



## Uda Parav in Mayurbhanj: Rituals, Traditions, and Community Spirit

Dr. Harekrushna Behera<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Sushanta Kumar Patra<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Lecturer in History, Mahatma Gandhi Mahavidyalaya, Baisinga, Mayurbhanj

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor (Stage- III), P.G. Department of A.I.H.C.A, Utkal University

Date of Submission: 06-05-2025

Date of Acceptance: 17-05-2025

### Abstract:

Uda Parav is a significant cultural and religious festival observed in various parts of Mayurbhanj, Odisha. Deeply rooted in local mythology, historical narratives, and agrarian traditions, Uda Parav reflects the communal spirit and deep religiosity of the people. This paper explores the multifaceted dimensions of Uda Parav, including its origin, rituals, significance, and contemporary relevance. The paper particularly highlights how the festival contributes to cultural preservation, community bonding, and regional identity. Through a detailed examination of its practices, including the unique observance of "Kanta Pat" and "Nia Pat," the role of "Bhaktas," and the vibrant mela that accompanies it, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the cultural richness of Uda Parav and its evolving role in modern society.

**Key Words:** Uda Parav, Mayurbhanj, Bhakta, Kanta pat, Nia Pat, Mela

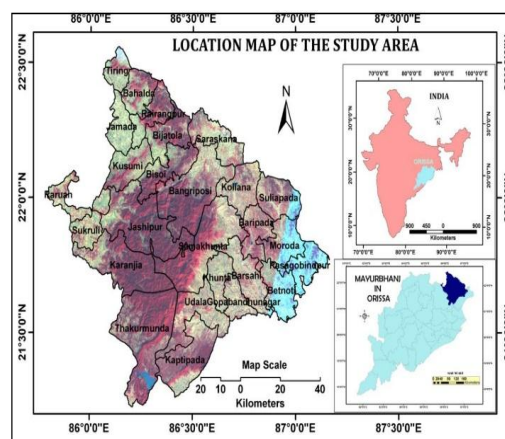
### I. Introduction:

Mayurbhanj, a culturally rich district in northern Odisha, is renowned for its distinctive blend of tribal heritage, sacred traditions, and artistic expressions (Jana, Banerjee, and Ghosh 2022). With its lush forests, river valleys, and vibrant villages, the region is home to numerous indigenous communities, each preserving unique customs passed down through generations. One of the most profound cultural manifestations in this region is the festival of Uda Parav, a spectacular celebration that serves as a living testimony to the district's spiritual depth and communal harmony.

Uda Parav is not merely a festive occasion but a complex, multi-layered ritual that embodies the spiritual, social, and ecological ethos of the communities who celebrate it. The festival draws on a rich tapestry of mythological narratives and agrarian symbolism, offering a fascinating insight into the worldview of the local populace. Traditionally observed in locales such as Udala, Betnoti, Thakurmunda, Rairangpur, Raruan,

Chitrada. The Uda Jatra in all most all places is observed either on Chaitra parva of every year roughly from the 11th to the 13th of April or on Maha Vishuva Sankranti which falls on April 14<sup>th</sup>. Uda Parav is a time of communal gathering, prayer, performance, and celebration.

The festival is unique in its emphasis on public rituals that merge penance with spectacle, particularly the dramatic observances of *Kanta Pat* (ritual pain endurance) and *Nia Pat* (fire-walking), as well as the spiritual "flight" of the Bhaktas (Artist DK Vlogs 2024), the central male devotees of the celebration. These elements are deeply symbolic, aiming to invoke divine blessings, purify the soul, and affirm the individual's commitment to community and faith. Furthermore, the vibrant mela (fair) that accompanies the religious ceremonies turns Uda Parav into a socio-economic event that fosters trade, social bonding, and cultural exchange. In an era of rapid urbanization and cultural homogenization, Uda Parav continues to assert its relevance, preserving ancestral knowledge systems



Map : Location map of Mayurbhanj

Source- GIS Division, NIC, Bhubaneswar

and community identity. This paper seeks to provide a comprehensive exploration of Uda Parav by examining its historical roots, ritual practices, cultural significance, and the challenges it currently



faces. Through this exploration, we aim to underline the importance of sustaining such indigenous traditions, not only as cultural artifacts but as living practices vital to the social and spiritual health of the region.

## II. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative ethnographic approach to explore the cultural, spiritual, and socio-economic dimensions of Uda Parav as celebrated in various parts of Mayurbhanj district, Odisha. Fieldwork was conducted in key locations known for their active participation in Uda Parav, including Udala, Rairangpur, Betnoti, Thakurmunda, Raruan, and Chitrada. Data was collected during the Chaitra Parba observances held between April 11 and April 14, aligning with the traditional timing of the Uda Jatra and Maha Vishuva Sankranti.

The research relied on multiple qualitative methods, including:

- Participant observation, particularly during the public rituals such as Kanta Pat, Nia Pat, and the symbolic spiritual flight of the Bhaktas, to document embodied expressions of devotion and penance.
- In-depth interviews with key cultural informants, including local priests, elders, bhaktas (devotees), artisans, and festival organizers, to understand the layers of meaning and continuity within the practices.
- Video analysis, including visual documentation sourced from cultural youtube and facebook platforms, to supplement direct observation and gain insight into contemporary representations of the festival.
- Documentary and textual analysis of existing literature on tribal culture and traditions in Mayurbhanj, to ground the study in a broader anthropological and historical context.

By combining immersive field engagement with secondary analysis, this methodology seeks to provide a holistic understanding of Uda Parav—not only as a festival but as a living cultural system that encapsulates the identity, beliefs, and resilience of the tribal communities of Mayurbhanj.

### The Origins and History of Uda Parav:

The origins of Uda Parav are deeply rooted in mythology and tribal folklore, particularly among the indigenous communities of Mayurbhanj in Odisha (Kendujhar, *Culture & Heritage*). According to local beliefs, the festival precedes organized religion and emerged from the ritual practices of tribal societies who worshipped nature and ancestral spirits. These early ceremonies were centered

around the rhythms of the earth—celebrating fertility, the harvest, and the unseen forces that governed life and death. Over time, with the gradual spread of Hinduism into tribal regions, these customs were absorbed and transformed within the



*Figure 1 Maa Basuli Pitha*

broader framework of Hindu ritualism.

In the mythological narrative, Lord Shiva, representing the cosmic masculine principle (Sharma 2023), and Goddess Maa Basuli, a fierce and protective local deity, became central figures of veneration. The dual worship of Shiva and Basuli reflects a syncretic blend of tribal animism and Shaiva-Shakta traditions, symbolizing the union of masculine and feminine energies—an idea deeply embedded in both tribal cosmology and Hindu theology. Maa Basuli, in particular, is believed to be a manifestation of Shakti, adapted from local goddess cults that personified nature's creative and destructive powers.

Historically, Uda Parav evolved as a seasonal festival tied to agricultural life, marking a time to honor the forces that ensured survival—rain, soil, sun, and divine protection. The tribal communities of Mayurbhanj would gather to perform rituals of thanksgiving and supplication, asking for a bountiful harvest and shielding from disease or misfortune. As these practices gradually came under the influence of Hindu temple culture and Sanskrit traditions, the festival retained its earth-centered ethos, while gaining formal religious status through temple rituals, priestly involvement, and the incorporation of Hindu deities.

Thus, Uda Parav stands today as a powerful testament to the fusion of indigenous spirituality and Hindu mythology, shaped by centuries of cultural continuity, adaptation, and reverence for both the divine and the natural world.

### Significance of Uda Parav:

Uda Parav is not merely a religious observance but a significant cultural and social event. The festival



reinforces community values, emphasizes intergenerational learning, and serves as a platform for cultural expression. The presence of Bhaktas (devout male participants) who undergo physical and spiritual preparation for the event adds a deeply devotional aspect to the celebration.

Spiritually, the worship of Lord Shiva and the Mother Goddess reflects a balance of cosmic energies, appealing to both creation and destruction aspects of the universe. Socially, the festival brings together people across castes, occupations, and villages, creating a collective identity rooted in shared traditions. Economically, the accompanying mela boosts local commerce and showcases indigenous crafts and foods.

#### **Rituals and Practices During Uda Parav:**

The rituals of Uda Parav begin a day in advance with the observance of "Kanta Pat (ritual pain endurance)" and "Nia Pat (Fire Walking)." These preliminary rituals are preparatory in nature and serve to purify the participants and the environment for the upcoming sacred activities.

**Kanta Pat** (ritual pain endurance) is often marked by symbolic acts of penance and self-discipline. The term "Kanta" means thorn, and this part of the ritual may involve walking on thorny paths or enduring mild physical hardship to demonstrate the Bhaktas' readiness to undergo spiritual transformation. These acts are not intended as extreme self-mortification but as a way to symbolically cast off physical and spiritual impurities. The ritual may also include the chanting of mantras, fasting, and meditative silence. Senior Bhaktas supervise this ritual and ensure that the younger initiates understand the significance and method.

**Nia Pat** (Fire Walking) is a dramatic and spiritually intense ritual that follows Kanta Pat ("Firewalking"). In this phase, the Bhaktas undertake the awe-inspiring act of walking barefoot over a bed of burning coal (Nayak, "Walking on Fire in Mayurbhanj, Odisha"). The term "Nia" in local dialect is associated with 'fire', symbolizing purification through trial and transformation. Walking on fire is seen as the ultimate test of faith and devotion, representing a spiritual cleansing of body and soul. It is believed that true devotion will protect the Bhaktas from harm, and thus, many emerge unscathed a testament to their faith and discipline.

Before the fire walk, the Bhaktas bathe in rivers or ponds, donning sacred attire, usually in red or white. The fire path is sanctified by elders, and prayers are offered to the village deities, especially the Mother Goddess. As drums beat and chants fill the air, the

atmosphere becomes one of charged spiritual energy. This fire-walking ritual not only purifies but also signifies the burning away of past sins and personal limitations, empowering the participants with spiritual strength for the main festival day.

Together, Kanta Pat and Nia Pat represent a dual process of penance and purification. These rituals prepare the body and soul for the main day's worship and communal celebrations, setting a tone of sanctity and devotion. They also reinforce the themes of discipline, humility, and renewal that underpin many traditional festivals in the region.

The central figures of the festival are the Bhaktas, numbering between 20 to 40 in most villages. These participants bathe in rivers or pond beds early in the morning, don new traditional attire, and perform puja to the village deities. Their actions are carefully guided by older, experienced Bhaktas who train the younger generation in the proper rituals, songs, and movements.



*Figure 2 Bhakta in Ceremonial Flight*

A unique and visually striking ritual of Uda Parav occurs in the evening when the Bhaktas participate in a ceremonial "flight." Holding wooden structures constructed by the village committee, the Bhaktas are seen symbolically flying or dancing through the village, representing spiritual transcendence and divine ecstasy (Prince Ramesh, "Thakurmumda Uda Parba Mayurbhanja"). These wooden structures, typically cross-like or frame-shaped, are tied to the backs of the Bhaktas using ropes and belts. The Bhaktas then run or leap into the air with the aid of momentum and the supportive lifting by other villagers, creating an illusion of flying. This symbolic flight signifies liberation from worldly constraints, expressing the soul's journey toward divine realms. The spectacle draws large crowds, further enhancing the festival's popularity and spiritual intensity. It is one of the most awaited events of Uda Parav, showcasing devotion, discipline, and the dramatic flair of ritual art.





**Figure 3 Bhaktas after Bathing**

During this time, the Bhaktas are not only viewed as performers or devotees but are regarded as vessels of divine power. Women, in particular, show immense reverence to the Bhaktas, often seeking blessings and offering prayers. The divine acceptance of the Bhaktas is so deeply entrenched that their mere presence is considered sanctifying. Many women touch their feet or sprinkle sacred water on themselves after contact, believing that the Bhaktas carry the aura and energy of the deities they worship. This societal perception reinforces the sacred status of the Bhaktas during the festival, adding to the mystique and devotion surrounding Uda Parav.

#### **The Mela During Uda Parav:**

Simultaneous to the religious observances is the vibrant mela or fair that unfolds in the village centers. The mela is an integral part of Uda Parav, offering a space for economic exchange, entertainment, and cultural exhibition. Vendors from faraway villages set up stalls to sell toys, clothes, agricultural tools, ornaments, and food items.

Traditional performances, including Chhau dance, folk music, and storytelling, attract large audiences and create a festive mood. The mela is also a site for social interaction where people meet relatives, forge new friendships, and even arrange marriages. Local artisans find a market for their products, making the mela a vital economic event as well.

#### **The Contemporary Relevance of Uda Parav:**

In the context of modernity, Uda Parav has adapted to changing times while retaining its core traditions. With increasing urban migration and the influence of digital media, the festival has gained broader visibility beyond its traditional locales. Educational institutions, cultural bodies, and local governance have started recognizing the value of preserving Uda Parav as a cultural heritage event.

Many youths are showing renewed interest in learning about the festival, participating in rituals, and documenting its practices. Training provided by elder Bhaktas ensures continuity, while local NGOs and cultural activists are advocating for its recognition in state cultural calendars. Additionally, the festival is now being promoted as a potential rural tourism attraction, bringing both economic benefits and cultural pride to the region.

#### **Challenges and Future of Uda Parav:**

Despite its enduring significance, Uda Parav faces several interlinked and cumulative challenges. Among the most pressing are the pressures of modernization, urbanization, and the gradual loss of traditional knowledge.

Modernization has ushered in rapid lifestyle changes, particularly among the youth, who are increasingly drawn to global culture, digital entertainment, and modern values. As a result, many view the time-intensive and spiritual practices of Uda Parav as outdated or less relevant. The shift in value systems threatens the continuity of deeply rooted customs and beliefs that have traditionally been upheld through community discipline and devotion.

Urbanization brings its own set of problems. As towns expand and infrastructure projects encroach upon rural spaces, the natural environments essential for rituals—such as clean



**Figure 4 Bangles Shop at Mela**

rivers and open village spaces—are disappearing. Sacred sites are often polluted or built over, and noise from urban settlements interferes with the serene, ritualistic atmosphere required for spiritual observances. Encroachment also leads to displacement of local communities, weakening their ties to ancestral traditions and places of worship. Loss of Traditional Knowledge is an even more alarming trend. Uda Parav rituals are mostly transmitted orally by senior Bhaktas and community elders. However, with rising rural-to-urban



migration and the death of older knowledge holders, this oral heritage is at risk. Younger generations often lack interest or time to undergo the necessary spiritual training, and without systematic documentation, many rituals risk distortion or complete disappearance. There is also the danger of rituals being misrepresented or commercialized without context.

Additional challenges include commercial influences that threaten to reduce the religious core of the festival to a mere spectacle. Funding shortages, environmental degradation, and declining local participation due to migration further add to the burden.

### III. Recommendations

To safeguard the future of Uda Parav, a multi-pronged strategy is essential. This includes:

- **Formal Documentation and Academic Research:** Encouraging in-depth studies and ethnographic research to capture the oral traditions, rituals, and significance of Uda Parav. These efforts should be supported by universities, cultural organizations, and independent researchers.
- **Inclusion in Regional Cultural Heritage Programs:** Getting Uda Parav recognized in state and national lists of intangible cultural heritage can provide institutional support and public recognition.
- **Government and NGO Support for Training and Community Involvement:** Launching training initiatives for younger Bhaktas, supported by grants or community organizations, to ensure transmission of knowledge.
- **Integration of Cultural Education in Local Schools:** Introducing Uda Parav and similar festivals into school curricula through books, workshops, and storytelling sessions to instill cultural pride in students.
- **Environmental Protection Efforts to Restore and Maintain Ritual Spaces:** Initiating cleanup drives and legal protections for rivers, ponds, and fields used in rituals to maintain the sanctity and usability of these spaces.
- **Creating Digital Archives and Visual Media to Engage Younger Audiences:** Producing documentaries, short films, and interactive digital content to increase accessibility and awareness among tech-savvy youth.
- **Promotion of Rural Tourism with Cultural Sensitivity:** Developing responsible tourism strategies that allow outsiders to experience the festival without disrupting or commercializing sacred practices.

### IV. Conclusion:

Uda Parav is a vibrant and intricate mosaic of rituals, devotion, community participation, and cultural celebration. Rooted in the landscapes of Mayurbhanj, it reflects the enduring human need for spiritual connection, social cohesion, and cultural expression. As it continues to evolve, Uda Parav stands as a testament to the resilience of indigenous traditions in the face of change. By recognizing and supporting its value, both as a spiritual observance and a cultural heritage, we can ensure that this festival continues to thrive for generations to come. Moreover, Uda Parav serves as a living chronicle of tribal identity and collective memory, passed down through oral traditions, sacred performances, and symbolic acts like firewalking and Chhau dance. It offers not only a window into the cosmology of the tribal communities but also a powerful reminder of the ecological and ancestral reverence that shaped their worldview. In an age of rapid modernization and cultural homogenization, preserving such festivals becomes not just an act of conservation but a reaffirmation of cultural diversity and human creativity. Supporting Uda Parav means uplifting the voices of indigenous communities, acknowledging their contributions, and fostering a more inclusive narrative of cultural heritage in India.

### References:

- [1]. Das, A. *Living Traditions of Mayurbhanj*. Kolkata: Heritage India, 2019.
- [2]. Field interviews with local practitioners (2025)
- [3]. Firewalking. Wikipedia. Accessed on May 12, 2025. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Firewalking>.
- [4]. Behera, H. *Fairs and Festivals of the Tribes of Mayurbhanj, Odisha: An Ethnographic Study*. PhD diss., Utkal University, 2024. pp. 169–170.
- [5]. Jana, N. C., A. Banerjee, and P. K. Ghosh. *Sustainable Livelihoods of Tribal Communities in Odisha, India: The Case of Mayurbhanj*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022.
- [6]. Kendujhar. Culture & Heritage. Government of Odisha. Website. Accessed May 12, 2025. [https://kendujhar.odisha.gov.in/tourism/culture-Heritage?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://kendujhar.odisha.gov.in/tourism/culture-Heritage?utm_source=chatgpt.com)
- [7]. Mayurbhanj Mirror. UDA PARBA | MAYURBHANJ MIRROR | EPISODE-105. YouTube video, 4:14. Posted June 5, 2022. [https://youtu.be/u5mbgR\\_ib64?si=UST\\_2wp c5liDDvsX](https://youtu.be/u5mbgR_ib64?si=UST_2wp c5liDDvsX).



- [8]. Nayak, P. "Walking on Fire in Mayurbhanj, Odisha." YouTube, 2021. October 20. <https://youtube.com/shorts/mTnsUMMhnis?si=PTtxbysDa14mwzDp>.
- [9]. Oral traditions from Betnoti and Thakurmunda villagers
- [10]. Pattnaik, D. *Tribal Festivals of Eastern India*. Bhubaneswar: Utkal Press, 2018.
- [11]. Prince Ramesh. "Thakurmumda Uda Parba Mayurbhanja." YouTube, April 15, 2025. [https://youtu.be/VNGE6WX4c\\_s?si=3EGfBCxAtnfHaJQw](https://youtu.be/VNGE6WX4c_s?si=3EGfBCxAtnfHaJQw).
- [12]. Rairangpur Uda Yatra 2024, Mayurbhanj Uda Yatra, Mayurbhanj Chaitra Parba." YouTube video, 7:26. Posted April 15, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/@artistdkvlogs>
- [13]. Sharma, Harshit. "Shiva: Embodiment of Creation and Annihilation of Duality." *Gap Bodhi Taru* (2023): 83–91.
- [14]. Singh, R. (2016). "Community Rituals and Cultural Identity in Odisha." *Indian Folklore Journal*, 22(3), 45-67.