



Dhanu Yatra of Bargarh: Its Tradition and Modernity

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Abstract: Culture is an important element in the process of societal development, it helps stimulating unity, preserving heritage, strengthening social bond between different classes in society and create a classless society. By bridging generation and promoting communal harmony, Dhanuyatra of Bargarh explain how culture and tradition enrich the societies, inspires the future generation serving as a vibrant reminder of the enduring power of cultural heritage in shaping an inclusive society. The world largest open-air theatrical event celebrated based on Pouranic myth 'Krushna Leela' for 11 days. This yearly cultural event very is spectacular, which has its roots in ancient traditions, performs scenes from the Mahabharata with an emphasis on the epic account of Lord Krishna's early life and his encounter with the despotic King Kansa. The study will explore how cultural tourism can be developed in Western Odisha through proper planning and promotion of Dahanu Jatra and the positive contribution that these events play in solidifying community relations with development of the cultural tourism. Festivals are considered to contribute significantly to the cultural and economic development wealth of the tourist's destinations.

Keywords: Dhanujatra, Culture, Heritage, Indian Knowledge system

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Introduction

Each region has its own culture and tradition that has a larger impact to the society, which the people of that region take pride for which they are particularly known to others. These may include their customs and traditions, social practices, festivals, fairs, and celebrations. In this context, the globally renowned *Dhanuyatra* held in the town of Bargarh in Western Odisha can be discussed concerning its tradition and modernity. In recent times, The *Rathayatra* of Lord *Jagannath* is celebrated in various parts of

the world beyond Odisha and India, when we talk about the authentic *Rathayatra*, it refers to the one held in Puri, Odisha. Similarly, while the *Sital Sasthi* festival is grandly celebrated in many places, when we mention *SitalSasthi*, it typically refers to the famous *SitalSasthi* festival of Sambalpur. In the same way, though *Dhanuyatra* is organized in many places with much pomp and grandeur in contemporary times, the mention of *Dhanuyatra* primarily signifies the world-famous *Dhanuyatra* Festival of Bargarh. This festival deeply resonates with the emotions and strong cultural connection of the local people, making it profoundly heartwarming and significant. In the city of Bargarh, the grand *Dhanuyatra* festival has been traditionally celebrated since after independence. After being held continuously for some years, the festival was temporarily discontinued for a certain period. However, due to the sincere efforts of several visionary individuals, the festival was revived and has since been celebrated uninterruptedly.

During this time, the *Dhanuyatra* has gained immense popularity and widespread fame. This world-renowned festival was initially established before independence due to the contributions of notable individuals such as Chandramani Gyontia, Kangali Nayak, Kapileswar Dash, Rushi Mohanti, Krushna Sahu, Bipin Saraf, Aparti Panigrahi, Lalit Mohanti, Gurudal Nayak, Tila Pradhan, Chalu Master, and Brundaban Bishi. In later years, the continuous development and success of the festival were ensured through the active support and efforts of prominent local leaders like Sarbeswar Ratha, Sadandana Panigrahi, Lenku Mishra, Ganesh Pradhan, Shankar Biswal, and Gudeba Pradhan (Nahak, Ganeshram). The initiation of such a grand program by those great individuals who aim to eradicate the demonic tendencies within people and nurture divine qualities is certainly memorable for our region. The primary objective of this study is to understand the faith in religion, annihilate the evil forces residing within individuals, and foster a sense of brotherhood across community. Regarding this journey, the opinion of the late Lengu Mishra can be cited here: - “Nowhere in the world, apart from Bargarh, has a play been staged where every resident of a city or village performs as an artist. The world-renowned open-air stage, the grand *Dhanayatra* of Bargarh, is not merely a celebratory festival of Lord Krishna’s victory in Mathura, as depicted in ancient scriptures. This journey or festival serves to shape human society into a fearless and combative entity. Its core principle lies in protecting and preserving the vulnerable and the oppressed. This festival symbolizes the collective struggle against the injustices and tyranny of autocratic rulers. Under British rule, countless individuals were subjected to injustice and oppression. At that time, Bargarh was a small town with a modest

population, although it was recognized as a sub-division. This city was also known as the commercial hub of western Odisha and for its weekly Friday market. *Dhanuyatra*, even two or three years before independence, served as a practical demonstration of raising voices against the exploitative traders, the British government, and the feudal system.” (*Smaranika, Birata, Dhanuyatra Festival*, Bargarh, 1994. Fairs, festivals, and celebrations hold immense attraction for everyone. For individuals burdened by the fatigue of daily life, they provide a great source of inspiration and rekindle enthusiasm. These festivities rejuvenate the spirit of weary people and create indomitable energy and excitement, bringing vitality to life’s journey. This journey becomes unceasing, moving forward with constant zeal and the mantra “*Chareibati Chareibati*” (“Keep moving forward, keep progressing”) resonating in their hearts.

The Largest Open Air Theatre of the World

The *Dhanu Yatra* at Bargarh has been a unique festival combining the folk-theatre, folk—culture and which has been celebrated uninterruptedly since the pre-independence era. During the *Dhanu Yatra*, Bargarh and *Ambapali* transforms into the mythical Mathura city and the *Gopapura*. The river *Jeera* flowing between Bargarh city and *Ambapali* village reverberates the melodious babbles of the mythical Yamuna river. The folk-theatre *Dhanu Yatra* is based on the stories depicted in the *Hari Vansha Puraan* of *Dwaapar Yuga*. Various episodes starting with the Birth of Lord Krishna and the death of Mathura king Kansha get enacted in the *Dhanu Yatra*. However, the episodes related to Lord Krishna’s childhood known as *Baalya leela* and charismatic youth, known as *Raasa leela* are certainly heart-touching and worth-watching. *Dhanu Yatra* spans over 11 days starting with the Fifth day of the *Pausa* and getting over on the *Pausa Purnima*. The *Dhanu Yatra* makes everyone of the Bargarh city and *Ambapali* in the radius of 3 km as actors of the mythical event and has earned the distinction of being the largest open-air theatre in the world.

Uniqueness of Dhanu Yatra

Dhanu Yatra of Bargarh was started as an artistic and creative expression; and as a symbolic opposition and resistance against the repressive *Zamindari* system, exploitative capitalist system, tyrannical monarchies and the alien British rule. It also symbolizes the eternal victory of Truth over Falsehood, triumph of Justice over injustice and victory Righteousness over the anarchy. In *Dhanu Yatra* of Bargarh, the characters deliver dialogues without any written scripts and act impromptu and sometime improvise

depending upon the situation on that particular date and time. Especially, the acting and dialogues of King Kansa of Mathura are extempore and they are the main attraction of the Dhanu Yatra. In fact, no one is an audience, rather everyone is an actor and is either a resident of Mathura or Gopapura.

King Kansa the chief Protagonist and not a Villain

Traditionally, the 'Hero' has been the central figure in any film, drama or folk-theatre. But, in the Dhanu Yatra, the case is different and unique. King Kansa of Mathura is the main attraction of Dhanu Yatra. During the *Dwaapar yuga* King Kansa of Mathura was an extremely oppressive and tyrannical king. He was also known for making the administration work for the residents of Mathura. During Dhanu Yatra, King Kansa of Mathura becomes the real administrator and everyone obeys his instructions and his orders are carried out diligently by the Ministers, District Collector, Superintendent of Police and all high rank officials of the district and the common residents. The other attraction of Dhanu Yatra has been the '*Nagar Parikramaa*' of King Kansa of Mathura. Almost everyday the King Kansa of Mathura moves around the city alongwith his ministers atop an elephant. During the '*Nagar Parikramaa*' King Kansa interacts with common residents, redresses their grievances and imposes penalties or fines in the form of '*Swarna mudra*' [symbolic gold coins] on the non-performing officials. King Kansa also accords rewards to many prominent citizens of Mathura. King Kansa felicitates the residents of Mathura who are achievers in various walks of life. So, in Dhanu Yatra, King Kansa comes across as the chief protagonist and not a villain. During the entire 11 days of Dhanu Yatra, the King Kansa turns the Bargarh into a mythical kingdom in present times.

Ambapali's Residents Smitten by the Divine Love of Krishna

Lord Krishna, his elder brother Balram, King Nanda, Devaki and Akrura etc play significant role. Sometime, people get soaked in the divine feeling of Lord Krishna and sometime they get terrified with the atrocities inflicted upon them by King Kansa. Mathura attracts more attraction due to King Kansa. Yet, the emotionally charged atmosphere soaked in the divinity of Lord Krishna in Gopapur remains incredibly unique. The village 'Ambapali' totally get immersed in the devotional activities around Lord Krishna. The folk and rural culture get merged with the devotion and divinity and leave an indelible experience. Each and every household in Ambapali gets decorated traditionally and feature one or two paintings on the various episodes from Lord

Krishna's life. During the Dhanu Yatra, especially when Lord Krishna along with elder brother Balram leave for Mathura, every household prepare the traditional 'Jhunti' and install the auspicious 'Jaagar' and 'Purna-kalash' with tender-coconut and mango leaves atop. The women of every household wait for the arrival of Lord Krishna and Balram in front of their respective houses to offer 'Bandaan' by sprinkling holy rice-grains and applying 'tilak' and pressing the mango-leaves on the cheeks of Lord Krishna and Balram. The profound statements and fragrance of divinity of Lord Krishna engulf the small village Gopapur [Ambapali].

Cultural 'Mahaakumbha'

Dhanu Yatra ushers in a cultural and a festive feeling among the residents of Bargarh district. Even, the king Kansa organize cultural activities at his 'Durbaar' and 'Rangmancha'. The guests of King Kansa seated on the stage and the people get enthralled by the festive feeling and cultural performances. There have been cultural performances by the artists from abroad also. In other words, Dhanu Yatra turns into a cultural 'Mahaa-Kumbha' with the congregation of folk-artists, classical dancers, artists from abroad etc.

Folk songs

*Lekhi achi Kansa, hoi Maharasa
Arre Gopepati Nanda
Agyan pramane aasibu nohile
Chedibi to skanda*

This literally means,

Being enraged, my self Kansa has sent a summon
O beloved & protector of Gopees
You must come after receiving this Supreme order
Or else, I will chop off your head.

Review of Literature

Based on its history and activities, festival tourism can be separated into two categories: traditional and modern. Based on a rich cultural legacy, traditional festivals are passed down from one generation to the next. Festivals, on the other hand, are organized only to satisfy customer demand, taking into account regional traits or purchasing patterns (Huang, 2004).

According to Bhaduri R. and Swamy G. (2012), events are essential to the preservation and upkeep of Odisha's cultural icons. Examines the cultural significance of celebrations and occasions that showcase the Odisha's traditional expressions. Describe the connections between Odisha's cultural monuments and events. .

Tiwari S., (2015) shows the importance of Shilpgram fair and its significance towards the expansion of mindfulness and financial development of rural life and crafts particularly for younger people. The role of culture in economic growth increases areas where the Shilpgram fair is facilitated in Rajasthan.

According to Cibinskiene, A. (2012), tourist destinations compete with one another to draw more visitors since their expenditures boost the local economy. Assessing an event's financial impact in relation to city tourism, using main data sources and focusing on new visitor spending while omitting "time-switcher" and "casual" visitor spending will increase competitiveness.

The ability of festivals to produce a number of development outcomes pertaining to inward investment, destination repositioning, economic restructuring and revival, and tourism income generation. These factors are largely responsible for the increased involvement of public organizations in a variety of specialized fields in promoting and occasionally planning art festivals. Consequently, art Festivals and other events in general are now included in a variety of "Cultural Strategies." (Gotham 2004)

India presents both opportunities and problems for utilizing the cultural and economic potential of fairs and festivals, according to Munjal, S., and Jauhari, V. (2015). Absence of essential infrastructure, unresponsive government assistance, and local disinterest in Poor involvement of stakeholders and cultural monetization are two new problems with Indian cultural festivals.

Festivals, rallies, fairs, expositions, sports, and cultural events are all included in festival tourism. In contrast to traditional life lines of people, events, and programs, it can draw a sizable number of tourists from outside the region and has a variety of sizes, a defined topic, and is held regularly or sporadically in the same region at a specified period (Lian, 2004).

It is challenging to determine how much the festival contributes to local economic growth, according to Felsenstein, D., and Fleischer (2003), and most studies don't look at this problem beyond typical multiplier effect. A new approach that takes into consideration net local the yearly local festival in northern Israel causes an increase in income.

The effects of festivals and cultural events on local communities and cultural tourism, with an emphasis on social, cultural, economic, and environmental aspects. This study addresses the benefits and challenges of sustainable management by highlighting

the diverse ways that cultural events and festivals support tourism development and community well-being through a thorough literature review and case studies (Lopes, R., and Hiray, A 2024).

In order to increase awareness of local customs, Stankova M. (2015) used cultural profiles, which were displayed at a local festival. Estimates for the survey among festival organizers and the local level of authenticity of regional customs in South Bulgaria is suggested by the number of festival attendees and enterprises. There are opportunities for those areas to flourish economically, socially, and culturally in a sustainable way while maintaining and passing on the current legacy to coming generations.

The Tradition of Bargarh Dhanuyatra

The *Dhanujatra Mahotsav*, based on the events described in the *Bhagabata Purana*, is celebrated for approximately 11 days in the town of Bargarh. It begins on the fourth day of the waxing moon in the month of Pousha and concludes on the full moon day. This renowned festival takes place on the world's largest open-air stage. Due to its geographic setting, Bargarh is ideally suited for hosting the *Dhanuyatra* festival. Bargarh represents the ancient city of Mathura, while *Ambapali* symbolizes *Gopapura*. The Jira River flowing through the region represents the sacred Yamuna River of mythology, and the mango orchards near the river signify *Vrindavan*. In *Gopapura (Ambapali)*, the childhood (*balya lila*) of Lord Krishna and Balarama is enacted, while a stage in the vicinity showcases the demise of demoness *Putana* and other mythological events. Near the Jira River, the pond (*Pushkarini*) becomes the site for Lord Krishna's triumph over *Kaliya (Kaliyadalana)*. The depiction of Krishna's playful activities captivates the audience. During *Dhanuyatra*, the entire town of Bargarh transforms into a mythical land of joy and enchantment, with streets illuminated and cleaned for the occasion.

The narrative spans from the marriage of *Devaki* and *Vasudeva* to the slaying of King Kansa. The central character of the festival is King Kansa of Mathura. The actor portraying Kansa interacts with the audience through dialogues in a mix of Hindi and *Sambalpuri* languages, entertaining the spectators. While the mythological Kansa was a cruel tyrant, in *Dhanuyatra*, Kansa is portrayed as a well-meaning ruler. During the 11 days of the festival, he becomes the supreme ruler of the town, and his orders are obeyed by all, including government officials, who act as his servants. Regardless of their status or influence, everyone must adhere to Kansa's commands. A notable highlight is Kansa's daily procession through the streets of Mathura (Bargarh). Riding on a well-decorated elephant and surrounded by his council members, Kansa tours the town, accompanied by the chants of his praise, which resonate in the air. The residents of Bargarh, along with

visitors, take on the role of his subjects. One unique aspect of this festival is that everyone in the town becomes a participant, playing a character in the grand narrative. Even villagers from within a 4-5 km radius actively engage as performers. During these processions, Kansa promptly imposes fines on anyone found violating order or cleanliness, regardless of their status. Offenders immediately seek forgiveness and pay the penalty, which is often symbolic (e.g., a fine of ten lakh coins might equate to just ten rupees). These dramatic acts of governance entertain the audience and emphasize the importance of discipline. After the town procession, Kansa holds his court in a beautifully decorated assembly at the town square. Accompanied by ministers and officials, he listens to public grievances and commands solutions. The court also features cultural performances, with local artists showcasing dances and songs. Outstanding performers are rewarded. In earlier times, when platforms for artists were scarce, this festival provided a rare opportunity for local talent to exhibit their skills. Unlike today, when even block-level cultural events promote artists, *Dhanuyatra* was a major avenue for spreading and preserving local art forms. Thus, the performances were aimed at both entertainment and the promotion of indigenous culture. After the performances, Kansa addresses the concerns of his subjects and issues commands for the welfare of his kingdom. Sometimes, the *Maharaja* (king) discusses matters with distinguished guests. After the court proceedings are over, he rides a beautifully decorated elephant and returns to the inner palace. Later in the night, various folk dances, folk songs, and *Odissi* dance performances are presented for the entertainment of the audience. Among the folk dances and songs are *Dalkhai*, *Rasarkeli*, *Maelajada*, *Sanchara*, *Pala*, *Bhajana*, and *Sankirtana*, which together create a delightful atmosphere for *Dhanuyatra*. These performances not only add charm to the festival but also evoke spiritual sentiments among the viewers. Over time, some changes have been observed in these practices. Presently, dance performances are presented to the tunes of music from various Hindi and Odia films. Various scenes of archery can be seen in Bargarh's *Dharmasala* Kansa's palace, *Hatapada* Kansa darbar, Nishamani high school *lok mandap* Kansa's *Rangamaharaj*, *Ambapali* Nanda darbar and *Adimata* temple becomes Madhuban garden. *Gobindapali* is depicted as the mango orchard, and *Phakirabandha* becomes Kalindi pond. Similarly, Kali temple portrays the episode of Kumbha's redemption, while Manabandha represents various other divine plays.

On the other hand, in *Gopapura* (*Ambapali*), Sri Krishna's enchanting divine acts are enacted. People of all ages and backgrounds participate actively and with devotion in all the programs held there. The eagerness, enthusiasm, excitement, and joy among the people can only be fully understood by witnessing it firsthand. Sri Krishna and Balarama sing songs, play the flute melodiously, and dance while herding the cows. In

their sweet voices, they sing, “Come, come Let us graze the cows; let’s live in the beautiful Vrindavan.” The scenes depicting Sri Krishna’s divine plays are deeply emotional and soul-stirring. The depiction of the cowherd women selling curd in Mathura is portrayed with great skill. Thousands of spectators watch these scenes with awe, often shedding tears of joy. Many devotees bow at Sri Krishna and Balarama’s feet, rolling on the ground in ecstasy, overwhelmed with spiritual emotion. Hearing the divine prophecy, the wicked Kansa conspires to kill Sri Krishna. He sends various demons to *Gopapura*, but all of them meet their end at the hands of Sri Krishna. Eventually, *Akrura* arrives in *Gopapura*. He takes Sri Krishna and Balarama to Mathura to witness the *Dhanuyatra* festival. The departure of the brothers to Mathura fills every viewer’s heart with sorrow. The tearful eyes of the audience and the poignant cries of the *Gopis* create a heart-rending atmosphere. The actors portraying the characters are so convincing that the audience perceives them as the actual historical figures.

Dhanuyatra features numerous characters, including *Kansa*, *Krishna*, *Balarama*, *Nanda*, *Yashoda*, *Vasudeva*, *Devaki*, the *Gopis*, *Sudama*, *Chanura*, *Kubja*, *Akrura*, and *Ugrasena*, along with various royal officials. Each character puts in heartfelt efforts to bring their roles to life. The festival concludes with the death of Kansa at the hands of Krishna and the coronation of *Ugrasena* as king. A collective chant of the audience can be heard as the Kansa falls in Krishna Hand –

‘*Kansa Rajara Bansa Budu*
Kansa Male Khaema Loodu’

Initially, the festival lasted 16 days but has now been reduced to 11 days. During the performances, Kansa repeatedly insults Krishna, which, according to local belief, requires the actor playing Kansa to seek penance. After the festival, the actor visits either the *Samaleswari* or *Jagannath* temple to offer prayers and seek liberation from any sins committed during the role. Various traditional musical instruments are used during *Dhanuyatra*, such as *Dhola*, *Nishan*, *Mahuri*, *Tasa*, *Timkidi*, *Jhumuka*, *Banshi* (flute), *Jhanjha*, *Kastala*, *Ghini*, *Mrudanga*, *Madala*, and *Dulkuli*. The festival fosters a spirit of harmony, transcending caste, creed, and religion. Additionally, the mythological narratives interwoven in the festival address local issues, and under the guise of Kansa’s directives, many problems are promptly resolved.

Modernity in Bargarh Dhanuyatra

With the changing times, transformations have occurred in various aspects of life, including our eating habits, attire, dance, music, celebrations, and festivals. In this

context, the influence of modernity on Bargarh's *Dhanuyatra* is prominently noticeable. The scope of artistic performances in this festival is vast, extending across different parts of Bargarh and Ambapali. The dialogues of the performers in this festival clearly reflect modernity. Interestingly, these dialogues are not pre-written; instead, the artists adapt their dialogues spontaneously based on the environment and situation, entertaining the audience. Although the storyline is based on mythological events, its presentation reflects a refreshing modern touch. Within these dialogues, local issues are frequently highlighted, and under Kansa's directives, many such problems are addressed immediately. In recent times, significant efforts have been made to enhance the festival's appeal by incorporating advanced lighting arrangements. This was not possible in earlier times due to the lack of technological advancement. Since *Dhanuyatra* is a theatrical art form, considerable emphasis is placed on the effective use of stage lighting. Modern stage decor, combined with vibrant lighting, captivates the audience. Earlier, such arrangements were unfeasible, but advancements in technology have made them possible now. The grandeur of Kansa's court at Bargarh *Haat Padar* and the colorful stage at *Nishamani* High School premises successfully mesmerize spectators. These two stages showcase a variety of folk-art forms, including diverse dances and songs from different regions, bringing immense joy to the audience.

Traditional dance and music, once performed in their original styles, are now presented in modern forms. In the current era of remixes, traditional elements are blended with modernization. Old songs are rendered with new tunes, and traditional dances are performed with a modern twist, making them more appealing to the audience. It can be said that efforts are being made to tailor performances according to the changing tastes of people. During the vibrant celebration of *Dhanu Yatra*, Bargarh transforms into a bustling hub of festivities and cultural splendor. The city becomes home to numerous attractions, including *Meenabazar*, circus shows. Government and private institutions actively participate by setting up exhibition stalls showcasing their initiatives, while handicrafts and textile exhibitions highlight the region's artistic heritage. Attractive towers, dazzling illuminations like *Manolova*, and a series of cultural programs at local, state, and national levels add to the grandeur of the occasion. This remarkable blend of events attracts a massive gathering of devotees and visitors, turning the entire area into a festive spectacle. The *Dhanuyatra* acts as a powerful cultural bridge, facilitating the exchange of ideas across countries. It promotes harmony and understanding among diverse communities, enhancing its significance as not just a regional festival but a global cultural event. Recently, the Odisha Literary Academy

organized a lecture series during the festival, bringing world-renowned critics together to discuss various aspects of this extraordinary journey. Such intellectual engagements underscore the festival's universal appeal and its contribution to cultural discourse, which is indeed a matter of pride for the people of Odisha. Over time, *Dhanuyatra* has carved a unique identity in the global cultural landscape. This festival has evolved with changing trends, embracing modernization while maintaining its essence. However, amidst this evolution, the primary responsibility of all participants and organizers is to preserve the simplicity and authenticity that define.

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Consent to Participate: All the researchers or all co-authors have positively agreeded to participate this research work effectively and contribute drastically.

Consent to Publish: All are agree to publish this work in this journal ethically.

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Appendix

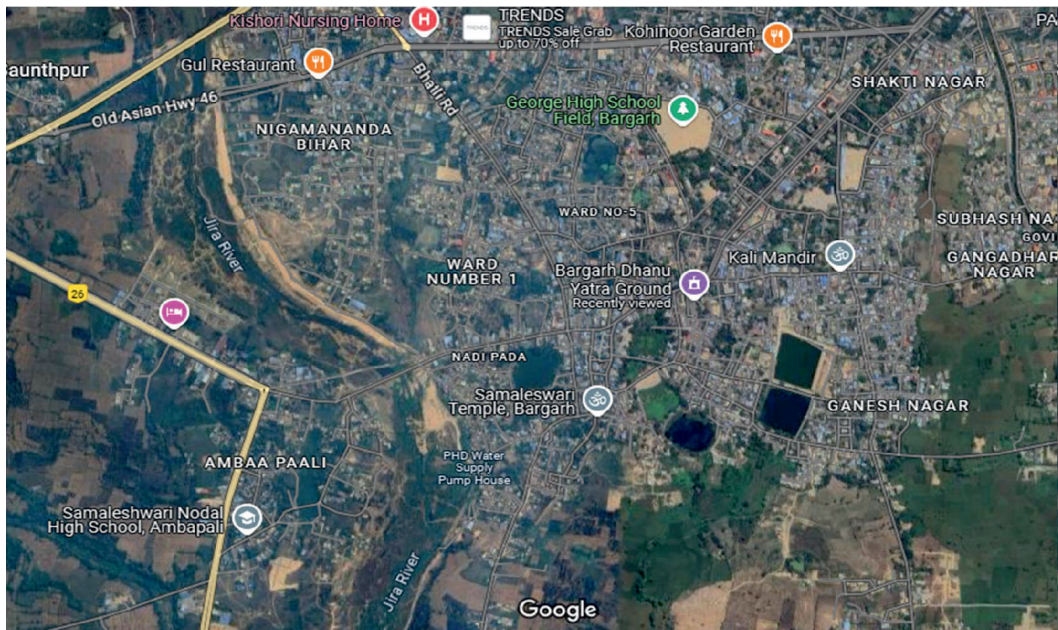


Map A1: Map of Odisha with highlighted map of Bargarh district.

Source: Google common images.



Map A2: Physical map of Bargarh district showing major national highway, major roads, district boundary



Map A3: Satellite image of Bargarh district



Map A4: Satellite image of Bargarh district with points of importance for Dhanuyatra.

Source: Google Earth images.



Picture A5: Akrura [legendary actor Natyacharya Harekrushna Pujari] taking Krushna and taking Balram to Mathura.



Picture A6: Legendart actor late Judhisthir Satpathy performing as Kansa.



Picture A7: Kansa holding his Durbar alongwith his ministers and officials.



Picture A8: Akrura taking Krushna & Balramito Mathura.



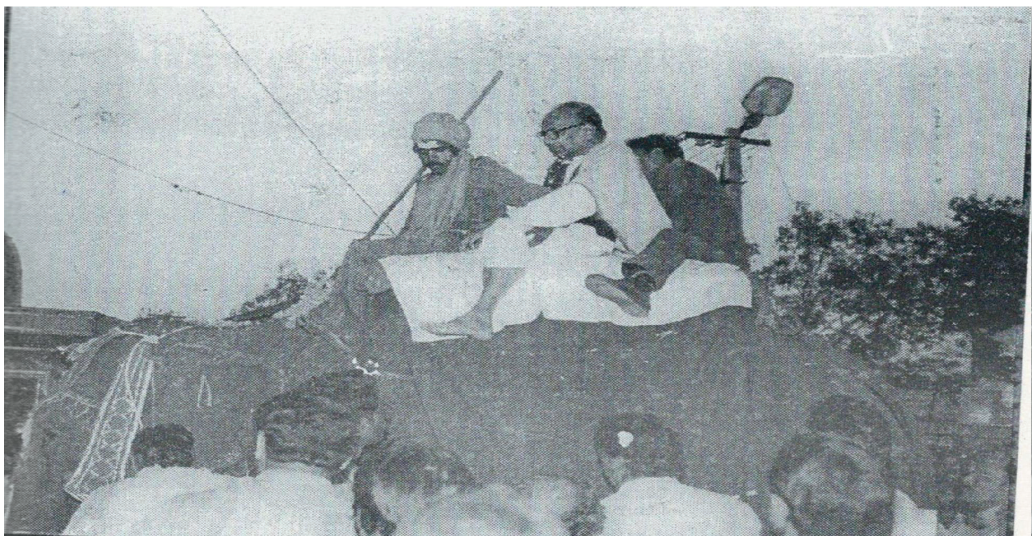
Picture A9: Krushna & Balram going arund Mathura.



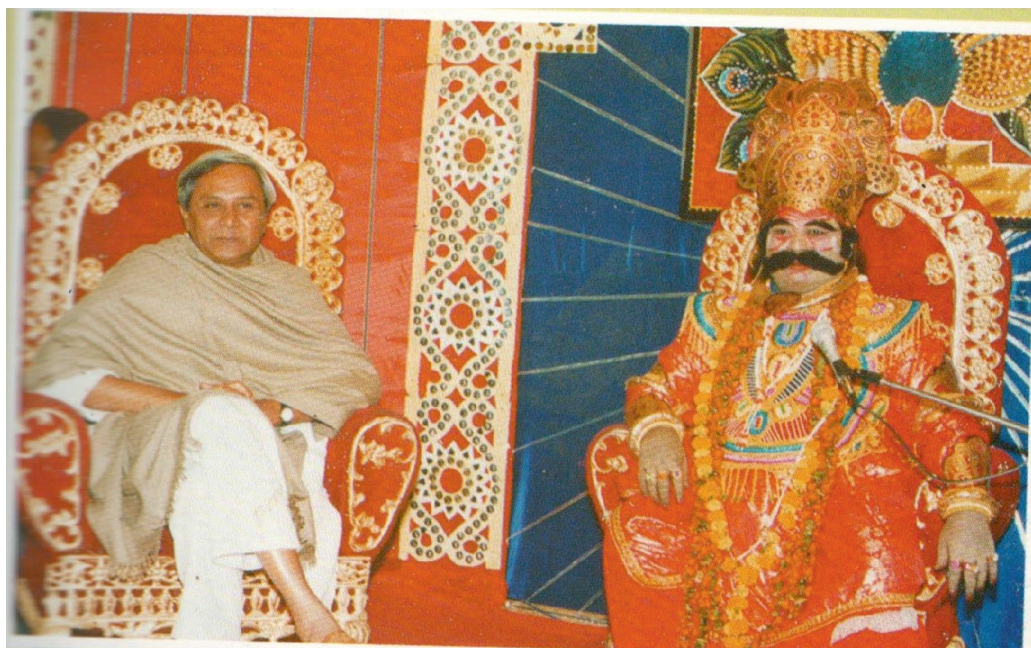
Picture A10: Residents of Mathura [Bargarh] warmly receiving Krushna & Balram



Picture A11: Kansa fighting with krushan & Balram.



Picture A12: Late Biju Patnaik former Chief Minister of Odisha being taken to Rajdarbar atop an elephant.



Picture A13: Naveen Patnaik, former Chief Minister attending Rajoarbar



Picture A14: Postage Stamp on Dhanu Yatra (Cultural Heritage of Western Odisha) Released by Government of India, 2024



Picture A15: Special day cover on Dhanu Yatra Released by Government of India on 27.12.2017



Picture A16. Dhanu yatra souvenir 2006