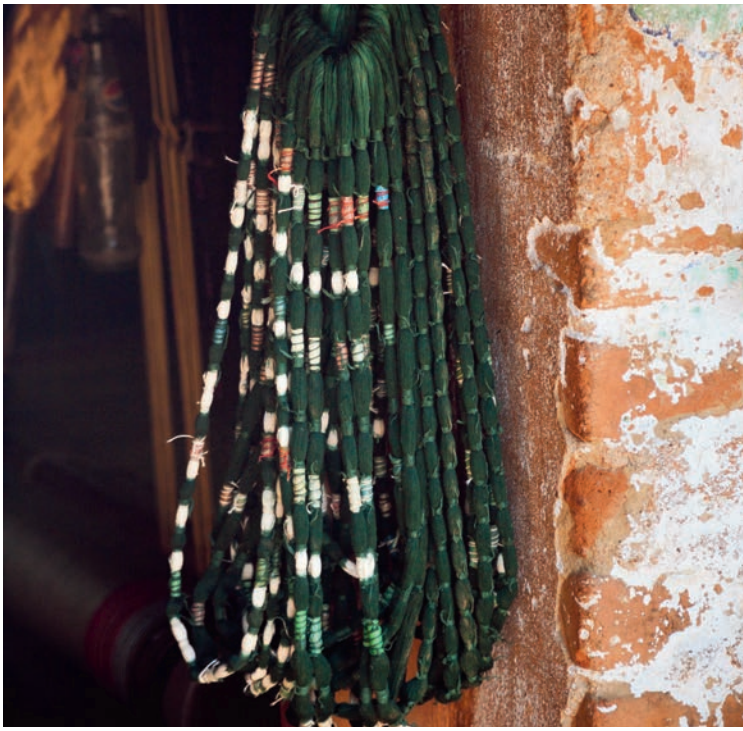












## Dyeing arts and wedding saris

THE STATE OF ORISSA is famed for its *ikat*. They do either a *warpikat* or *weftikat* as well as *doubleikat*, for which both warp and weft are resist dyed.

All around there are women dressed in saris with traditional ikat patterning, often checked with pattern borders variously combined. Golden rice fields form the background to lovely scenes. Nowadays much is dyed with synthetic pigments, as they produce stronger and more brilliant colours, we were told.

Plant dyes are also used and the effect of synthetic dyestuffs on the environment is now a subject of on-going discussion.

AT ONE WEAVING VILLAGE we visited, we saw people using natural dyestuffs. They showed us a recipe book with samples, alongside which were all the plants used. It was at this village that wedding saris in white and red are woven, incorporating gold metallic thread. The same set-up is used to weave the blouse and the part called 'pallu' for a sari, the richly patterned area. Two people were sitting at another loom, weaving complex

patterning in many different shades, all inlaid by hand. This was for a sari commissioned by an Indian living in USA.

They told us the price for this type of richly patterned sari starts at 8000 SEK. >

**page 42 top left** / Weaving double ikat. Weaver in Barpali, Orissa.

**top right** / Edging borders pattern woven, with warp ikat. Animal motifs crop up frequently. The wide border is pattern woven combined with weft ikat. The white squares are produced with double ikat. Everything is dyed by hand and handwoven, using a fly shuttle.

**below left** / Dyeing silk.

**below middle** / Recipe book for natural dyestuffs.

**below right** / Sari with an inlaid (brocaded) design.

**p 43 top left** / Everywhere are ikatdyed yarn.

**below left** / Ties for the weft.

**top right** / Dyeing with synthetic pigments.

**below right** / Warp ikat.





PHOTO: MIKAEL LINDSTRÖM

# Kantha embroidery

KANTHA EMBROIDERY is found in West Bengal and has also a rich tradition in Bangladesh. Prior to 1947, under British rule in India, West Bengal and Bangladesh formed part of the province of Bengal.

KANTHA means cover or to cover. Traditionally, it was used for big coverlets or quilts, cushions and smaller textiles, like mirror protectors. Originally the technique came about as a form of recycling. White cloths of handspun and handwoven cotton were pieced together, layer upon layer, with small stitching, usually running stitch. The threads used for sewing were often taken from worn borders on saris, and it is not uncommon to find the pattern forms in the woven borders repeated in the stitching.

IN SHANTINIKETAN, home to the Nobel prizewinner Tagore, we were fortunate to visit *Mrs Rashida Khatun*, recipient of *The National Awards for Master Craftsmen* for her work. She sells her Kantha embroideries as well as embroidery from the nearby villages. Her son and husband are part of the business.

AT ONE OF THE VILLAGES specializing in Kantha embroidery, we saw a huge variety of materials and patterns.

The fabrics, consisting of silk as well as artificial silk, arrive with the patterning marked out.

One of the men came out with a quilt in white cotton, packed with patterning in close running stitch.

It was not for sale; it is in use.

**top left** / Modern Kantha embroidery on silk, with painted detail.

**top right** / Kantha embroidery contains a fantastic range of imagery.

**below left** / Traditional coverlet with the characteristic roundel in the centre. Victoria Memorial Hall in Kolkata (Calcutta).

**below right** / In one of the villages specializing in Kantha embroidery, not far from Shantiniketan, we were shown a traditional coverlet.

**right** / Mrs Rashida Khatun, Shantiniketan, recipient of the National Award for Master Craftsmen for her work.





## The National Awards

FOR MASTER CRAFTSMEN were introduced in 1965. The award is given annually to a number of practitioners both by a state and on behalf of the Indian Government. Several of those we met had been honoured with this distinction. *Dayalu Meher* has a retail outlet in central Barpali. The shelves in the shop were packed with handwoven textiles. Both he and his wife have been given awards for their weaving. He showed us the silkcloth with ikat in various red and oranges that had earned him his distinction.

*Bhagabana Meher* has his own production, teaches and has had several shows. When we visited, he was busy packing for a trip to Malaysia, where he would be showing work. His cupboards at home contain a wealth of weaves, which he was happy for us to see. Several more exceptional pieces came back in our luggage. And for sure, we would all be delighted to return to India! **A**

**top left** / Dayalu Meher, recipient of the National Award for Master Craftsmen, 1993, and State Award in 1987, Barpali, Orissa.

**top right** / Bhagabana Meher, winner of the National Award for Master Craftsmen, 2003, Barpali, Orissa.

### TEXTILE TRIP TO INDIA

**1-17/11:** Itinerary: West Bengal. We started in Kolkata, then travelled north by bus to Baharampur, where there is a silk production co-operative venture (Islampur). We also saw gamsha being made in that area. Then we went on to Shantiniketan, where we saw Kantha embroidery and more. The next stop was Bishnupur, with trips out, including to a weaving village. Return to Kolkata.

Orissa: We took the train from Kolkata to Bhubaneswar, then travelled by bus around the area. Ikat weaving. Overnight at the amazing Dhenkanal Palace. Visits to weaving villages around Sambalpur and Sonapur. Night train to Puri. Return by plane to Kolkata.

Tip: Shop at these places for authentic handwork:

Apart from the local markets and small shops that can be found everywhere, try *Fabindia*, throughout India, selling different kinds of handwork. *Anokhi*, throughout India, selling textiles and primarily block-printed fabric.

#### Reading tips:

Indian Textiles, John Gillow/Nicholas Barnard.

Kantha, The embroidered quilts of Bengal from the Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection and the Stella Kramrisch Collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Scandinavian Weaving Magazine and Världens Resor are planning a new trip to India in winter 2014/5, to see the wonderful weaving traditions of West Bengal and Orissa. The trip will be advertised in *Vävmagasinet* and on *Världens Resor* website: [varldensresor.se](http://varldensresor.se)