Magical Mayurbhanj



Magical

Mayurbhanj

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Foreword

Mayurbhanj is renowned for its rich natural, historical and cultural heritage. Its forests, landscapes and diverse communities have shaped distinctive traditions, art forms and knowledge systems that continue to thrive today. From the grace of Mayurbhanj Chhau to the craftsmanship of Dhokra, sabai grass, kashi grass and bamboo artisans, the district's heritage reflects generations of creativity, skill and resilience. Its festivals, customs and traditions are not only expressions of collective identity but also hold significance as valuable community assets with the potential to create sustainable livelihood opportunities.

At Axis Bank Foundation, we believe that enduring development outcomes must build upon the strengths, knowledge, aspirations and resources that already exist within communities. Through *Roots to Prosperity: Developing Sustainable Livelihoods through Heritage*, implemented by Contact Base (banglanatak dot com) with support from our Sustainable Livelihood Programme, we aim to revitalise traditional creative enterprises by fostering skill development, nurturing entrepreneurship, expanding market access and promoting community-led cultural tourism. By placing communities at the heart of this effort, the initiative seeks to transform cultural heritage into a meaningful source of livelihood, ensuring that traditional art forms and indigenous knowledge continue to thrive while creating long-term economic opportunities for present and future generations.

Magical Mayurbhanj celebrates the district's living heritage and the communities that keep it alive. Beyond documenting its wealth of local artistic traditions, the publication highlights how heritage can become a path to local economic development, community well-being and responsible tourism. We hope this publication will inspire wider engagement among travellers, cultural institutions, policymakers and development practitioners, while opening new possibilities for artists and craftspeople.

We congratulate Contact Base and the participating communities for creating this publication and reaffirm our commitment to supporting community-led cultural initiatives that create dignified livelihoods while preserving the rich heritage that people of the region have nurtured over generations.

Dhruvi Shah
Group Head-CSR, Axis Bank
ET & CEO, Axis Bank Foundation



Preface

Magical Mayurbhanj celebrates the rich cultural heritage, enduring traditions, and resilient spirit of Mayurbhanj district in Odisha. Nestled in the northern part of the state, Mayurbhanj is blessed with diverse landscapes, rich biodiversity, and a vibrant cultural identity. This publication is an important milestone of the project "Roots to Prosperity: Developing Sustainable Livelihoods through Heritage," implemented by Contact Base (banglanatak dot com) with support from the Axis Bank Foundation. The initiative aims to empower rural and indigenous communities by creating sustainable livelihood opportunities through cultural heritage. Building on Contact Base's flagship Art for Life (AFL) model, the project seeks to strengthen traditional creative enterprises, promote social inclusion, and connect heritage practitioners with wider markets while safeguarding cultural identity and pride.

Field research and community interactions have helped uncover Mayurbhanj's remarkable cultural diversity, from its performing arts to traditional crafts, folk narratives, festivals, and ecological knowledge. The publication has been developed in close association with the communities of the region. *Magical Mayurbhanj* is more than documentation of traditions; it is a tribute to the people whose knowledge, creativity, and dedication keep them alive. By bringing their stories to a wider audience, this book seeks to foster greater appreciation for Mayurbhanj's cultural landscape and reaffirm that safeguarding heritage and strengthening livelihoods can go hand in hand towards a more inclusive and prosperous future.

The publication takes readers on a journey through Mayurbhanj's historical evolution, royal legacy, cultural heritage, diverse communities, and vibrant folk traditions of music, dance, art, and festivals. It also explores the region's rich natural heritage, including the forests, hills and waterfalls. Tracing the region's journey from its historical past to contemporary realities, the book offers insights into its cultural identity, social transformations, and future possibilities. Intended for researchers, academicians, students, culture enthusiasts, travellers, and general readers, this volume seeks to deepen an understanding of Mayurbhanj and celebrate its distinctive place in the history and cultural heritage of Odisha and India.



01

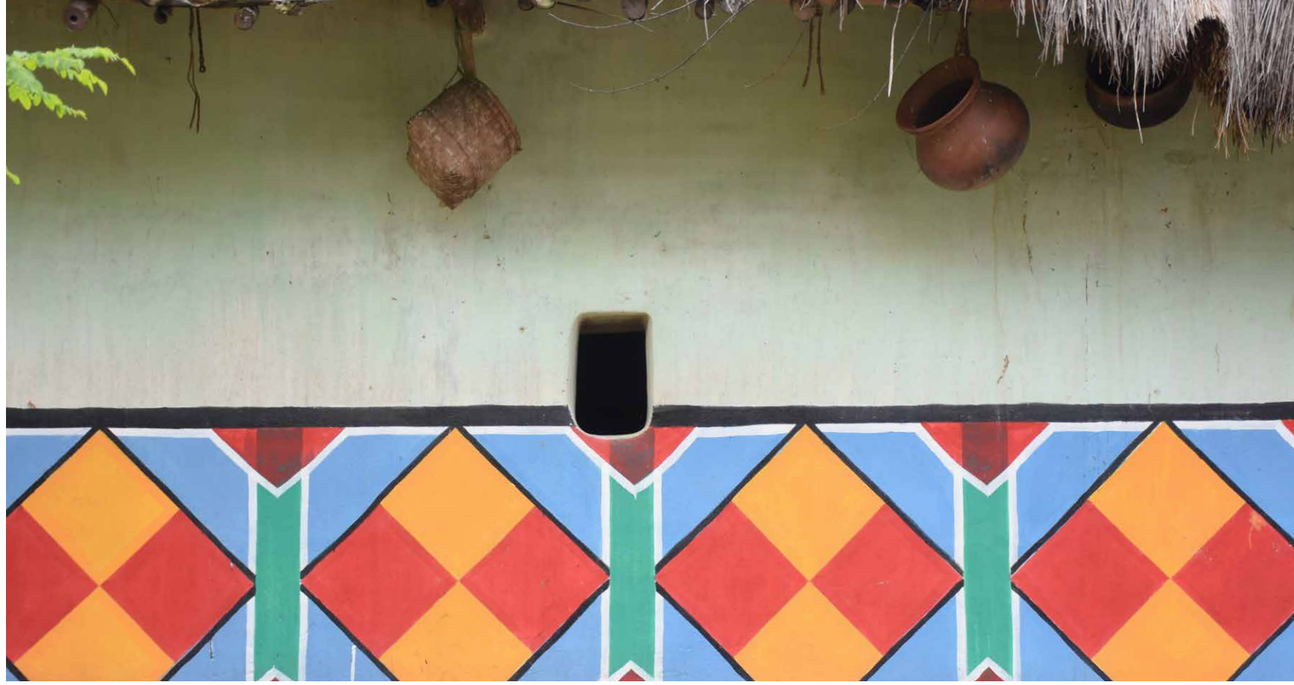
Mayurbhanj at a Glance

Mayurbhanj is one of Odisha's most distinctive regions—a vast landscape where forests, hills, rivers, wildlife and living traditions come together. Spread across approximately 10,418 square kilometres, the district encompasses remarkable geographical and cultural diversity, with Baripada as its administrative and cultural centre.

Mayurbhanj district is bordered by West Bengal and Jharkhand to the north, Balasore district to the southeast, and Keonjhar district to the southwest. Occupying a unique position in northern Odisha, its dense forests, undulating terrain, fertile valleys and rich biodiversity have shaped not only the land but also the lives and traditions of its people.



Map of Mayurbhanj



Traditional village wall

Discover the Region

Mayurbhanj, one of the largest districts of Odisha, is home to a diverse population whose social and cultural identity is closely connected to its indigenous communities and rural way of life. According to the 2011 Census, the district had a population of approximately 2.52 million, with women slightly outnumbering men. A defining feature of its demographic landscape is the significant presence of Scheduled Tribe communities, which account for nearly 59% of the population. Communities such as the Santhal, Ho, Munda, Bathudi, and Kolha contribute to the district's rich cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and distinctive artistic practices.

The rhythm of the seasons is deeply connected to life here. The rains transform the landscape into an intense tapestry of green, the winter brings clear skies and cooler days, and summer reveals the rugged beauty of the forest and hills. The population is predominantly rural, where agriculture and related activities play an important role in everyday life. Livestock rearing, forest produce, fishing, handicrafts, and wage-based occupations form important parts of rural livelihoods.

Here, culture is not confined to museums or archives—it is lived, performed, sung, crafted, and passed from one generation to the next. Art and craft practices often draw upon locally available materials, preserving the community's cultural identity while serving functional, decorative, and ceremonial purposes. The traditions of Mayurbhanj therefore represent not only a distinctive material culture but also a living heritage that connects craftsmanship, community life, and the natural environment.



02

Contours of Mayurbhanj

Mayurbhanj unfolds as a landscape of remarkable contrasts—dense forests and open fields, rolling hills and quiet valleys, cascading streams and fertile plains. Its undulating terrain, rich vegetation, and abundant water bodies create a distinctive natural character, while providing a habitat for an extraordinary variety of flora and fauna.

Here, the forest changes with every turn of the trail. Sunlight filters through the canopy, streams disappear into the wilderness, and distant hills unfold beneath an endless green horizon. Similipal reflects the rich natural beauty and diverse wildlife of Mayurbhanj. Emerging from forested hills and rocky valleys, its waterfalls transform the monsoon landscape into a world of mist, sound, movement, and emerald green.



Scenic beauty of Lulung

The Green Heartland

The landscape rises into hills and plateaus before descending into valleys and agricultural plains. Rivers and streams weave through the terrain, nourishing the land and sustaining agriculture and surrounding ecosystems. Villages are nestled among fields, forests, ponds and groves, creating a rural landscape where community life is closely connected with nature.

The forests are rich in native species such as sal, mahua, kendu, and bamboo. Beyond their ecological importance, these forests support the lives and livelihoods of many communities, particularly the indigenous peoples of the district. Across the plains and valleys, agricultural fields change with the seasons, from the fresh greens of the monsoon to the golden hues of harvest, adding another dimension to Mayurbhanj's natural beauty.

Similipal National Park

At the heart of this natural abundance lies Similipal, a vast and extraordinary landscape of forests, hills, grasslands, rivers, and waterfalls. Recognised under UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme in 2009, Similipal Biosphere Reserve is celebrated for its rich biodiversity, diverse forest ecosystems, and the longstanding relationship between indigenous communities and nature. Its international recognition highlights the importance of conserving biodiversity while promoting sustainable development, environmental research, and the continuity of local ecological knowledge.

Odisha's largest national park, Similipal, is home to a rich diversity of wildlife, including the Royal Bengal Tiger, Asian Elephant, several species of deer, and numerous birds. Among the commonly sighted birds are the Crested Serpent Eagle, Alexandrine Parakeet and Red Junglefowl. The park is also known for its remarkable floral diversity, harbouring around 90 species of native wild orchids.



Similipal forest

Cascading Waterfalls

Mayurbhanj is home to some of Odisha's most captivating waterfalls. Barehipani Waterfall, one of India's tallest waterfalls, descends dramatically in multiple tiers within the Similipal landscape. Joranda Waterfall forms a striking vertical cascade surrounded by dense greenery. The quieter Uski Waterfall offers a serene escape, especially during the lush monsoon season. Sitakund, surrounded by dense sal forests and rocky hills, is known for its refreshing waters and local legends associated with Goddess Sita. Seasonal streams, moss-covered rocks, natural pools, and mist-filled valleys add to the region's scenic charm. Fed by forest streams and rivers, these waterfalls flow through rugged terrain, creating striking contrasts of white water, dark rock, and lush green vegetation. Together, they define Mayurbhanj's distinctive landscape, offering a remarkable glimpse of Odisha's rich natural beauty and ecological diversity.

Where Nature Meets Divinity

Devkund features a picturesque descent that plunges into a natural pool with the sacred Maa Ambika Temple on top. A series of water pools blends scenic beauty with local mythology and tradition.



Devkund Waterfall



03

Cultural Legacy of Mayurbhanj

Ancient settlements, stories of gods, kings, heroes, and generations of communities continue to shape the identity of Mayurbhanj. From the ringing bells of ancient temples to the roar of waterfalls, from royal monuments to festivals, Mayurbhanj tells its story through landscape, faith, art, and memory. These places are living chapters of a cultural landscape where mythology continues to inspire, traditions continue to be celebrated, and nature remains inseparable from the lives of its people.

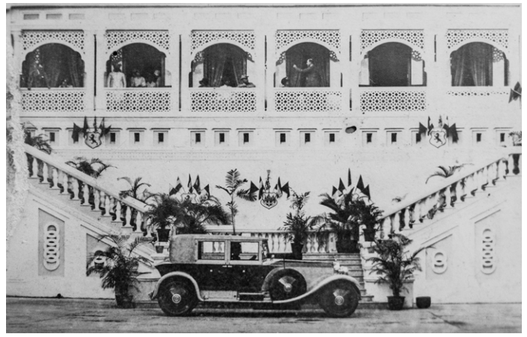
The history of Mayurbhanj is a story of ancient kingdoms, a remarkable royal dynasty, cultural patronage, and the making of modern Odisha. For centuries, the region was shaped by the Bhanja rulers, whose legacy continues to live on in its temples, architecture, education, literature, performing arts, and public institutions. Mayurbhanj continues its cultural legacy through festivals like Ratha Yatra. Traditional music, devotional singing, and processions form an important part of the celebrations.

History and Royalty

The roots of the Bhanja dynasty in Mayurbhanj date back to 697 AD. In its early history, the kingdom was known as Khijjinga Mandala, named after its capital, Khijjinga Kotta, identified with present-day Khiching. The kingdom once extended across a much larger territory, encompassing parts of present-day Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar districts, as well as adjoining areas of the states of Jharkhand and West Bengal. Copper-plate inscriptions and surviving temple remains provide important evidence of this early history. Over the centuries, the centres of royal power shifted, with Haripur emerging as an important capital and Baripada later developing as the administrative and cultural centre of the princely state. The Bhanja rulers left a significant architectural and cultural legacy through temples, palaces, educational institutions, and patronage of performing arts, particularly Mayurbhanj Chhau.



Government Women's College, erstwhile Mayurbhanj Palace



Old photograph of Mayurbhanj Palace
(Photo courtesy: Bhanj Deo family, Mayurbhanj)

Following India's independence, Mayurbhanj's princely rule came to an end. The merger agreement was signed in October 1948, and Mayurbhanj formally became part of Odisha on 1 January 1949. Today, its royal heritage remains an important part of the district's identity, connecting its historical monuments, cultural institutions and living artistic traditions.

Built Heritage & Timeless Stories

At the heart of Baripada stands the ancient Maa Ambika Temple, a place of deep faith and devotion. For generations, the people of Baripada have revered Maa Ambika as their living goddess, a compassionate mother who watches over her people and showers them with her blessings.

Deep within a landscape of forests, hills, and cascading waters, Devkund reveals one of Mayurbhanj's most enchanting settings. The sound of the waterfall, the surrounding greenery, and the hilltop shrine of Maa Ambika create an atmosphere that is both serene and sacred. Here, nature itself becomes part of the pilgrimage. Set amid the rugged landscape associated with the Baitarani River, Bhimkund is a place where mythology and nature meet. Local tradition connects the site with Bhima of the *Mahabharata*, who is believed to have bathed here during the Pandavas' exile. Surrounded by dramatic stone formations, the pool continues to attract pilgrims, travellers, and visitors seeking a quiet retreat.

Ramatirtha carries the timeless memory of Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana. Local tradition holds that the three passed through the forests of Similipal during the Treta Yuga. The ancient settlement of Khiching is a remarkable chapter in Mayurbhanj's architectural heritage. Its celebrated Maa Kichakeswari Temple stands as a



Kichakeswari Temple

testament to the region's artistic and religious traditions. Nearby, a museum preserves an important collection of sculptures, statues, and archaeological remains. Together, the temple and museum offer a window into a remarkable artistic past, where stone was transformed into enduring expressions of faith and craftsmanship.

Haripur, once an important capital of the Bhanja rulers, preserves the remains of a fortified royal settlement and several historic temples. The Rasikaraya Temple, with its distinctive brick architecture and decorative craftsmanship, reflects the artistic exchanges between Odisha and Bengal. Together with the remains of the Radhamohana and Jagannath temples, Haripur offers a glimpse into Mayurbhanj's medieval political, religious, and architectural history. Baidyanath Temple, built under Baidyanath Bhanj, is a laterite temple associated with the distinctive Baripada Ratha Yatra. A particularly important feature of the festival is women's role in pulling the chariot of Subhadra. The tradition illustrates how historic monuments remain connected to living cultural practices and community participation.



Haripur Gada



Decorated chariots during Ratha Yatra

Ratha Yatra
A Living Tradition in Celebration

Ratha Yatra in Mayurbhanj is an important expression of the region's community life, tradition and cultural identity. Celebrated in the month of Ashadha (June-July), the festival is dedicated to Lord Jagannath, Balabhadra, and Subhadra and brings together people from different communities. The festival is marked by the ceremonial movement of the deities on elaborately decorated chariots (*rathas*). The pulling of the chariot is a collective activity, bringing devotees and local communities together in a shared celebration. The streets become spaces of music, colour, ritual, and social interaction. Local artisans, musicians, performers, vendors, and families all contribute to its atmosphere, making it an important social and cultural occasion. The festival provides an opportunity for communities to come together and participate in shared rituals.



04

Stories in Motion

Chhau dance was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2010. The tradition encompasses three principal styles—Mayurbhanj, Seraikela, and Purulia (Manbhum)—each with its distinctive characteristics. Mayurbhanj Chhau is known for its combination of martial vigour, athletic movements, rhythmic intensity, lyrical grace, and expressive storytelling. It has roots in *parikhanda*, a traditional martial practice involving sword-and-shield combat.

One of the defining features of Mayurbhanj Chhau is that it is performed without masks, allowing dancers to use facial expressions alongside gestures and body movements to portray characters and emotions. Make-up and body paint further enhance characterisation, giving the performances their distinctive dramatic appeal.

Influence of the Royalty

The evolution of Mayurbhanj Chhau is closely linked to the patronage of the Bhanja royal court, which fostered its development into a sophisticated performance tradition. Martial techniques, rhythmic movement, music and storytelling were integrated into a distinctive choreographic vocabulary. The court provided dancers and musicians with training, resources and opportunities to perform. In 1912, Maharaja Sriram Chandra Bhanja Deo presented a specially choreographed War Dance in Calcutta in honour of King George V and Queen Mary. Featuring 64 dancers, the performance marked an important milestone in the wider recognition of Mayurbhanj Chhau.

While becoming integral to royal celebrations, Chhau retained its connections with community and martial traditions. Under royal patronage, performers and gurus refined techniques, developed new compositions and strengthened their transmission through disciplined training. Following Mayurbhanj's integration into Odisha in 1949, the loss of royal patronage posed challenges. Artists and cultural organisations subsequently played an important role in sustaining and reviving the tradition.



Old photograph of Mayurbhanj Chhau performance in Mayurbhanj Palace
(Photo courtesy: Bhanj Deo family, Mayurbhanj)



Uttar Sahi and Dakshin Sahi: A Tradition of Artistic Rivalry

The Maharajas of Mayurbhanj maintained two competing troupes—the Uttar Sahi (northern group) and the Dakshin Sahi (southern group)—one patronised by the Maharaja himself and the other by the Rajmata. Each commissioned new choreography annually, creating a tradition of sustained artistic renewal. The masters of music were called *ustads,* and those of dance, gurus.



Tridhara pala of Mayurbhanj Chhau

Artistry of Mayurbhanj Chhau

Mayurbhanj Chhau's physical vocabulary reflects its martial ancestry. Mock combat, leaps, turns, vigorous footwork, expansive body movements, and stylised animal movements are incorporated into the choreography. *Khel*, *chali*, *topka* and *ulfi* are key elements of Chhau's vocabulary of movement.

The most recognisable feature of Mayurbhanj Chhau is its maskless performance. Because the face remains visible, dancers can employ facial expression as well as posture and movement to communicate character and emotion. Mayurbhanj Chhau performers use body paint and facial make-up to help create the appearance and identity of characters. The colours and designs used in painting help distinguish mythological, animal, demon or heroic characters. This gives the style a particularly fluid relationship between dance and dramatic acting.

The visual energy of Mayurbhanj Chhau is inseparable from its music. The traditional ensemble includes instruments such as the *mohuri, dhol, dhamsa, jhanjhi* and *chadchadi,* whose rhythm establishes the atmosphere and identity of a character or episode rather than functioning merely as accompaniment.



Face make-up before a performance



Maya Shabari pala of Mayurbhanj Chhau

The Stories Woven into Mayurbhanj Chhau

The pala, a narrative dance-drama, is central to the storytelling tradition. Mayurbhanj Chhau draws extensively from the *Ramayana, Mahabharata,* Puranic mythology, local legends, and aspects of everyday life. The palas are the narrative core of Mayurbhanj Chhau. Themes can range from heroic combat and divine intervention to love, devotion, nature, and social experience.

Among the well-known mythological subjects are *Dashavatara, Kirat-Arjuna, Nataraja, Kailash Leela,* and *Shambhu-Nishambhu*. Some pieces take their subjects from ritual and social practices. These pieces demonstrate how mythology in Mayurbhanj Chhau becomes an opportunity for physical characterisation rather than merely a retelling of scripture. Another fascinating aspect of the Mayurbhanj repertoire is the transformation of ordinary activities into formal dance movements. Some ulfi are associated with actions such as pounding rice, winnowing grain, sweeping, sprinkling water, fishing, hunting, and other domestic or occupational activities. *Keuta-Keutini* and *Chash Mohila* are two palas based on everyday actions such as fishing and agriculture. This gives Mayurbhanj Chhau a strong connection with its local environment.

The martial inheritance of Mayurbhanj Chhau becomes particularly visible in pieces involving warriors, combat, and confrontation. A warrior may be characterised through martial movements, an animal through stylised gait, while ordinary human activities can become choreographic material.

The training cycle historically mirrored the agricultural calendar, practice commenced on Dussehra in October and culminated in the performances of the Chaitra Parab festival in April. Performances are generally presented in an open performance space or *akhara/asara*. The performances begin with an invocation to Lord Bhairab, regarded as the presiding deity of Mayurbhanj Chhau.



Mayurbhanj Chhau musicians with their instruments



Guru Lokanath Das

The Living Legacy of Chhau Gurus

Guru Lokanath Das and Guru Budheshwar Munda are eminent artists of Mayurbhanj Chhau who are training the next generation of Chhau artists. Dibar Naik and Prafulla Mohanta are other renowned artists. Born in Baripada in 1981 into a family of Chhau performers, Guru Lokanath Das (Sambhu) is a third-generation exponent of Mayurbhanj Chhau. He trained under several eminent gurus and has contributed to the tradition as a performer, choreographer, teacher, and researcher. A recipient of the Ustad Bismillah Khan Yuva Puraskar (2015) from the Sangeet Natak Akademi, he has also received the Best Male Artist Award from Mayurbhanj Chhau Nrutya Pratisthan three times. His work reflects the continued transmission and evolution of Mayurbhanj Chhau from the akhara to the national stage.



Mahishasura Mardini pala of Mayurbhanj Chhau



05

Made in Mayurbhanj

In Mayurbhanj, craft thrives in the everyday life of the dweller. Its forests, hills, and rivers have shaped the lives of its communities, and this intimate relationship with nature is reflected in its crafts. The communities beautifully illustrate how locally available materials have been turned into objects of both utility and artistic value. A basket reflects identity; a metal figure holds ritual significance; and woven natural fibres create pathways to women's empowerment.

Natural fibres such as sabai, kashi grass, and bamboo are woven into beautiful objects of art and convenience. Dhokra craft from the region is noteworthy too. They are living practices; knowledge held in hands and passed from one generation to another. The craft traditions of Mayurbhanj tell a story of materials, memory, and human ingenuity.

Natural Fibre Craft

The natural fibre crafts of Mayurbhanj offer a particularly intimate way of understanding the region. Plant fibres are closely connected to the local environment and to the communities who know how to harvest, prepare, and work with them. Handicrafts made from natural fibre begin with recognising the material, the collection, the process of drying, preparing, and strengthening the fibres, and finally the weaving. The plant fibres are valued for their strength and durability. They may first be processed into rope and then woven or combined with other materials to create bags, mats, carpets, baskets, and other useful objects. The importance of such crafts lies in their simplicity. Artisans work with resources that can be collected, processed, and transformed locally. The resulting objects retain the texture and character of the original plant material while serving contemporary domestic needs.

Kashi grass craft makers of Talgaon village



Sabai

Villages: Rangamatia, Goaldihi, Baddhenkia, Mahabila, Kujdihi, Salasahi, Badsole

Sabai grass craft is an important traditional and livelihood-based handicraft of Mayurbhanj, where the naturally growing grass is found abundantly, particularly in rural and forested areas. Sabai grass is used to make a plethora of products like mats, baskets, trays, flower-vase holders, boxes, bags, hats, and other household products. Sabai rope is also used in furniture such as chairs, sofas, and cots.



Knotting in sabai craft making

Making of sabai craft

The mature sabai grass is harvested when the stems are sufficiently long and strong. The grass is cut, gathered, and brought home or to the artisan's workplace. The freshly collected grass is spread out and sun-dried. Once dry, the grass is cleaned and sorted according to length, thickness, and quality. Damaged or unsuitable stems are removed. The selected fibres are then prepared for weaving. Before weaving, the dried grass may be moistened or softened so that it becomes flexible enough to bend without breaking. Depending on the product, the grass can be twisted into strands or prepared as individual fibres. The prepared grass is then woven, coiled, or braided by hand. The artisan gradually builds the desired form, controlling the tightness of the weave. Different techniques are used for different products such as baskets, mats, bags, and containers. The woven structure is shaped according to its intended use. Artisans add handles, borders, supporting frames, or other decorative elements. Contemporary products can combine sabai grass with materials such as cotton, fabric, thread, or other natural fibres. Finally, loose fibres are trimmed and the edges are strengthened.



Different types of sabai products



Women's Entrepreneurship

Sabai craft has an important social and economic dimension in Mayurbhanj. It provides employment to rural households and offers income opportunities for artisans, particularly women. Sabai craft is increasingly being promoted through women-led producer groups, enabling individual artisans to collaborate in production, organise their efforts, and access wider markets collectively. This has benefitted hundreds of women artisans from the region.





Naturally dyed sabai products with threadwork





Lamps and jewellery made of sabai



Kashi Grass

Village: Talgaon

Kashi grass is a fast-growing perennial grass found in the forest-fringe areas of Mayurbhanj. The natural texture and earthy appearance of the grass give these products a distinctive aesthetic appeal, while their lightweight and functional qualities make them suitable for everyday use. Because it is abundant, renewable, and low-impact, kashi grass is an excellent material for sustainable products.



Traditional fishing traps woven from kashi grass



Kashi grass artist



Jewellery made of kashi grass

Making of kashi grass crafts

Kashi grass is collected locally from riverbanks and fallow fields during the post-monsoon period. Artisans select suitable stems and cut them carefully so that the plant can regenerate. The collected grass is cleaned to remove dirt and debris. It is then sun-dried for 2-3 days. Proper drying prevents mould, and adds strength to the fibre. Before weaving, it is softened by soaking in water to increase flexibility. The dried stalks are sorted and bundled for ease of handling. Depending on the type of product, the grass and palm leaves are left in their natural shade or dyed in eco-friendly ways to bring vibrancy and visual richness. Using traditional hand techniques, the artists interlace kashi grass with date palm strips in spiral or coiled patterns. Many a time, artisans use cotton yarn or wool to bring diversity in product design to suit changing markets.



Collecting kashi grass



Kashi grass artists at work

Kashi grass products

Kashi grass was traditionally used to make household items like brooms and fishing equipment. Skilled artisans use simple hand techniques to transform the grass into products such as baskets, mats, trays, storage containers, boxes, bags, decorative articles, and other household items. The craft has adapted to modern needs, and the artists have started making lampshades, planters, and wall plates used in interior design.

Bamboo Basketry

Villages: Kandsore, Chanpal

Bamboo craft carries considerable social and cultural significance in Mayurbhanj. Rural communities have long relied on bamboo to meet domestic, agricultural storage, and ceremonial needs. The knowledge of selecting, preparing, slicing, and weaving bamboo has traditionally been passed down through generations, making craftsmanship an important part of the region's intangible heritage. The craft provides livelihood opportunities for rural artisan families and is particularly significant for communities that depend on locally available forest and agricultural resources. Its handmade nature means that each product can display subtle variations in texture, pattern, and form, giving it a distinctive character.



Bamboo winnowing tray

Making of bamboo craft

The craft begins with the careful selection and harvesting of mature bamboo. Knives are used to split and peel the bamboo poles. The shaved bamboo is then thinned to achieve the right flexibility and thickness depending on the product pattern. Bamboo strips are then soaked in a solution of hot water and powdered dye. Afterwards, excess dye is removed from the bamboo strips by washing with plain water. The bamboo strips are interlaced, typically in a criss-cross pattern, beginning with the base and gradually building up the walls and rim using different weaving techniques. Small hammers are used in carving and sandpaper is used for polishing the product. Glue and adhesives are used in pasting.

Bamboo basketry products

Bamboo is valued by artisans for its strength, flexibility, light weight and availability, making it a versatile material for both functional and decorative objects. Everyday products include baskets, storage containers, mats, trays, winnowing fans, fishing equipment, and agricultural implements. Through innovative weaving techniques, geometric patterns, and refined design elements, bamboo basketry has evolved into a diverse sustainable craft. In addition to utilitarian objects, contemporary artisans have adapted bamboo to create decorative items, lampshades, furniture, and lifestyle products suited to modern markets.



Contemporary bamboo craft products

Dhokra

Village: Kudiakhunta

Dhokra is an ancient, non-ferrous metal casting tradition that uses the lost-wax technique, which dates back to the Indus Valley Civilisation. Dhokra craft from Mayurbhanj is well known for its richly detailed craftsmanship and rustic visual appeal. Characterised by delicate wire-like patterns and an earthy, antique finish, this craft reflects the region's indigenous artistic knowledge, spiritual traditions, and generational craftsmanship.

Making of Dhokra craft

The making of Dhokra artefacts involves several stages. First, a clay core, slightly smaller than the final artefact, is prepared and dried under the sun. During modelling, the core is covered with wax and resin threads, which are shaped to create intricate designs. Next, a thin layer of fine clay mixed with cow dung is applied over the wax model, forming a negative impression. After drying and hardening, another layer of clay is added. A channel is created to drain the wax and pour molten metal. The mould is heated in a furnace, melting the wax, which flows out through the channel and leaves a cavity of the desired shape. During casting, molten brass is poured into this cavity, and the mould is left to cool. Finally, the mould is broken to release the cast artefact. Polishing, buffing, and finishing are then carried out to give the metal object a smooth and shiny appearance.









Dhokra making process



Dhokra products



Themes and Motifs

The designs of Mayurbhanj Dhokra often draw inspiration from the surrounding natural and cultural environment. Figures of animals, birds, human beings, musicians and traditional motifs are commonly represented, reflecting the importance of nature, community life and folklore in the artistic imagination of the region.

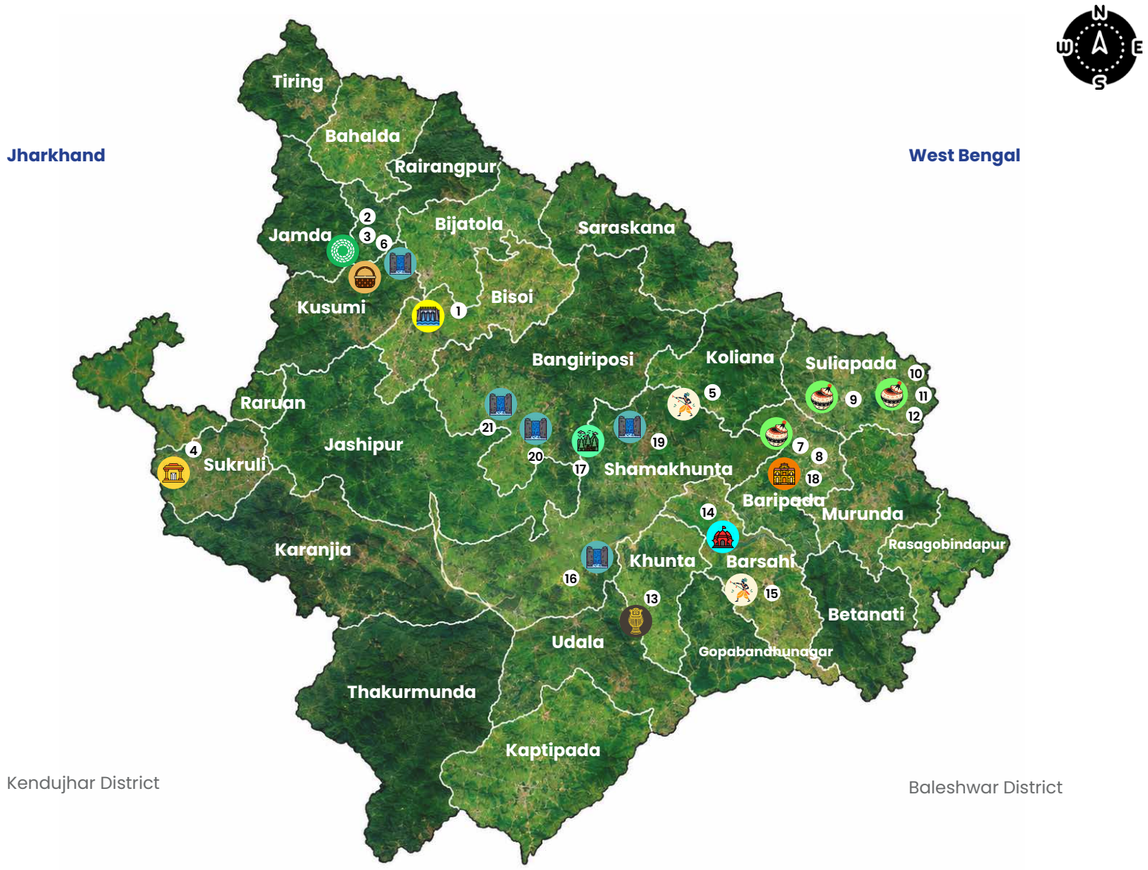


06

Experience Mayurbhanj

Away from the familiar tourist circuits, the district offers a deeply immersive journey through forests, waterfalls, festivals, indigenous food, and a cultural landscape shaped by generations of communities living closely with nature. Traditional crafts reflect the knowledge of local materials and inherited skills, and the vibrant Mayurbhanj Chhau continues to express the region's cultural identity through movement, music, and storytelling.

A journey through this region is an immersion into a living landscape where nature, community, tradition, and memory come together to define the spirit of Mayurbhanj. To travel through Mayurbhanj is to slow down, look beyond conventional sightseeing, and discover a region where the landscape itself becomes part of the story.



Tourism destinations of Mayurbhanj

1. Suleipat Dam
2. Talgaon: Kashi Village
3. Kandsore: Basketry Village
4. Kichakeswari Temple
5. Baledih: Chhau Village
6. Asurghati Waterfall
7. Rangamatia: Sabai Village
8. Goaldihi: Sabai Village
9. Badsole: Sabai Village
10. Baddhenkia: Sabai Village
11. Salasahi: Sabai Village
12. Kujdihi: Sabai Village
13. Kudiakhunta: Dhokra Village
14. Haripur Gada
15. Nichuapada: Chhau Village
16. Devkund Waterfall
17. Similipal Forest
18. The Belgadia Palace
19. Sitakund Waterfall
20. Joranda Waterfall
21. Barehipani Waterfall



Traditional floor art

Cultural Trails

The district is home to Similipal, one of India's important forest and wildlife landscapes, as well as a remarkable range of crafts and performance traditions. Chhau, Dhokra, sabai grass craft, kashi grass craft, and bamboo basketry form part of this diverse cultural landscape. Two places offer particularly different ways of entering this world. Baripada, the district headquarters and cultural centre, lies on the eastern edge of the Similipal landscape and brings together the region's royal history, performance traditions, crafts, and access to the forest. Rairangpur, farther to the northwest, opens into a landscape of hills, forests, agricultural settlements, and craft villages where natural materials such as sabai grass, bamboo, and kashi grass become part of everyday production.

Baripada: Where Forest Meets Culture

Baripada, the district headquarters and cultural centre of Mayurbhanj, lies on the edge of the Similipal landscape. Baripada can consequently be understood as a gateway rather than merely a destination. Similipal National Park and Tiger Reserve is the region's defining natural landscape, with dense forests, hills, rivers, and waterfalls such as Barehipani and Joranda. Wildlife, birdlife, trekking, and forest experiences offer opportunities to explore the landscape beyond sightseeing. Bhimkund Waterfall and Devkund Waterfall add another dimension, where nature and belief come together. The sacred presence of Lord Jagannath finds another important home in Baripada. The town's Jagannath Temple is renowned for its distinctive Ratha Yatra, celebrated a day after the grand festival at Puri. When the chariots roll through the streets, Baripada comes alive with colour, music, devotion, and celebration.

Exploring Chhau hubs

In Baripada, a visit to Uttarsahi Chhau Nrutya Pratisthan offers a glimpse into the royal legacy of Mayurbhanj Chhau. Visitors can enjoy a performance and explore historic costumes, swords, shields and rare photographs associated with the tradition's royal past. In nearby villages such as Nichuapada and Bhurukundi, visitors can also experience Chhau performances in their traditional community settings.



Similipal forest entrance



Women's group working at their resource centre

The craft traditions around Baripada reveal a close relationship between people, materials, and the landscape; among them, Dhokra holds a special place. One of the principal centres of Dhokra in Mayurbhanj is Kudiakhunta, a village near Baripada that has emerged as an important hub for Dhokra artisans. More than 100 Dhokra artisans live and work in Kudiakhunta, making it one of the most significant concentrations of Dhokra practitioners in the region. A Folk Art Centre within Kudiakhunta provides an additional space for the craft to be experienced and showcased.

The villages around Baripada—Rangamatia, Goaldihi, Salasahi, Baddhenkia, and Badsole are known for sabai. Sabai craft is organised through women-led producer groups that bring individual artisans together for collective production and marketing. At Rangamatia, about 24 km from Baripada on the Baleswar Road, Gouri Mohapatra and Jayanti Naik lead the Sindurgoura Sabai Producer Group, who not only makes small utility items but are also equipped in making sabai products on frames. Just beside Rangamatia, another village, Goaldihi, is home to a producer group led by Usharani Naik, producing sabai jewellery, trays, bottle holders and other contemporary products. On the Deuli Road, Salasahi, about 30 km away, brings visitors to the Maa Andharibudhi Sabai Producer Group, led by Sumitra Barik, where artisans make bags, baskets, coasters, and other utility products. The trail continues to Baddhenkia, around 28 km from Baripada, where Urmila Dehuri leads the Mugdha Chinabadam Sabai Producer Group, known for its jewellery, mats, and trays. At Badsole, about 34 km from Baripada, Taramani Si and Droupadi Raj lead the OLM Sabai Producer Group, producing bags, trays, coasters, mats, and other products. Together, the groups bring visitors into the heart of Mayurbhanj's evolving sabai craft landscape.

The Royal Retreat: The Belgadia Palace

Set amidst the cultural landscape of Baripada, The Belgadia Palace is the ancestral residence of the Bhanj Deo royal family of Mayurbhanj. With a history dating back to 1804, its construction was initiated under the orders of Dowager Maharani Sumitra Devi Bhanj Deo. The palace evolved over successive generations, reflecting the architectural influences and cultural aspirations of the royal family.

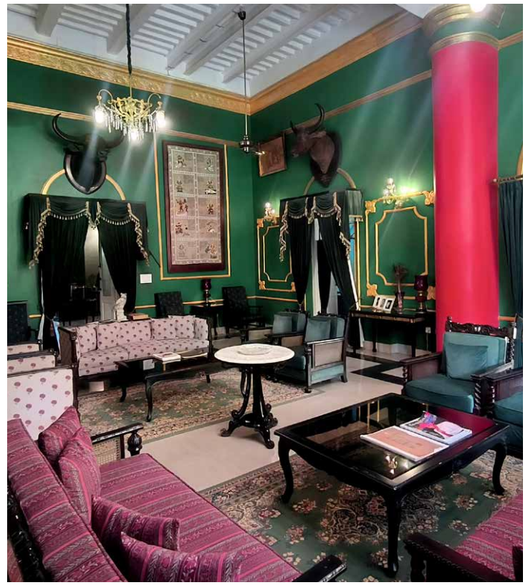
Its distinctive architecture blends Victorian and Greek classical elements, with grand facades, arched verandahs and elegant interiors that reflect a fascinating period of Mayurbhanj's history.

More than a historical monument, The Belgadia Palace remains a living royal residence and continues to be home to the Bhanj Deo family. Today, part of the palace welcomes guests, offering an opportunity to experience its architecture, collections, stories and traditions while discovering the wider cultural heritage of Mayurbhanj.

Through its heritage experiences, cultural performances and connections with local artisans and communities, The Belgadia Palace serves as a bridge between the region's royal past and its living cultural traditions.



The Belgadia Palace



Interiors of The Belgadia Palace



Asurghati Waterfall

Rairangpur: Hills, Grasslands, and Craft Communities

Rairangpur is the headquarters of the Bamanghati subdivision, one of the district's administrative regions. The surrounding landscape is characterised by undulating terrain, forest patches, agricultural settlements, and villages where craft traditions remain closely connected with household production and locally available materials. Here, the relationship between nature and craft becomes particularly visible.

In villages such as Talgaon, women transform kashi grass into baskets, trays, and other products, combining craft with agricultural and household activities. Bamboo artisans in places such as Kandsore create baskets and household objects using skills passed through generations, while new designs and market opportunities are helping traditional crafts evolve.

Rairangpur is also part of the living landscape of Mayurbhanj Chhau. Visitors can experience performances at Baledih, Kandsore, and Talapati, where local gurus and performers continue to train younger generations. Nearby attractions include Maa Kichakeswari Temple and Pakhanapath Hill. From Rairangpur, one can visit Baledih village in Bahalda block and witness a Mayurbhanj Chhau performance by Nataraj Chhau Nrutya Pratisthan, led by Guru Dibar Naik. A visit to the nearby Maa Kichakeswari Temple can also be included in the journey. In Kandsore village, visitors can see traditional bamboo craftsmanship and witness Chhau performed by Nagendra Chhau Nrutya Pratisthan, led by Kishore Behera. Nearby, Pakhanapath Hill is home to a black-stone idol of Lord Narasimha and is regarded as an ancient pilgrimage site. For another Chhau experience, one can travel to Talapati, a village set amidst a picturesque landscape, with roads winding through hills, rivers, and forests of sal, mahua, and tamarind. Here, visitors can experience a performance by Jai Maa Durga Chhau Nrutya Pratisthan, led by Guru Paresh Mohanta.



Keuta-Keutini pala of Mayurbhanj Chhau



Bamboo artists of Kandsore

Flavours of Mayurbhanj

Food is an important part of the cultural identity of Mayurbhanj, reflecting the region's forests, agricultural traditions, indigenous communities, and seasonal way of life. Local cuisine is shaped by what grows in the fields and forests, making food closely connected to the landscape and everyday life. Rice forms the staple of the local diet and is commonly accompanied by vegetables, leafy greens, pulses, fish, and other locally available ingredients. Seasonal forest produce also contributes to the diversity of the cuisine. Ingredients gathered from the surrounding environment reflect generations of knowledge about local plants, their uses, and the changing seasons. *Chhena poda* is a famous traditional dessert from Odisha. Its name literally means burnt cottage cheese, and it is known for its caramelised, dark-brown crust and soft, sweet interior.



Muri mangsho



Chhena poda

For indigenous communities, food is closely connected with festivals, rituals, and community gatherings. Mayurbhanj's food culture also reflects the meeting of different communities and traditions. Indigenous, rural, Odia, and royal culinary influences have existed alongside one another, creating a varied food landscape. Royal kitchens historically introduced their own styles of preparation, while village communities retained food practices based on local crops, forest produce, and traditional cooking methods. Some of the distinguished culinary flavours of the region are Baripada mutton, *chal-daler pithe*, *muri mangsho* (puffed rice with mutton curry).



Scenic beauty of Mayurbhanj

Preserving the Past, Shaping the Future

The true essence of Mayurbhanj lies in the richness of its cultural heritage, vibrant traditions, natural landscapes, and historical legacy, as well as in the communities that continue to preserve and pass them on. More than a reflection of the past, this heritage is a living resource that shapes local identity, strengthens community bonds, and holds immense potential for the future.

Recognising and supporting local artisans, traditional performers, knowledge holders, and community-led initiatives can help sustain cultural practices while creating dignified livelihoods and new economic opportunities. Responsible tourism, rooted in respect for local customs, environmental sensitivity, and meaningful community participation, can further contribute to the district's development while safeguarding the distinct character of its cultural and natural assets.

The way forward lies in ensuring that the benefits of heritage conservation and tourism reach the people who safeguard this legacy every day. By bringing together heritage preservation, sustainable development, and inclusive opportunities, tradition and progress will go hand in hand. Placing local communities at the centre of this process will help safeguard their cultural identity, strengthen livelihoods, and ensure that tourism grows responsibly. Mayurbhanj nurtures a living heritage that continues to inspire pride, support community well-being, and enrich generations to come.

Glossary

Akhara: A traditional Indian training ground where wrestlers or martial artists practice.

Ashadha: It is the fourth month of the Hindu lunar calendar and typically corresponds to June–July in the Gregorian calendar.

Asara: A gathering to spectate musical or dance performances.

Balabhadra: Another name for Lord Balarama, the elder brother of Lord Krishna in Hindu tradition.

Balaram: A prominent figure in Hindu mythology and the elder brother of Lord Krishna.

Bathudi: An indigenous community primarily found in Odisha, particularly in the Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar regions.

Bhima: One of the five Pandava brothers in the Hindu epic Mahabharata known for his immense strength.

Brahmin: It refers to a section of the Hindu caste system historically associated with priests, teachers and the study and teaching of sacred knowledge.

Bhumij: An indigenous community mainly found in Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, and nearby parts of eastern India.

Chadchadi: A traditional short, cylindrical percussion drum used in Chhau dance music.

Chaitra Parab: A vibrant spring festival celebrated during the Hindu month of Chaitra primarily in Odisha, Jharkhand and parts of West Bengal.

Chal-daler pithe: A traditional sweet made using rice and lentils.

Chali: Stylised walking movements and gait patterns forming part of the basic movement vocabulary of Chhau dance.

Chash Mohila: A Chhau narration based on agriculture.

Chhena poda: A traditional Odia dessert made from cottage cheese.

Dakshin Sahi: The southern Chhau troupe that participated in the historical tradition of artistic rivalry and innovation in Mayurbhanj.

Dashavatara: Ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu in Hindu tradition, believed to appear on Earth to restore righteousness.

Dhamsa: A large, bowl-shaped traditional kettle drum used by indigenous communities in eastern India.

Dhol: A double-headed barrel drum from the South Asian subcontinent.

Dussehra: A major Hindu festival celebrating the triumph of good over evil in the month of October.

Gada: A fort or fortified settlement, often associated with a royal residence or historical seat of power.

Goddess Ambika: A form of the Hindu Divine Mother, associated with Goddess Durga and Parvati, symbolising maternal love, strength, protection, and the power to overcome evil.

Ho: An indigenous ethnic group in eastern India.

Jagannath: Literally meaning Lord of the universe, is an incarnation of Lord Krishna.

Jhanjhi: A pair of metal cymbals used to provide rhythmic accompaniment in Chhau performances.

Kailash Leela: Stories of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati on Mount Kailash, depicting their celestial life, divine love and spiritual power in Hindu tradition.

Kendu: A tree native to India whose leaves are traditionally used to make hand-rolled cigarettes.

Keuta-Keutini: Fishing community or a pair of characters associated with fishing in Odia folk traditions.

Khel: A playful or dramatic sequence of movements performed by dancers, often depicting combat, martial skills, or interactions between characters.

Khijjinga Kotta: An early royal capital associated with present-day Khiching in Mayurbhanj.

Khijjinga Mandala: An early historical name associated with the kingdom ruled by the Bhanja dynasty in the Mayurbhanj region.

Kirat-Arjuna: An episode from the Mahabharata in which Lord Shiva, disguised as a tribal hunter (Kirata), tests Arjuna's strength and courage before granting him the divine weapon.

Kolha: An indigenous community found mainly in Odisha and parts of Jharkhand, India, with a distinct cultural heritage, traditional customs and folk practices.

Lakshmana: The younger brother and devoted companion of Lord Rama in the Hindu epic Ramayana known for his loyalty, courage, and dedication.

Lord Bhairab: A fierce form of Lord Shiva in Hindu tradition associated with protection, the destruction of evil and the guardianship of sacred places.

Maa Kichakeswari: A form of Goddess Kali worshipped at the Kichakeswari Temple in Khiching, Mayurbhanj district, Odisha, and is considered the presiding deity of the region.

Maharaja: It is a historical title for a Hindu prince, king, or royal ruler in India.

Mahabharata: One of ancient India's epics, dealing mainly with the conflict between the Pandavas and the Kauravas.

Mahishasura Mardini: Mythological story of Goddess Durga destroying the demon Mahishasura.

Mahua: A deciduous tree also known as the Indian Butternut tree indigenous to the Indian subcontinent.

Mandap: A decorated pavilion used for religious ceremonies, weddings, community gatherings or cultural performances.

Maya Shabari: A mythological story based on Lord Krishna and Goddess Durga.

Mohuri: An Indian wind instrument used in folk music and dance performances, including Chhau, to produce a loud, high-pitched melodic sound.

Munda: An indigenous ethnic group primarily concentrated across the Chhotanagpur Plateau in eastern India.

Muri mangsho: A food speciality of Mayurbhanj, Odisha, consisting of puffed rice (muri) served with spicy mutton curry (mangsho).

Nataraja: The cosmic dancing form of Lord Shiva in Hindu tradition symbolising the cycle of creation, preservation and destruction.

Nrutya Pratisthan: A dance institution or organisation, often associated with the training and performance of Chhau.

Padiya: A local open space used for Chhau practice or performance.

Paikas: Traditional warrior communities of Odisha, particularly associated with the Khurda region, known for their military service and martial traditions.

Pala: An episode or composition in a traditional performance, often depicting a particular story, character or theme.

Pandava: The five heroic brothers—Yudhishthira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva in the Indian epic Mahabharata.

Parikhanda: A form of mock combat used to develop and maintain the skills of warriors.

Rajmata: It is a traditional Indian title used for the mother of a reigning king or monarch.

Rama: A Hindu deity and the seventh avatar of Lord Vishnu.

Ramayana: One of ancient India's two major Sanskrit epics recounting the feats of Lord Rama.

Ratha: A multi-tiered wooden structure or carriage used to carry temple deities during public religious processions known as a Ratha Yatra.

Ratha Yatra: A major Hindu chariot festival where sacred wooden carts pull deities through public streets.

Sal: A large, slow-growing hardwood tree native to the Indian subcontinent.

Santhal: An indigenous community living primarily in eastern India, as well as Bangladesh and Nepal.

Shambhu-Nishambhu: Two demon brothers in Hindu mythology who were defeated by Goddess Durga, symbolising the triumph of good over evil.

Sita: A central figure in Hindu mythology, renowned as the consort of Lord Rama and an incarnation of the goddess Lakshmi.

Subhadra: The daughter of Vasudeva and Rohini, sister of Lord Krishna and Balarama in the Hindu mythology of Mahabharata.

Topka: Sharp, forceful movements and body gestures in Chhau dance characterised by sudden, energetic actions that express martial agility, rhythm, and the dynamic nature of the dance form.

Treta Yuga: The second of the four ages in Hindu cosmology, traditionally associated with the life and deeds of Lord Rama in the Ramayana.

Tridhara: It symbolises the confluence of three traditions, ideas or forms of expression.

Ulfi: The martial movements and physical techniques of Chhau dance reflecting the agility, strength, and rhythmic expression of this folk dance.

Ustad: A master practitioner or teacher who trains performers and transmits the techniques and repertoire of Chhau.

Uttar Sahi: The northern Chhau troupe historically associated with royal patronage in Mayurbhanj.

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