



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Tourism

FOLK TRADITIONS AND RURAL TOURISM: A FIELD STUDY IN AJODHYA HILLS, PURULIA.

KEY WORDS: Folklore, Rural tourism, Ajodhya Hills, Chou dance, Oral traditions

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ABSTRACT

This field study examines the living relationship between folk traditions, rural tourism, and community life in the Ajodhya Hills region of Purulia, West Bengal. Conducted between 20 and 22 March 2025 as part of the Folklore, Tourism and Community Development course under the Department of Folklore at the University of Kalyani, the survey is grounded in direct fieldwork, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews with artisans, villagers, guides, and local vendors. The study approaches folklore not as a static remnant of the past, but as a dynamic and embodied practice through which communities negotiate memory, livelihood, identity, and change. The research documents a range of cultural expressions and landscapes, including Chou mask-making at Mukhosh Gram, ritual narratives associated with dams, hills, waterfalls, and temples, vernacular mud-brick architecture, and emerging forms of community-based tourism around water bodies such as the Khairabera and Murguma Dams. Particular attention is paid to how tourism creates new economic possibilities while simultaneously raising concerns about ecological strain, cultural dilution, and the transformation of ritual practices into consumable spectacles. Oral histories and local voices reveal a complex negotiation between preservation and adaptation, especially among younger generations who view tourism with both hope and hesitation. By situating folklore within everyday practices, sacred geographies, and material culture, the study highlights the need for sensitive and sustainable models of rural tourism that are rooted in local knowledge systems and community participation. The Ajodhya Hills emerge as a cultural landscape where tradition, nature, and economy remain deeply intertwined, offering important insights into the role of folklore in inclusive rural development and cultural continuity.

INTRODUCTION

Folk traditions are the living expressions of a community's cultural heritage. They are not merely aesthetic practices, but dynamic, evolving markers of identity and history. In the district of Purulia, West Bengal, the Ajodhya Hills region stands as a vivid canvas where folklore thrives amidst stunning natural beauty. This study aims to explore the interplay between folk traditions and rural tourism, focusing on how traditional practices shape, and are shaped by, tourism in the Ajodhya Hills. The methodology included field visits to culturally significant locations, interviews with local communities, and participant observation. This interdisciplinary approach allowed me to analyse folk practices not only as performative traditions but also as potential engines for sustainable tourism and rural development.

Day 1 Location: Bagmundi, Mukhosh Gram, Upper and Lower Dams

My journey began with a visit to Bagmundi, a village known for its deep-rooted cultural heritage and its strong association with the Chhau dance tradition. Here, I had the opportunity to visit Charida village, popularly known as Mukhosh Gram, and I got the chance to interact with a local artisan family engaged in mask-making—a crucial component of the Chhau performance. At Mukhosh Gram (literally, "The Mask Village"), we engaged in a more detailed ethnographic interaction. Women, too, were seen participating in aspects of mask decoration—a shift from earlier gender norms. When asked about tourism, one artisan said, "People from other states buy our masks. Now our art has value.". These vibrant masks, often depicting characters from the Ramayana and Mahabharata, are crafted from clay, paper pulp, and natural dyes. The artisan proudly shared, "Our work isn't just about mask-making; we keep our old traditions alive.". Besides making masks based on the epics of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, artisans now also cater to the young as well as the older audience by creating masks and showpieces of famous cartoon characters like Chota Bheem and the Buddha. When I asked if I could click a photo, their daughter (below in the photo) happily posed for me while minutely doing her work.



Image: 1 (In the Picture: Pinki Mahato, painting a mask, Mukhosh Gram, Charida Village, Bagmundi, Purulia)

As the day passed by, I stopped for lunch at a local hotel by the name of Rajdhani Hotel, where they served rice, mutton curry, and navaratna dal along with simple potato fry. The price was quite affordable, and the quality of the food was extremely good. This place seemed to be one of the favourite dining haunts of the tourists.



Image: 2 (In the Picture: Rajdhani Hotel)

After having lunch, I resumed my journey towards the Upper Dam and Lower Dam. Nestled amidst the undulating terrain and lush greenery of the Purulia district, these two dams are not only engineering marvels, but also carry cultural and socio-economic significance for the local communities.

The Upper Dam, located at a higher elevation in the Ajodhya Hills, serves as a major water reservoir supporting both irrigation and local household needs. The dam is embraced by dense forests and rocky hillocks, offering breathtaking views that have increasingly drawn eco-tourists and nature enthusiasts in recent years. From a folklore perspective, local Santhal and Munda elders narrate stories of water spirits believed to inhabit the reservoir, often invoking rituals and songs to appease these entities during seasonal changes.

During my visit, I interacted with local villagers who shared how seasonal fairs or small community gatherings are sometimes held near the dam during harvest festivals. Such occasions blend ritual, recreation, and collective memory, reinforcing the dam's role as not merely a utilitarian structure, but a symbolic centre of local folklore and social life.



Image: 3 (In the Pictures: Upper Dam)

Situated downhill from the Upper Dam, the Lower Dam is surrounded by terraced fields and small settlements where tribal communities reside. Unlike its counterpart, i.e. the Upper Dam, the Lower Dam area has been developed more visibly as a tourist site, with better access paths and small food stalls managed by locals. Boating facilities, scenic viewpoints, and quiet picnic spots make it a favoured destination for visitors. However, it is crucial to note that such tourism-based development has both empowered and challenged the local communities.



Image: 4 (In the Picture: Hotel Hill View Restaurant, where I had Tea)

I found a local tea stall run by one of the residents. From our discussions, we learned that while some families have benefited economically by running homestays or acting as local guides, the vendor voiced concerns about ecological degradation and loss of cultural privacy due to unchecked tourist influx. Besides, the tourists also tended to make a mess out of that area, littering it with wrappers, plastic bottles, etc. Oral histories collected during interviews also reveal that the area where the Lower Dam now stands once hosted seasonal ritual grounds used by tribal healers and shamans. The displacement caused by the dam's construction is remembered as a painful but rarely discussed chapter of local history.



Image: 5 (In the Pictures: Lower Dam)

This marked the end of Day 1 of my travel and survey of Ajodhya Hills, Purulia. I had made a reservation at the Birsa Munda Resort. The manager was extremely helpful and very accommodating in his dealings with me. The places I had travelled and would be travelling were all chalked out by him. He further helped me by arranging a car to take me to places. The hospitality and the food offered were all very pleasant.



Image: 6 In the Picture: Birsa Munda Resort, Ajodhya Hills Road, Ajodhya, West Bengal – 723152)

Day 2 Location: Khairabera Dam, Murguma Dam, Turga Falls and Dam

The second day focused on water bodies that have become emerging rural tourism hotspots. At Khairabera Dam, I noted a significant influx of tourists, both local and international. Several makeshift stalls sold bamboo handicrafts and Chhau-themed souvenirs, indicating the blending of folk culture with economic aspirations.



Image: 7 (In the Pictures: Khairabera Dam)

Amidst the lush green Ajodhya Hills in the Purulia district of West Bengal, Murguma Dam stands as a tranquil reservoir surrounded by rolling hills, tribal villages, and forested landscapes. It is not merely a site of scenic beauty but a significant location reflecting the intricate ties between natural resources, local folklore, tourism potential, and community livelihoods. The serenity of the dam, with its still waters reflecting the hills and the sky, creates an almost poetic atmosphere that naturally lends itself to storytelling, oral traditions, and spiritual beliefs among the local communities. Murguma Dam is gradually emerging as a popular offbeat

destination for eco-tourism and rural tourism. However, the tourism infrastructure remains relatively underdeveloped, providing both a challenge and an opportunity for sustainable community-based tourism initiatives.



Image: 8 (In the Pictures: Murguma Dam)

My next stop, Turga Falls, is not only a popular tourist destination but also tied to tribal folklore about spirits and healing waters. Local guides shared stories passed down from generations, many of which emphasize respect for nature and the coexistence of the human and spiritual realms.



Image: 9; (In the Picture: Turga Falls)

Day 3 Location: Marble Lake, Mayur Pahar, Loharia Shiv Mandir

My final day was dedicated to locations that underscore the rich cultural capital of Ajodhya Hills.

Marble Lake, a serene and relatively undiscovered location, captivated me with its ethereal beauty. Although there was little active folklore around this lake, its silent landscape evoked a sense of myth-making possibility; it is the kind of space where new stories might be born. Marble Lake is surrounded by marble-like rock faces, lending the site an almost surreal aesthetic. This hidden gem, lesser-known to the mainstream tourist crowd, is rapidly gaining recognition among eco-tourists and cultural explorers alike. Locals have begun to guide visitors through the terrain, sharing stories not just about the lake's formation, but also about its place in local oral traditions. The nearby residents have taken initiative in maintaining the cleanliness of the site and educating visitors about responsible travel. In doing so, they are not only preserving the ecological sanctity of the area but also ensuring that the folklore and cultural practices tied to the landscape are not lost to time.



Image: 10 (In the Pictures: Marble Lake)

Mayur Pahar (Peacock Hill) is one of the lesser-known yet

enchancing spots in the Ajodhya Hills of Purulia district, West Bengal. Amidst the rugged terrain and dense forests, this hill derives its name from the presence of peacocks in the region, which are occasionally spotted during early morning or twilight hours. From a tourism perspective, Mayur Pahar is gradually gaining attention for its trekking routes and panoramic views of the surrounding Ajodhya plateau. Its development as a tourist destination, however, must be undertaken with sensitivity toward the ecological balance and local livelihoods. The hill is surrounded by tribal villages, primarily inhabited by the Santhal and Munda communities. At the foot of the hill, the locals have set up shops catering to the needs of the tourists, ranging from tea and biscuits to breakfast platters like daal and puri. Besides, they also have sandwiches and bread toasts. Furthermore, the residents have also set up stalls that sell locally made crafts and garlands made of the polash flower, which were being sold at extremely affordable rates without compromising on the quality. When I talked to one of the vendors about the remarkably cheap rates, he said the price that he set was good enough for him, and this, along with the other stalls, furthered the prospect of tourism, which helped them in the long run.



Image: 11 (In the Pictures: Mayur Pahar)

After visiting these places, I finally visited the Loharia Shiv Mandir. Loharia Shiv Mandir is a quiet but spiritually significant temple located near the foothills of Ajodhya Hills. Dedicated to Lord Shiva, the temple is a centre of local religious life, attracting devotees especially during Shivratri and other auspicious occasions. While it may not be grand in architecture, its historical and cultural value is deeply rooted in the daily practices of the local population. Folklore plays an important role in shaping the temple's sanctity. Oral narratives passed down by village elders tell of a divine event or vision that led to the discovery of a Shivlinga in the forest, around which the temple was later built. I was fortunate enough to go into a bazaar that is present behind the temple. I brought a few things from the bazaar. The commodities were not only beautiful but also pocket-friendly. The place, although not grand, had a devotional ambience. Also, it is one of those very few Shiv temples where happens the sacrificial ritual. Surprisingly there is also in its compounds, a temple of Radha-Krishna. The locals were all very much involved with the temple, its myths, stories and maintenance. Loharia Shiv Mandir offers potential as a site for cultural tourism, especially if developed in collaboration with local artisans, priests, and historians. It serves as a tangible link between tangible heritage (the temple structure) and intangible heritage (the myths, rituals, and oral histories).



Image: 12 (In the Image: Loharia Shiv Mandir, Purulia)

Interviews and Observations

Across all sites, I conducted semi-structured interviews with artisans, residents, tourist guides, and stall vendors. Key takeaways include:

- Folk artists want recognition beyond seasonal fairs.
- There is a desire for more government support in terms of infrastructure and financial aid.
- Many fear the loss of authenticity due to “performance tourism,” where traditions are modified to suit external tastes.

Interestingly, younger villagers expressed both excitement and scepticism. While some view tourism as a chance for economic upliftment, others worry that their culture may be diluted or misrepresented.

Folk traditions in Ajodhya Hills exist at the intersection of performance, memory, and livelihood. They are embodied archives, constantly negotiating between continuity and change. Drawing upon folklorist Richard Bauman's theory of performance, we can interpret Chhau not merely as entertainment but as a communicative act—an assertion of identity, heritage, and resistance.

From a tourism studies perspective, this region presents a classic case of rural cultural tourism, where tradition is both commodified and revalorized. The challenge lies in preventing folkloric practices from being “frozen” into spectacles, stripping them of context and meaning.

Traditional Mud Brick Houses of Ajodhya Hills, Purulia

During the field survey in the Ajodhya Hills region of Purulia, I was mesmerized by the vernacular architecture of the tribal and rural communities inhabiting the area. One of the most striking features observed across the villages—especially in and around Baghmundi, Mukhosh Gram—was the prevalence of traditional mud brick houses, which form an integral part of the region's indigenous architectural and cultural identity. These houses are primarily constructed using locally sourced materials—a combination of sun-dried mud bricks, bamboo, straw, and occasionally stone. The mud used in construction is often mixed with straw or cow dung to improve its binding capacity and durability. Roofs are typically sloped and covered with thatch or clay tiles, allowing rainwater to drain easily during the monsoon season. The use of natural materials provides thermal insulation, keeping the interiors cool in summer and warm in winter—an adaptation well-suited to the local climate. These dwellings are not merely residential structures but are cultural spaces that reflect the community's relationship with the land, ecology, and ancestry. They serve as repositories of intangible heritage, offering insights into indigenous knowledge systems, gendered spaces within households, and the transmission of craftsmanship across generations. In conclusion, the mud brick houses of Ajodhya Hills are emblematic of the region's living heritage—structures that are at once functional, symbolic, and culturally rich. Their preservation is vital not only for the sake of architectural diversity but also for maintaining the socio-cultural continuity of the indigenous communities of Purulia.



Image: 13 (In the Image: Mud-Brick houses of Purulia)

CONCLUSION

My field trip to Ajodhya Hills offered valuable insights into the region's living traditions, indigenous architecture, and sacred geography. Through direct observation and interaction, I explored how folklore actively shapes community identity and contributes to sustainable rural tourism. The experience deepened my understanding of field-based research and the urgency of preserving oral traditions amid rapid socio-cultural change. Despite being brief, the trip reinforced the role of folklore in community development and highlighted the importance of respectful, immersive engagement with local knowledge systems.



Image : 14 Scenic Beauty of Purulia