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SUNDAY POST

HERE . NOW

Bali Yatra: Magic of a bygone era

COVER STORY

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Sunday serenity

My ideal Sunday begins peacefully, without alarms, with soft music playing. I might practice a few moves or watch dance videos, then unwind with a walk, explore a new eatery, or enjoy anything that recharges me.

A day to recharge

Sundays are my reset days — a gentle pause amidst a week filled with dance, rehearsals, and classes. I prefer to keep them light, allowing myself time to relax, recharge, and find balance before the new week begins.

Music, coffee & friends

Sometimes, I do freestyle purely for joy, without pressure or choreography. Other times, I unwind with music, coffee, or quality moments spent catching up with friends and family.



ANISHA KHATUN, OP

Quiet move & chills

Whenever I have free time, I watch performances, plan new concepts, or dance freely to music. Off the floor, I enjoy relaxing quietly and watching something light.

For Yash Choudhary, dance is not just a profession — it's emotion, expression, and evolution. What began as a childhood passion blossomed into a full-fledged career marked by dedication and artistry. Trained in diverse dance styles and skilled in choreography, Yash has collaborated with renowned artistes and inspired many through his performances and teaching. As the founder of Yash Dance Company, he continues to nurture talent, helping others discover confidence and joy through dance. the IIDC Hip Hop Champion in 2024, Yash creativity, discipline, and the relentless of artistic excellence

Exploring beyond dance

I love exploring diverse dance styles and crafting choreography that blends emotion with movement. Beyond dance, I enjoy soulful music, journaling, and spending time with people who spark my creative inspiration.



WhatsApp This Week

Only on Sunday POST!

Send in your most interesting WhatsApp messages and memes at: features.orissapost@gmail.com
And we will publish the best ones

THE BEST MEMES OF THIS ISSUE

At my job, I have 500 people under me. I'm a security guard at a cemetery.

Stalking is when two people go for a long romantic walk together but only one of them knows it.

I hate cocaine dealers. Always sticking their business into other people's noses.

Zebras are just horses that escaped from prison.

Future of Bhubaneswar

Sir, This refers to the cover story "Bhubaneswar at a crossroads" ahead of Word Cities Day in last week's Sunday POST. Bhubaneswar, once a quiet temple town, now races to stay ahead of its own shadow. Glass towers shoot up beside narrow 1950s lanes; SUVs crawl where cows once strolled. A ring road, metro rail and airport expansion promise speed, yet approvals outpace drains, buses and water lines. Floor Area Ration doubled overnight, letting builders stack twenty floors where four stood before; new flats sell fast while sewage spills into old creeks. Cyclones blow hotter summers and flash floods through tree-less wards, but wetlands still shrink under billboards selling "lake-view" villas. Jobs and pride beckon, yet each missed bus, each hour lost in traffic, each dry tap reminds citizens the bill could outrun the boom. If leaders choose short-term gain over long-term care, the city could sink into traffic jams, water shortages, and lost green cover. If they choose balanced growth, Bhubaneswar could still become a model for modern India. At this crossroads, the city must choose: chase glossy headlines or fix lanes, drains, trees and buses first. One road leads to a shiny but strained metropolis; the other, harder, keeps the garden city alive while it grows.

SANJEEV SAHOO, BHUBANESWAR

LETTERS

A word for readers

Sunday post is serving a platter of delectable fare every week, or so we hope. We want readers to interact with us. Feel free to send in your opinions, queries, comments and contributions to

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Bali Yatra: Magic of a bygone era

Bali Yatra is Cuttack's heartbeat, reviving maritime pride and childhood joy. But for most Odias, it's a proud yearly homecoming: river breeze carries ancestral courage, fair lights mirror childhood wonder and hearts swell knowing their culture still sails

ANISHA KHATUN, OP

For the people of Cuttack, Bali Yatra is not just a fair — it is an emotion, a collective celebration of Odisha's glorious past and its vibrant present. Each year, as the cool winds of Kartika Purnima sweep over the Mahanadi, the city awakens in a dazzling spectacle of lights, colours, and joyous fervour. The fairground transforms into a living chronicle of Odisha's illustrious maritime past, where every stall, every aroma, every note of music whispers tales of courage, enterprise, and cultural grandeur.

Walking through the largest open air trade fair of Asia, one feels the heartbeat of a civilisation that dared to sail across distant seas, bringing back not just trade, but the spirit of innovation, artistry, and resilience. The fair is a bridge across time — connecting the exuberance of childhood memories with the pride of heritage, and the present with an ever-evolving cultural legacy. Traditional crafts mingle effortlessly with modern creativity, rituals entwine with celebration, and the air hums with the laughter and excitement of generations.

Bali Yatra is the soul of Cuttack on display — a vibrant affirmation that the city's rich history, colourful culture, and enduring spirit continue to shine through time. It is a festival that stirs the heart, ignites pride, and reminds every visitor that the legacy of Odisha sails triumphantly,

phantly, carried on the shimmering waves of the Mahanadi. With the grand fair on the horizon, Sunday POST reached out to individuals from diverse walks of life who shared what Bali Yatra means to them.

'Bali Yatra is akin to Simon & Garfunkel's Scarborough Fair'

For eminent poet, writer, and academician **Devdas Chhotray**, the grand celebration is not just a fair — it is a tapestry woven with memory, history, culture, and pride.



"Scarborough Fair, the song by Simon & Garfunkel, always reminds me of Bali Yatra," he says with a smile adding "Whenever I listen to that song, images of this larger-than-life fair come rushing back — the lights, the laughter, the aroma of sweets, and the spirit of joy that fills the air." He fondly recalls his childhood memories — the colourful sweets shaped like elephants, horses, and other animals, and the carefree moments spent roaming with friends and siblings. "We shared laughter, food, and endless rides," he reminisces. "Everywhere you turned, there were people — some familiar faces from our neighbourhoods and many strangers — all brought together by the same festive spirit," he recounts.

For the Vice-Chancellor of Ravenshaw University, Bali Yatra stands as a reminder of Odisha's rich maritime legacy — when brave sailors ventured to faraway lands such as Bali, Java, Sumatra, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, carrying with them not only goods but the essence of Odia culture, art, and enterprise. "The fair today continues that tradition of exchange," he observes. "Stalls from different states arrive, bringing their own unique cultures and flavours, adding to the vibrant mosaic that defines Odisha."

Deeply rooted in Cuttack's identity, Chhotray believes Bali Yatra mirrors the city itself — diverse, dynamic, and harmonious. "Just as Cuttack has preserved its colourful culture through time, Bali Yatra too has sustained its identity," he says. "For every Katakia, Bali Yatra is not just a festival — it is a matter of immense pride."

'A place where legacy meets innovations'

Cuttack resident **Pradeep Kumar Das**, a senior journalist and academic, shares a deep emotional bond with Bali Yatra, a festival that, to him, embodies the spirit and soul of Odisha. "Bali Yatra has always held a special place in my heart as an Odia," he begins. "Every year, as the holy month of Kartika comes to an end, a cool breeze sweeps



through the Mahanadi — from Chahata Ghat to Jobra Barrage, with Gadagadia Ghat taking the spotlight. It's during this time that my city, Cuttack, transforms into a living museum of Kalinga's glorious maritime past," he says.

For Das, the festival is not just about celebration, but about remembrance — a vivid reminder of Odisha's seafaring ancestors who once embarked on daring voyages to Bali, Java, Sumatra, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives.





“They didn’t just trade goods,” he notes, “they carried with them the essence of our culture, the spirit of entrepreneurship, courage, and the desire for cultural exchange. Their journeys symbolise the fearless and enterprising nature of our people.”

Reflecting deeply, Das says, “For me, Bali Yatra is more than a festival. It is a mirror in which I search for my identity in the past and my dignity in the future.” To him, the fairgrounds represent both tradition and transformation — a space where Odisha’s legacy meets innovation. “The presence of start-ups and creative entrepreneurs alongside traditional crafts and food stalls is proof that our heritage continues to evolve while staying rooted in its values,” he adds.

As he strolls through the vibrant grounds every year, the sights, sounds, and energy fill him with pride. “Bali Yatra,” Das concludes, “is a reaffirmation that the soul of Odisha still sails proudly over the Mahanadi, navigating the waves of time with faith, history, culture, and courage.”

‘Bali Yatra stands as a symbol of cultural continuity’

Dr. Srimoyee Roy Lal, a respected physiotherapist from Cuttack, shares a deep emotional bond with Bali Yatra, one of Odisha’s grandest and most cherished festivals. For her, this iconic celebration is far more than a fair — it is a journey back in time, a living tribute to the courage, vision, and maritime glory of the ancient Kalinga traders who once set sail to faraway lands.

“Bali Yatra is very close to my heart because it feels like our history comes alive,” she says with affection. “It reminds me of the courage, adventure, and dreams of our ancestors who braved the seas, carrying not just goods but the rich essence of Odia culture.”

Each year, when Dr. Lal visits the bustling fairgrounds along the banks of

the Mahanadi, she is enveloped by a wave of nostalgia and pride. The air filled with folk songs, the soft glow of decorative lights, and the enticing aroma of traditional Odia food together recreate the magic of a bygone era. “It’s as if the river itself whispers stories of our glorious maritime past,” she adds, smiling.

For her, Bali Yatra stands as a symbol of cultural continuity — a bridge that connects the past with the present, keeping alive the spirit of community, tradition, and belonging. It celebrates not just trade and travel, but the resilience and creativity of an entire civilisation. “For me, Bali Yatra isn’t merely a festival. It’s an emotion that fills me with pride and gratitude — a reminder of who we are, where we come from, and the enduring spirit that defines Odisha,” she concludes.

‘It feels like stepping into a time capsule’

For **Pramod Singh**, a corporate job employee from Cuttack, Bali Yatra is not just a festival — it’s an emotion that reconnects him to his roots, no matter how far life takes him. “The moment I step onto the fairgrounds, it feels like stepping into a time capsule,” he says. “The sight of the river, the smell of freshly made sweets, and the energy of the crowd instantly take me back to my childhood.”

Pramod recalls how, as a kid, he would wait eagerly all year for this grand fair. “The fair itself was pure magic to me,” he says with a smile. “From the giant wheels and toy stalls to the rows of handicrafts, food vendors, and cultural performances — everything felt larg-

er than life. The colourful lights reflected on the river, the aroma of street food in the air, and the cheerful noise of people bargaining or laughing created an atmosphere unlike any other. It wasn’t just a fair; it was an experience that filled my young mind with wonder and excitement.”

Now, as an adult, he experiences the festival differently but with the same excitement. “When I visit Bali Yatra today, I see it as a celebration of who we are — resilient, creative, and proud of our heritage. It’s not just about fun or shopping anymore; it’s about feeling connected to generations before us who shaped this identity,” he reflects.

What moves him most is how the festival brings everyone together — families, friends, and even strangers sharing a sense of belonging. “You can feel the pulse of Odisha here — the

mix of tradition and modernity, of nostalgia and progress. It’s amazing how the same fair that fascinated me as a child now inspires me as an adult.”

For Pramod, Bali Yatra represents continuity. “It reminds me that no matter how modern life gets, some traditions still hold us together — like the Mahanadi’s flow, constant yet ever-changing. That’s what makes this fair timeless.”



Future at your fingertips

In 2025, the tech world is buzzing with innovation as some of the most anticipated gadgets have officially launched, transforming how we work, play, and live. From cutting-edge virtual reality headsets to wearable devices that monitor your health in ways never before possible, these new gadgets are redefining the boundaries of technology. Whether you're a gamer, a fitness enthusiast, or someone who simply enjoys the latest in smart devices, 2025 is shaping up to be a year of extraordinary advancements. Here are the top five gadgets that are making waves this year, each bringing something truly unique and exciting to the table.



Samsung Galaxy Ring

The Samsung Galaxy Ring is a sleek, health-focused wearable that tracks everything from heart rate to sleep patterns and even your blood oxygen levels, all while looking like a regular ring. This compact, stylish gadget uses bioimpedance sensors to measure and monitor a wide range of health metrics in real-time. What sets the Galaxy Ring apart is its advanced hydration monitoring — it can detect when you're dehydrated and send you alerts to stay on top of your water intake. Designed for those who want health data at their fingertips without a bulky device, this ring also integrates seamlessly with Samsung's SmartThings ecosystem, allowing for smart home control and tracking.

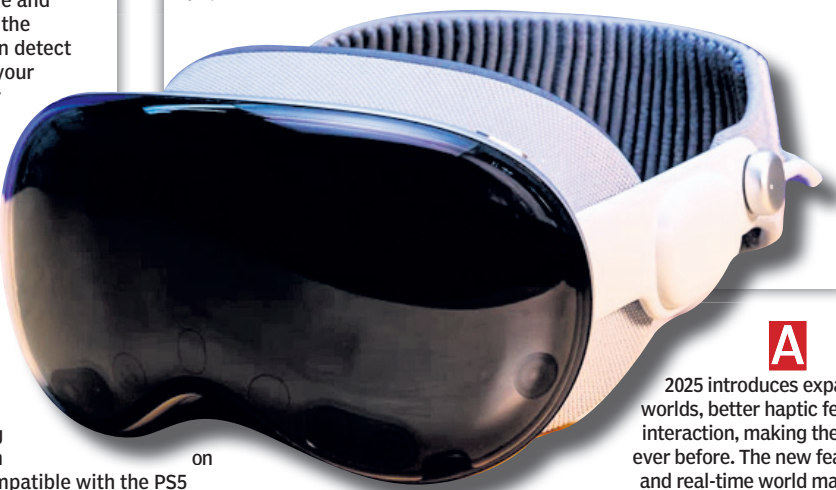


Apple Vision Pro

Apple's Vision Pro is a groundbreaking augmented reality (AR) headset that's set to revolutionize both work and entertainment. Although Apple first announced it in 2023, the 2025 update introduces key upgrades to the software and hardware, including enhanced eye-tracking technology and even more seamless integration with the iOS ecosystem. The headset boasts stunning 4K resolution for each eye, a spatial audio system for immersive sound, and a powerful chip that can run complex AR applications without needing a computer or phone. Its new AR features will allow users to create a digital workspace with virtual screens and interact with objects as if they were real. For entertainment, the Vision Pro enables fully immersive VR experiences while still retaining the ability to interact with the physical world.

Ring Always Home Cam

The Ring Always Home Cam, which originally debuted in previous years, has undergone a 2025 update to include AI-powered facial recognition and a wider flight range. This home security drone now allows for more specific movement patterns and can even follow family members around the house while capturing footage. It's the future of home surveillance, with a dash of autonomy and advanced recognition features.



Sony PlayStation VR2 Sense

Sony's PlayStation VR2 Sense headset has received a major update in 2025 with the introduction of adaptive haptics and eye-tracking features for more immersive gameplay. The new version offers higher resolution, a wider field of view, and more realistic feedback through its redesigned Sense controllers. The eye-tracking technology allows the headset to detect where you are looking and adjust the visual elements accordingly, which will reduce the strain on the hardware while improving the visual fidelity. The 2025 edition is compatible with the PS5 and offers an even more immersive experience, bringing PlayStation gamers into the next level of VR entertainment.

Oculus Quest 3

Although the Oculus Quest 3 originally launched in 2023, its latest update in 2025 introduces expanded interactivity with AI-generated worlds, better haptic feedback, and real-time environmental interaction, making the VR experience more immersive than ever before. The new features, including advanced AI avatars and real-time world mapping, bring users deeper into virtual environments, whether for gaming, work, or socializing.



Sara's mental filter

Sara Ali Khan has learned to handle life in the spotlight with grace, even as constant trolling and criticism come her way. The actress admits that dealing with public judgment isn't easy, especially when comments turn personal. However, over time, she has developed what she calls a "mental filter" to focus on what truly matters. "Constructive criticism helps me grow, learn, and improve. But when it feels like the intention is to tear me down, I try not to let it in," says Sara, adding that staying connected to her values, family, and close circle keeps her grounded.

Despite her positive public persona, Sara acknowledges that there are days when things get overwhelming. "As a human, some days things affect me more than I'd like, and

that's okay. I go back to my work, family, and friends to stay real," she shares. Known for her infectious energy, the *Kedarnath* actress also embraces her emotional side. "I let myself have a mini-drama moment, vent to my diary or friends, binge a comfort show, and then bounce back," she laughs. For Sara, accepting both highs and lows is key — because, as she puts it, "the happy moments feel sweeter when you don't bottle up your emotions."

AGENCIES



THAMMA'S SUCCESS

Rashmika on her character's journey

Actress and National crush Rashmika Mandanna, who is currently riding high on the success of her latest release *Thamma*, has spoken about stepping into the layered world and the human connection in her character's journey.

Speaking about finding the human connection in her character Tadaka's journey, Rashmika told this news agency: "I've realised Tadaka is just picking up emotions through the journey because it's been like so many years that she's been alive, but she's also been in the forest. So for her, like human emotions, humans are, you know, a fascinating species." "Like every time they cry, she's just wondering how they're crying.

Every time they laugh, she's just wondering, 'oh, this is how you smile'.

"And she's trying to replicate that from Alok and things like that. Those are the minute details that I had worked on because, you know, I basically was like, okay, I'm an animal."

She added: "If I were turned into a human, this is what I'd have to do. So that's how I saw it. That's how I sort of performed it. And that's why she can't cry. Like she doesn't know how to cry. So all that she can do is scream. And screaming is her superpower. Like, so yeah, we've just sort of built around what we could."

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Emraan stands for women's right

Emraan Hashmi is gearing up for his next film, *Haq*, a powerful legal drama inspired by the landmark Shah Bano case. The film features Emraan as a reputed lawyer whose estranged wife takes him to court seeking maintenance, sparking a deeper conversation about women's rights and equality. Directed by Suparn S Varma, *Haq* also stars Yami Gautam as the wife, with Vartika Singh, Danish Husain, Sheeba Chadha, and Aseem Hattangady in key roles.

Speaking about the film, Emraan said it's highly relevant in today's times. "It's a story about a woman's voice, equality, and dignity. These are universal themes — not limited to one community. The film encourages men to introspect on the biases ingrained in a patriarchal society," he explained. He further emphasised that *Haq* is "pro-women," not against religion or group. "We're not judging anyone or pointing fingers. We've shown the story in an unbiased way and left it to the audience to decide," he added.



Rooted in the real-life 1978 Shah Bano case — a milestone in the fight for Muslim women's rights — *Haq* explores justice, faith, and fairness. Produced by Vineet Jain and Harman Baweja, the film releases in theatres November 7.

AGENCIES

Bini Samal's special show on Baliyatra



A special screen presentation on Baliyatra is set to bring alive the golden maritime legacy of ancient Kalinga here at Utkal Mandap, November 5. The show, inspired by the celebrated Sadhabas—the seafaring merchants who carried Odisha's culture across oceans—promises to be a rich blend of history, art, and emotion.

Conceptualised, written, and musically composed by Guru Chandrabhanu Satapathy, the show is a tribute to state's timeless maritime spirit. Directed by Bini Samal and produced under the banner of Sai Shraddha Productions, the special show aims to revive the forgotten tales of the state's glorious past and present them to audiences both in India and abroad.

The show's ensemble cast includes Ashrumochan Mohanty, Sritam Das, Sukanta Rath, Akhil Pattanayak, Saheb Singh, Soham, Subhashis, Shakti Baral, Shambhu Khuntia, Milu, Hiteisha Bag, Loverin Khan, Soumya Sucharita Sahu, Sangeeta Behera, Mamali Sahu, Lipsa Maharana, and Priyanka Sahu. The choreography is being designed by noted artist Bobby Islam.

Shooting for the show was completed at the scenic locales of Parikud and Bhingarapur. PNN

Sir set to hit theatres Nov 14



The Odia film industry is gearing up for the release of *Sir*, a much-anticipated drama from Kamal Cine Productions, November 14. Featuring an ensemble cast including Samaresh Routray, Abhishek Rath, Arlin Ankita, Dipanwit Das Mohapatra, and Ashrumochan Mohanty, the film delves into the intricate and emotional relationship between a teacher and his two students.

Directed by Keshab Mallick and both written and produced by Kamal Lochan Sahoo, *Sir* promises to blend strong storytelling with heartfelt performances. Amara Music has acquired the audio rights, ensuring a soulful musical experience for audiences.

The film is expected to resonate with viewers through its powerful narrative and emotional depth.

PNN

Tiny faces, big risks



SHAHNAZ HUSAIN

Makeup might be fun and playful, but there could be some side effects of cosmetics on kids. These aren't just physical but also emotional and psychological

Is your little one often digging through your makeup bag or reaching for your lipstick? You're not alone.

Chances are your child is being exposed online, on social media, YouTube videos to endless cosmetic products that promote beauty or other kinds of visual transformation. The majority of bullying in school and public places is related to physical appearance. Teasing about being overweight or not pretty enough has lasting and detrimental effects on kids.

Skincare routines have become a big focus nowadays for teens as young as 10 years old.

Whether it's smearing blush across their cheeks or experimenting with eyeshadow like its finger paint, kids are naturally drawn to the colourful world of makeup.

Both boys and girls often face body image issues, leading to a belief that natural appearance isn't good enough.

But here's the problem - Makeup might be fun and playful, but there could be some side effects of makeup on kids. These aren't just physical but also emotional and psychological. Traditional beauty products are loaded with chemicals, synthetic dyes, and mica, which may not be safe for kids' sensitive, delicate skin.

More problematic is children doing "mimicry makeup", or often trying their mother's makeup. Such use could not only cause acne, dry skin, and itching-related issues, but also viral infections like herpes or bacterial infections.

Children are prone to atopic dermatitis. If they pick

their parents' make-up and use it on their skin, they have a high chance of developing dermatitis.

Children's sensitive skin makes them prone to allergic reactions, irritations, and long-term damage from chemicals like parabens and phthalates.

Many products have what we call "active" ingredients — like salicylic acid, retinols, peptides, which are easily absorbed by teen thin skin since absorption rate in children is at least 10 per cent higher than compared of adults due to their faster metabolism. It is more permeable and can therefore absorb chemical substances more easily.

These ingredients can cause microtrauma and irritant dermatitis, damaging the skin barrier and making it more susceptible to irritation and infection.

Simply applying these makeup products to the skin of your kids will make them vulnerable to toxic materials. With constant use, makeup products can cause dryness, itchiness, redness and irritation to the skin. It can permanently harm the skin's barrier and structure of the skin, causing it to be more sensitive to even water.

Exposure to makeup products has led to signs of premature ageing, dry and dull hair and skin due to the presence of chemicals in the cosmetics and exposure to environmental toxins. The long-term psychological effects, such as anxiety and depression, stemming from an obsession with appearance, are profound and troubling. The presence of retinols in beauty products

can sometimes cause retinoid dermatitis, a type of scaly rash. Additionally, retinols can make you susceptible to sunburn and sun damage.

The abuse of beauty products in girls can alter both their emotional well-being and neuronal development, while also causing anxiety or eating disorders.

Exposure to chemicals such as parabens, phenols, and phthalates in cosmetics was directly linked to the early onset of puberty among girls. Girls with higher levels of parabens in their bodies attained puberty earlier.

Earlier puberty in girls affects their behaviour as teenagers and makes them more prone to mental health issues. More importantly, the early onset of puberty increases breast and ovarian cancer risk in these girls in the long term.

The use of creams and serums — useful for preventing ageing — can lead the skin to develop dermatological pathologies (such as dermatitis, skin irritations, or even sun intolerance) among teens.

Early use of makeup can disrupt hormones, leading to growth, developmental, and reproductive issues.

Applying kajal on infant eyes has been a ritual in various parts of the country. However, kajal contains lead, which causes permanent multiple organ system damage in children due to lead toxicity. Similarly, Cadmium and lead in lipsticks can be ingested and cause disorders in the digestive tract. Young girls may feel pressured to conform to societal standards, fostering a culture of comparison and self-doubt. The pursuit of perfection can contribute to depression, anxiety, and body dysmorphism, particularly during the vulnerable teen years.

Regular use of make-up, sometimes in thick layers, can lead to problems of 'comedogenicity'—that is, clogged pores that cause blackheads and what is known as 'cosmetic acne.'

The author is an internationally famous beauty expert and is called the herbal queen of India



The 16th-century Hungarian noblewoman is known as the Blood Countess after being accused of killing over 600 young women. Though she was never convicted of these crimes, some say she bathed in her victims' blood to stay young. These gruesome and grisly tales continue to haunt Báthory's legacy

Cachtice Castle:
Historic horror house

Statue of Elizabeth Bathory in Slovakia

Elizabeth Bathory: The Blood Countess

room in her own castle. Bricks were placed over the windows, leaving only a slit for food. She lived there for four years, until her death in 1614. Her lands were divided, and the king's debt disappeared.

Writers soon added colorful details: midnight blood baths, black magic robes, a cage shaped like a star. These images sold books and plays, but they were not written by anyone who had seen the castle. The number 650 grew with each retelling, like a fish story that gets bigger each time it is told.

Truth or trap?

Today historians ask hard questions. Where are the 650 bodies? No mass grave has ever been found. Most witness statements were second-hand: "My neighbor said her cousin saw a dead girl." The only written list of 650 names was reported by one frightened servant, and the paper itself vanished. Modern scholars note that Elizabeth was rich, single, and powerful—dangerous in a world run by men. Canceling her debt and taking her land gave both king and cousin Thurzó a strong motive to believe the worst.

Still, some clues suggest cruelty did happen. A priest wrote about beaten servants years before the trial. A girl named Anna showed burn marks on her arm and received money and a farm—proof something violent occurred. Perhaps Elizabeth hurt dozens of servants, a serious crime then, but not the fairy-tale monster later painted.

The lesson

The lesson of the Blood Countess is clear: when fear, money, and power mix, truth can be the first prisoner. The castle on the hill is now a ruin visited by tourists hunting ghosts. They pose for photos and buy red wine labeled "Elizabeth's Blood." Yet the real story is quieter: a powerful woman hated or feared by many, trapped by rumors, and sealed behind bricks while the number 650 echoed through the centuries—impossible to prove, and impossible to forget.

OP DESK

looked perfect.

But inside the great stone walls of Cachtice Castle, whispers began. Servants said the countess liked to hurt people. A priest wrote that young girls who went to work in the castle sometimes vanished. In those days nobles could beat peasants without fear of police, so few questions were asked—at first.

List that shocked a kingdom

In 1609 the king of Hungary, Matthias, heard fresh rumors. Some said girls from good families, not just peasants, were disappearing. The king owed Elizabeth a large sum of money. If she were found guilty of crimes, her lands could be seized and the debt wiped away. He sent his adviser, Count György Thurzó, to investigate.

On a cold December night in 1610, Thurzó and his soldiers rode up the hill to Cachtice. They broke open doors and found one girl dead and another tied up. Elizabeth's servants were arrested. Under torture, they told wild stories: the countess beat girls, stuck them with needles, poured cold water on them in winter, and even drank or bathed in their blood to stay young. A servant girl named Susannah claimed she had seen a private book in which Elizabeth herself wrote the number 650—the total of her victims. The paper was never shown in court, but the figure spread across Europe. People started calling Elizabeth the "Blood Countess."

Walling up the Countess

Because Elizabeth was noble, she could not be tried in public. Instead, in 1611, only her helpers faced a court. Three servants were found guilty and executed: their fingers pulled off with hot irons before they were burned alive. Elizabeth was locked inside a small

On a wind-scoured hill above the vineyards stand the broken teeth of Cachtice Castle in Slovakia where four centuries ago a noblewoman was bricked into a suite of rooms and left to die. Tourists come for the sunset and the ghost-story selfies, yet few realize that the horror they commemorate is itself a prisoner of history—half folklore, half political indictment, and wholly impossible to verify.

Elizabeth Báthory was born in Hungary in 1560. Her family owned castles, forests, and whole villages. She could read Latin, ride horses like a soldier, and wear silk every day if she wished. At 15 she married Count Ferenc Nádasdy, a rich war hero. While her husband fought the Turks, Elizabeth ran huge estates and looked after hundreds of servants. From the outside, her life