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Siruwa as Site of Rajbanshi Identity

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Letter of Recommendation

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Declaration

I hereby declare to the best of my knowledge that this thesis is original; no part of it has been submitted earlier for the candidature of research degree to any university.

Badri Narayan Rajbanshi

June 2024

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the significance of *Siruwa*, a traditional festival, in the construction and reinforcement of Rajbanshi identity in Nepal. The Rajbanshi community, an indigenous ethnic group primarily residing in the south-eastern Terai districts, celebrates this festival with unique cultural practices that are integral to their social and cultural fabric. By examining the historical roots, rituals, and contemporary adaptations of *Siruwa*, this study aims to understand how this festival serves as a dynamic platform for expressing and preserving Rajbanshi identity. Through participant observation and interviews, the dissertation investigates the ways in which *Siruwa* functions as a site of cultural continuity and change, reflecting broader themes of ethnicity, heritage, and identity politics from the perspective of performance developed by Richard Schechner, Victor Turner, Clifford Geertz, Richard Bauman and Diana Taylor . The findings highlight the resilience of the Rajbanshi community in maintaining their cultural distinctiveness amidst external influences and socio-political changes. This research contributes to the broader discourse on indigenous identity and cultural preservation in Nepal, offering insights into the complexities of cultural practices as mechanisms for sustaining identity in a rapidly changing world.

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Chapter I

Unveiling Rajbanshi Identity through *Siruwa*

Identity is not inherent but rather derived from performance, which is a crucial aspect of socio-cultural discourse. Our existence is based on our socio-cultural identities, which are constructed through a performance. The concept of identity has remained a topic of interest in the fields of social sciences and humanities and it is acknowledged as an important driving force in human activities. However, identity of the Rajbanshi people, in its various conceptual nuances has not yet been extensively explored within festival research. Hence, this dissertation explores how *Siruwa* festival of Rajbanshi people influences individual and social identities; what this influence on identities means for the people involved and how this relates to community identities.

The Rajbanshi community, an indigenous ethnic group predominantly residing in the Terai districts (especially Jhapa, Morang and Sunsari) of Nepal, has a rich cultural heritage that is both vibrant and resilient. Among the various cultural practices that define the Rajbanshi identity, *Siruwa*, which is a traditional festival celebrated by the Rajbanshis with much fervor, stands out as a significant marker of their social and cultural life. This dissertation delves into the multifaceted role of this festival in the construction and reinforcement of Rajbanshi identity, examining how this festival functions as a dynamic site of cultural expression, continuity, and adaptation.

Siruwa is celebrated for three days to honour the start of the Nepali New Year in the spring (Baishakh). It is characterized by a series of rituals and festivities that encapsulate the Rajbanshi way of life. The rituals, steeped in historical and spiritual significance, provide a lens through which we can understand the broader cultural dynamics of the Rajbanshi people. The festival is not merely a celebration; it is also a reaffirmation of the Rajbanshi identity, a demonstration of their unique cultural traditions, and a means of passing down heritage from

one generation to the next. This event is different from others in Nepal because of its distinctive celebration style. This festival of the Rajbanshi people is a vibrant cultural event that encapsulates the essence of their hidden identity. Though it is celebrated by other Hindu indigenous communities like Tharu, Chaudhary, Majhi, Gangai and Tajpuria with different names, the way the Rajbanshis celebrate it, is different in ritual performances and thus make it different from other communities, according to Pani Lal Rajbanshi. Rajbanshis exchange joys, emotions and greetings by splashing of water, mud and coloured powder as the symbol of washing away all that is considered bad, and different performances like stage cultural programmes, dancing, singing of folk songs (Ghatosari), hunting, fishing, shamans are organized. With the specific goal of showcasing and experiencing a unique Rajbanshi identity, it sets up a communicative environment for expressions of identity and cultural togetherness. *Siruwa*, a performing art form, has long played a significant role in Rajbanshi culture and communal life. It is best described as a festive occasion that is culturally and historically ingrained in the culture of the community and serves as hubs for significant social interaction.

Festivals have a significant role in promoting social contact and bolstering a group's identity by uniting members. According to Clifford Geertz, "Festivals strengthen the identity of a group by bringing it together and telling a story" (448). He elucidates the significance of cultural practices, recognizing festivals as intricate performances that convey crucial information about a society's identity, social structures, and worldview. Celebrated in April (Baishakh in Hindu calendar), it marks the onset of the New Year and is deeply rooted in the Rajbanshi's ancient traditions. The festival's rituals, customs, and ceremonies, such as specific prayers and offerings, have been meticulously passed down through generations, preserving the cultural heritage of the Rajbanshi community. Traditional music and dance performed

during *Siruwa* are not merely for entertainment but also serve as a medium to convey stories, values, and historical narratives, ensuring the continuity of their cultural legacy.

Siruwa offers a chance to witness the occasions and cultural communication system that are communicated through semiotically intricate performance activities and a distinctive celebration style that sets it apart from other Nepalese societies. Beverly Joyce Stoeltje argues that festivals are vital expressions of cultural identity and social cohesion within communities. She asserts that festivals provide a platform for communities to engage in rituals and symbolic activities that reinforce their shared values and traditions. According to Stoeltje, "festivals are occasions when a society's norms and values are enacted and reaffirmed, offering a space where collective identity is both celebrated and redefined" (261). This perspective highlights the role of festivals in maintaining cultural continuity and adapting to changing social dynamics. It holds a significant place in the cultural calendar of the Rajbanshi people, celebrated fervently across the Terai region of Nepal and various states in India like West Bengal, Assam, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh. Typically falling in the month of Baishakh (April-May), this festival marks the advent of the monsoon season, which is crucial for agrarian communities like the Rajbanshi. It is primarily observed in rural areas where the Rajbanshi community resides, often in villages and towns nestled amidst lush agricultural landscapes.

During *Siruwa*, a series of rituals and activities are performed, deeply rooted in agrarian traditions and spiritual beliefs. Central to the festival is the worship of the *Siruwa* plant (*Saccharum spontaneum*), revered as sacred by the Rajbanshi people. Special prayers and rituals are conducted to honor the *Siruwa* plant, symbolizing the intrinsic connection between nature and human sustenance. Alongside these rituals, vibrant cultural performances take center stage, featuring traditional dances, folk songs, and theatrical presentations. These

cultural expressions not only celebrate the community's rich heritage but also serve as a means of fostering social cohesion and identity.

Community participation is a cornerstone of this festival, highlighting the Rajbanshi's strong sense of unity and collective identity. The festival brings together all members of the community, reinforcing social bonds and fostering a sense of belonging. Elders play a pivotal role in guiding the younger generation through traditional practices, underscoring the community's respect for age and wisdom. This collective celebration strengthens community cohesion and emphasizes the importance of social structure within Rajbanshi society.

Spiritual beliefs and practices are integral to the *Siruwa* festival, with rituals dedicated to deities and ancestors reflecting the Rajbanshi's animistic and syncretic religious beliefs. These practices blend elements of Hinduism, local deities, and ancestor worship, providing a unique spiritual identity. The festival's rituals are laden with symbolism, representing themes of purification, renewal, and prosperity, which are central to the Rajbanshi worldview and their spiritual practices. Moreover, this festival serves as an assertion of the Rajbanshi's cultural identity, especially significant in a region where they may be a minority. By celebrating it, the Rajbanshi people preserve their unique cultural heritage. The festival becomes a platform for expressing their hidden narratives, history, struggles, and aspirations, which are often marginalized in mainstream cultural discourse.

Finally, *Siruwa* underscores the Rajbanshi people's intrinsic connection to nature. Timed to coincide with the agricultural calendar, it celebrates the end of the harvest season and the beginning of a new cycle, highlighting the community's dependence on farming. The rituals often emphasize respect for nature and the environment, reflecting an eco-centric worldview that is a crucial aspect of the Rajbanshi identity. Thus, the *Siruwa* festival is a multifaceted expression of the Rajbanshi's hidden identity, encompassing cultural heritage, social structure, spiritual beliefs, and a profound connection to nature. As a performative art,

for the Rajbanshi people, *Siruwa* has always played a significant role in their culture and way of life. In order to illustrate and experience a specific identity of the Rajbanshis, it therefore sets up a communication environment for expressions of identity and cultural togetherness.

In recent years, the Rajbanshi community has faced various challenges, including socio-economic changes, migration, and external cultural influences, which have threatened the preservation of their cultural practices. Despite these challenges, *Siruwa* has remained a steadfast symbol of Rajbanshi identity, adapting to changing times while retaining its core essence. This resilience underscores the importance of *Siruwa* as more than just a cultural event; it is a pivotal element in the identity politics of the Rajbanshi community.

This dissertation employs an approach to explore the significance of *Siruwa* in the Rajbanshi community. Through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and analysis of historical texts, the study aims to uncover the layers of meaning embedded in the festival and its role in the everyday lives of the Rajbanshi people. By situating *Siruwa* within the broader context of ethnicity, heritage, and identity formation, this research seeks to contribute to the understanding of how Rajbanshis navigate and negotiate their cultural identities in a rapidly changing world.

In essence, this dissertation posits that *Siruwa* is not just a festival but a vital site of cultural and identity preservation for the Rajbanshi people. It is through the celebration of *Siruwa* that the Rajbanshi community asserts its cultural distinctiveness, reaffirms its historical roots, and navigates the complexities of modernity. The study aims to illuminate the intricate relationship between cultural practices and identity formation, offering insights into the ways in which traditional festivals can serve as powerful vehicles for sustaining identity.

Background of the Study

The *Siruwa* festival holds significant cultural and historical importance among the Rajbanshi people, an indigenous community predominantly found in the south-eastern terai region of Nepal and parts of India. Historically, the Rajbanshi community has long been staying, contributing to the rich tapestry of Nepal's ethnic diversity. The festival itself is celebrated annually, serving as a vital occasion for community gathering, religious rituals, and cultural performances. It holds deep symbolic meanings, often intertwined with ancestral worship, and communal feasting, all of which reflect the community's spiritual beliefs and social values. Despite its cultural richness, the *Siruwa* festival faces contemporary challenges stemming from globalization, urbanization, and socio-economic transformations, which potentially impact its continuity and traditional practices. Thus, studying the *Siruwa* festival as a site of Rajbanshi identity not only sheds light on the community's cultural heritage and resilience but also provides insights into how ethnic identities are negotiated, preserved, and expressed amidst changing societal landscapes. This background underscores the significance of examining the festival within its broader socio-cultural and historical contexts, aiming to contribute to a deeper understanding of ethnic identity dynamics and cultural preservation practices among indigenous communities like the Rajbanshi.

Origin of Rajbanshis

The Rajbanshi people are an ethnic group with a rich historical lineage and a vibrant cultural identity. According to the 2011 Nepal census, the Rajbanshi population was recorded 129,829 individuals. They form a significant portion of the population in these districts, contributing to the region's cultural and demographic diversity.

There are numerous distinct groups within the Rajbanshi indigenous community, each with its own language and culture. Shyam Adhikari and Tamla Ukyab discuss the origins of the Rajbanshi, noting that “The Rajbanshi people were formerly known as Koch or Koche. It

is believed that the Koche were among the first people to live in the eastern Terai” (51).

Rajesh Gautam explains that “Kichak, a ruler of the Koche, sided with the Kauravas before being killed by Bhimsen, and a spot of pilgrimage in Jhapa is believed to be his grave”(177).

The Koche people lived in a massive kingdom throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, which was established by their extremely strong monarch, Hajo. Eventually, this kingdom encompassed the western region of Assam, India, as well as the eastern half of the Morang district. Koch Bihar, which is still located in northeastern India, was founded as the capital by Bisu, Hajo's grandson. “Bisu was bestowed with the title of Rajbanshi by the local Brahmins during his reign. Later, this title was adopted as the people's name and their language” (176-77). Among the oldest members in their community are the original Koch who are Rajbanshi now. Dor Bahadur Bista discusses, “The Hindu epic *Mahabharata* that dates over three millennia, mentions Koch chiefs fighting on the Kurukshetra battlefield during the *Mahabharata* era” (89). Rajesh Gautam mentions that “The original Koche people split out into many religiously-based factions over time. The Rajbanshis are now divided into three primary social groups as a result. These are the Koch, the Muslim Rajbanshi, and the Hindu Rajbanshi. The Rajbanshi community in Nepal is predominantly Hindu” (177).

In relation to the Rajbanshis' ancestry, there is another legend. Drona Upadhyay says that “The Chhetri rulers and their people fled India to avoid certain death when Parshuram began killing the Chhetria dynasty as his father's revenge. Being Chhetries, the Rajbanshis' own ancestors ran away and took up residence in the Morang and Jhapa forests of Nepal by hiding”(56). However, the British assimilated and overthrew them at that point in India, while in the context of Nepal, King Prithvi Narayan Shah annexed the Rajbanshis' kingdom especially Jhapa and Morang their territories in 1774 into a unified Nepal state and thus they were Nepalised.

Even though the Rajbanshis are an indigenous ethnic group living in eastern Terai, their roots lie in the Indian states of Assam, Bengal, and Bihar. The majority of the Rajbanshis are still known to have resided in India's Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Nagaland, and Manipur, according to Keshav Kumar Shrestha. They belong to one of South Asia's oldest indigenous ethnic groups. Historians and academics hold varying opinions regarding the Koch Rajbanshis' origins. However, as the words Koch and Rajbanshi are used interchangeably in the current study, it would be helpful to briefly address this before moving on to the explanation of the genesis of Koch Rajbanshi's identity. Regarding the subject of whether the terms Rajbanshi and Koch are synonymous or not, Swaraj Basu provides a clear picture in her book, *Dynamics of A Caste Movement: The Rajbanshis of North Bengal*. She has presented two main points of contention on the origins of the Rajbanshis: one is made by colonial official-cum-ethnographers, who are generally regarded as orientalist, and the other is made by publicists from the Rajbanshi caste (27). The Rajbanshis were portrayed in colonial literature as a purified group of "Koch" who had abandoned their own customs and social mores in favour of Hindu culture, tradition, and caste rules. B.H. Hodgson, W.W. Hunter, and Herbert Risley are among the colonial writers who have expressed the opinion that the Rajbanshis were a purified group of Koch who adopted Hindu culture and social norms during the reign of Viswa Singha who established the powerful Koch kingdom in the beginning of sixteenth century. But Edward Gait, another writer from the colonial era, expressed a somewhat different opinion. He claims that the Rajbanshis of Rangpur came from a completely different source and did not resemble the Koches based on the 1901 census report. Gait believes that even though there were numerous instances of racial mixing, the Rajbanshis were actually members of a Dravidian tribe. According to Swaraj Basu, "The people who are now known as Rajbanshi are either pure Koches with notably Mongoloid

characteristics in Jalpaiguri, Koch Bihar, or a hybrid variety where the Koch element normally predominates in Goalpara, Assam” (28).

Similar to the colonial writers' interpretations above, British ethnographers and authorities held similar ideas. However, the viewpoints expressed by regional authors diverged. They have stated that the Rajbanshis are superior to the Koches and that they are separate from them. Numerous indigenous writers, including Monomohan Roy, Hara Kishor Adhikari, Upendranath Barman, Manbhola Barman, and others, have expressed similar opinions in their writings. Monomohan Roy has maintained that there is no doubt that the Rajbanshis and the Koches descended from completely different castes. The Rajbanshis, who had more ceremonial purity than the Koches, had a distinctly higher social rank than the Koches. With the exception of the northern region that borders Kooch Behar, the majority of the Rajbanshis of Rangpur had physically distinctive "Dravidian" traits. The Koches had a strongly Mongoloid physiognomy (29). Other indigenous literatures have made arguments that are nearly identical to those of Monomohan Roy, namely that the terms "Koch" and "Rajbanshi" are not interchangeable and that the term Rajbanshi predates the early sixteenth-century conversion of the Koch King, Viswa Singha, to Hinduism. The topic of whether the Rajbanshis were mixed-race people or the descendants of the Koches remains a conundrum for some modern studies as well. In many areas of North Bengal, debates regarding the appropriate use of the terms "Koch" and "Rajbanshi" separately are still going strong. However, in the instance of Assam at this time, the majority of recent research on Koch Rajbanshis and the majority of Koch Rajbanshi civic associations that are currently in existence have been seen to use both terms together and to treat as a single community. Examples of organisations that use both acronyms interchangeably are "All Assam Koch Rajbanshi Sanmilani" (AAKRS), "All Koch Rajbanshi Students' Union" (AKRSU), "Koch Rajbanshi Sahitya Sabha," and several others (28), as mentioned by Arun Jyoti Das.

There is still debate on the Koch Rajbanshi's origins. According to Dwijendra Nath, “There is disagreement on the Koches' ethnic origins, despite the consensus that they comprise the Maches, Kacharies, Bodos, Rajvamsis, Garos, etc”(2). Renowned scholar Ambika Charan Choudhury, who is a member of the Koch Rajbanshi community, contends that the term "Koch" predates both the Puranas and the Tantras, which were written in India by the Aryans as derogatory references to their rivals. He claims, “the word ‘Koch‘ came down with these people when they came downwards from North China or Siberia region after struggling hard against natural odds and calamities in addition to the opposition from the rival groups in which most of the male members of Koches were killed in their way by fighting” (61). He further writes, “[T]his is partly evident from a folk song now occasionally sung by the Koch Rabhas, which is indicative as to their origin and development” (61).

The colonial scholar Edward Gait claimed that the word Koch is ambiguous. He claims that in Assam proper, it has come to refer to a caste of Hindus into which are accepted converts from among the Kachari, Lalung, Mikir, and other tribes. He goes on to claim that the Purans and Tantras commonly refer to the Koches as "Kuvacha." According to Gait, “The historian of Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khilji's invasion at the end of the twelfth century, ‘the Koch, Mech, and Tharu Tribes' characteristics were similar to those of a Southern Siberian tribe” (46). Based on the aforementioned claim made by Das, “It is undeniable that some Mongolian ‘tribes’, particularly the Kacharis (Bodo), have entered the ranks of Koch or Rajbanshi after converting to Hinduism, even though the majority of Koch Rajbanshis are not other converted tribes to Koch Rajbanshi rank”(29). George Greirson, the colonial scholar, made a similar argument. He noted that “Although the ‘Koches’ and ‘Kocheries’ belong to the same ethnic group, the Kocheries who reside in Nowgong, Goalpara, Koch Bihar, and other nearby nations are, in any case, the actual Koches” (60).

According to Nalini Ranjan Ray, a modern Koch Rajbanshi scholar, the Rajbanshi's ancestors settled in the plains and semi-hilly regions of modern-day North Bengal, Assam, and their surrounding areas. They adopted Hinduism after adopting Aryan civilization. Hinduism signified the way of life of the civilized people, adhering to the Vedic ceremonies and adopting the Maithili Apabhramsa language, which was "Sanskritized" by the Aryan civilization that arrived in this region of ancient India. He penned:

The people of this community have the features mixed up with all four human streams i.e. Austral-Asiatic or 'Adivasi', Dravidian, Mongoloid and Aryan, where the Mongoloid features like short height, fair complexion and having flat nose are predominant. Some of them can be seen as tall, fair and having sharp nose like people of north or midland Indians, who trace their origin in Aryan culture; some of them can be seen as far as Aryan people and at the same time some are as dark complexion as Adivasis or Dravidians. This region was like the eastern gateway of India or a meeting place where all four human streams got amalgamated, which gave birth to new 'Sanskritised' culture of the northeastern part of India. (9-10)

To shed more light on the Koches' racial origins, it is vital to cite additional assertions made by other academics. According to Herbert Hope Risley, the Koches are a significant Dravidian tribe from northeastern and eastern Bengal who are without a doubt "non-Aryan and non-Hindu," and among whom there is reason to believe some admixture of Mongolian blood" (quoted in Nath 2). They are also called "the most conspicuously Dravidian race in Bengal" by Oldham (491). Gait contends that the ambiguity around the name "Rajbanshi" appears to be the source of the disparity in opinions. According to him, the Rajbanshi originally alluded to a completely different Dravidian-affinity group. However, it was later embraced by the Koches living west of the Monas River, who, upon converting to Hinduism, took on the caste name of the largest Hindu population in their area. According to Gait, the

people who are now known as Rajbanshi from Jalpaiguri, Koch Bihar, and Goalpara are either mixed breeds in which the Mongoloid element typically predominates or pure Koches who, despite being dark, show a decidedly Mongoloid physiognomy (46-47).

In conclusion, the disputes over the Koches' origin according to Debabrata Nath, the Koches are of Mongoloid descent, with their ancestral home likely in Tibet in the Himalayas. From there, they migrated into India, most likely along the Teesta and Dharla rivers. They initially settled in northern Bengal before progressively moving eastward and westward, where they interacted with the Dravidian population (4). Once more, he makes the case that the Koches are closely related to other Bodo tribes, including the Meches, Rabhas, Dhimals, Hajongs, and Garos, and are of Mongoloid heritage. However, they eventually intermarried with the Dravidians in a few restricted locations, giving birth to a mixed Mongolo-Dravidian race with a preponderance of Mongoloid characteristics (4). Disregarding the various debates surrounding the genesis of the Koch Rajbanshi identity, it can be posited that the Koch Rajbanshis represent a Mongoloid group possessing traits from all four human streams: Austral-Asiatic, also known as "Adivasi," Dravidian, Mongoloid, and Aryan, where the Mongoloid features are predominant.

Statement of Problem

The *Siruwā* festival, a significant cultural event among the Rajbanshi people, serves as a critical site for the expression and preservation of Rajbanshi identity. However, in the face of modernization, globalization, and socio-cultural changes, the festival faces challenges that threaten its continuity and its role in shaping Rajbanshi identity. This study seeks to investigate how the *Siruwā* festival navigates these challenges and continues to function as a cornerstone of Rajbanshi identity, exploring its historical roots, cultural significance, rituals, and contemporary relevance. By examining these aspects, the research aims to provide insights into the dynamics of ethnic identity preservation and cultural resilience within the

Rajbanshi community, offering implications for the broader discourse on cultural heritage and identity maintenance among indigenous groups. This statement of the problem outlines the central focus of the dissertation, highlighting the importance of understanding how the *Siruwa* festival acts as a locus of Rajbanshi identity amidst ongoing societal changes and external pressures.

Research Questions

The researcher has framed the research questions in order to facilitate this study and address three fundamental questions. How does the *Siruwa* festival function as a site for expressing and preserving Rajbanshi identity? What are the key rituals and practices associated with *Siruwa*, and how do they reflect Rajbanshi cultural values and traditions? What challenges and opportunities arise in the efforts to sustain *Siruwa* as a living tradition in a rapidly changing socio-cultural environment?

Objectives

The objective of the study is to analyze *Siruwa* festival's cultural, social, and symbolic significance among the Rajbanshi community from the perspective or theoretical tools of performance. The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

-) To examine the role of the artistic expressions in the *Siruwa* festival's celebrations.
-) To analyze the symbolic meanings of the rituals within the context of *Siruwa*.
-) To investigate the impact of modernization, globalization, and urbanization on the celebration of the *Siruwa* festival.

Literature Review

The *Siruwa* festival, celebrated by the Rajbanshi people, is a profound cultural event that encapsulates the community's identity, heritage, and social values. This literature review delves into the historical context of the Rajbanshi people, their cultural practices, the significance of this festival, its rituals and symbolism, and the modern challenges it faces. By

examining these aspects, we aim to understand how this festival serves as a site of Rajbanshi identity.

The Rajbanshi community's history is marked by migration, adaptation, and resilience. Dor Bahadur Bista's seminal work, "The People of Nepal" (1996), provides a comprehensive overview of the ethnic groups in Nepal, including the Rajbanshi. Bista traces the origins and migration patterns of the Rajbanshi, highlighting their historical interactions with neighboring communities and their integration into the socio-political landscape of Nepal. This historical backdrop is essential for understanding the evolution of Rajbanshi cultural identity and the significance of traditional practices like the *Siruwa* festival.

Ethnographic studies have documented the cultural practices and traditions of the Rajbanshi people. Keshav Kumar Shrestha's "Ethnography of Jhapali Rajbanshis, 2064" offers an in-depth look at the daily lives, social structures, and rituals of the Rajbanshi community in Jhapa. Shrestha's work emphasizes the unique aspects of Rajbanshi culture, such as their agricultural practices, folk songs, dances, and traditional crafts. These cultural elements are vital for understanding how the *Siruwa* festival embodies and reinforces Rajbanshi identity.

The *Siruwais* more than a mere celebration; it is a vital cultural institution that reinforces Rajbanshi identity and communal solidarity. Harka Gurung's "Trident and Thunderbolt: Cultural Dynamics in Nepalese Politics" (2002) explores how festivals like *Siruwa* serve as platforms for expressing ethnic identity and resisting cultural assimilation. Gurung argues that in a pluralist society, such festivals are crucial for maintaining ethnic distinctiveness and cultural integrity. The *Siruwa* festival, with its elaborate rituals and communal activities, plays a central role in the Rajbanshi community's cultural calendar, fostering a sense of belonging and continuity.

The rituals and symbolism of the *Siruwa* festival are rich and multifaceted, reflecting the Rajbanshi worldview and religious beliefs. Various studies have documented the intricate ceremonies performed during this festival, from the worship of deities to communal feasts and traditional dances. These rituals are not only expressions of religious devotion but also serve to strengthen social bonds and transmit cultural knowledge across generations. The symbolic meanings embedded in these practices—such as fertility, prosperity, and protection—underscore the festival's role in sustaining Rajbanshi cultural heritage.

The *Siruwa* festival, like many traditional cultural practices, faces significant challenges in the modern era. Globalization, urbanization, and socio-economic changes have impacted the ways in which the festival is celebrated and perceived. Scholars have examined how these forces threaten the continuity of traditional practices and the cultural identity of the Rajbanshi people. Efforts to preserve and promote the *Siruwa* festival have been documented, including community-driven initiatives, governmental support, and cultural revitalization programs. These efforts highlight the dynamic nature of Identity preservation and the resilience of the Rajbanshi community in the face of modernization.

The literature reviewed demonstrates that the *Siruwa* festival is a vital component of Rajbanshi identity, serving as a cultural expression and a means of social cohesion. The festival's rituals and practices embody the values and beliefs of the Rajbanshi people, while also providing a platform for community bonding and Identity preservation. Further research is needed to explore the evolving nature of the festival and its role in the contemporary context, particularly in light of modern challenges. This literature review provides a comprehensive foundation for understanding the multifaceted significance of the *Siruwa* festival within the Rajbanshi community, highlighting its importance in the maintenance and transmission of cultural identity.

Research Gap

The research gap in the study of the *Siruwa* festival as a site of Rajbanshi identity lies in the absence of comprehensive, focused exploration on its historical evolution, ritual significance, and contemporary adaptations within academic literature. While existing sources touch upon Rajbanshi cultural practices and broader ethnic festivals in Nepal, detailed analyses specifically dedicated to the *Siruwa* festival are limited. There is a critical need for in-depth research that examines how historical factors have shaped the festival's development and continuity, its role in fostering Rajbanshi identity formation amidst modern challenges like globalization and urbanization, and its resilience in preserving cultural heritage and community cohesion. By addressing these gaps, this dissertation aims to contribute nuanced insights into the dynamics of ethnic identity maintenance and cultural resilience through the lens of the *Siruwa* festival among the Rajbanshi community.

Methodology

As the methodology of the study, this research employs the qualitative method. Qualitative data have been gathered through a literature review of relevant documents, fieldwork involving participation in the festival, and detailed observations, interviews with key informants such as community leaders and elders, and focus group discussions with various community segments which has been incorporated in Appendix. Audio-visual documentation has also been utilized on festival participation. The research results are shared with the Rajbanshi community to ensure practical benefits.

This comprehensive methodology aims to analyze *Siruwa* festival's cultural, social, and symbolic significance among the Rajbanshi community from the perspective of theoretical tools of performance.

Theoretical Perspective: Performance Theory

Performance theory offers a lens through which we can explore cultural practices as dynamic, interactive processes that actively construct and convey social identities. It encompasses the study of a wide range of performances, including theater, dance, rituals, festivals, everyday interactions, and even digital media. Scholars in performance studies analyze how performances are constructed, experienced, and interpreted, examining their significance in expressing identity, culture, power, and social norms. This theory not only investigates traditional and formal performances but also considers the performative aspects of everyday life, viewing actions and interactions as performative practices that shape and reflect societal values and structures. By doing so, it offers a unique lens to understand the complexities of human behavior and social organization.

Richard Schechner, a key figure in performance studies, examines performance as a broad and transformative concept that extends beyond traditional theatrical contexts. He argues that performance encompasses a wide range of human activities, from rituals and ceremonies to everyday behaviors and social interactions. He states, "Performance is behavior that is framed" (5), emphasizing the deliberate and contextual nature of performative acts. His approach challenges the distinction between performer and audience, highlighting how all individuals engage in performances that shape and reflect cultural norms and identities. Schechner's work encourages a dynamic understanding of performance as a fundamental aspect of human experience, influencing discussions on ritual, play, and the social construction of reality.

Clifford Geertz, a prominent cultural anthropologist, viewed performance as a critical lens through which to understand culture. In his interpretive approach to anthropology, Geertz emphasized the importance of "thick description," a method of analyzing cultural practices by detailing not only the behavior itself but also the context in which it occurs and

its underlying meanings. In *"The Interpretation of Cultures,"* he saw cultural performances—such as rituals, ceremonies, and public events—as texts that could be read and interpreted to uncover the symbolic meanings and social functions they embody. He famously argued that "culture is public because meaning is" (6), suggesting that the symbolic expressions found in performances offer insights into the collective understandings and social structures of a society. This view positions performances as dynamic processes through which cultural identities are constructed and communicated, highlighting their role in both reflecting and shaping the ongoing narrative of a community's existence.

Richard Bauman, a significant figure in performance theory and folklore studies, explores the concept of performance through the lens of communicative practices and cultural expressions. Bauman argues that performances are not merely presentations of cultural norms but are active processes through which social identities and relationships are negotiated and maintained. In *"Verbal Art as Performance"*, he states, "Performance is not simply a formalization or enactment of a culture already present but a constitutive means by which cultural forms and practices are brought into being and their meanings are circulated and transformed" (16). This assertion underscores the dynamic nature of performances in shaping and reshaping cultural meanings and social interactions, challenging static views of culture as a fixed entity. Bauman's approach invites scholars to view performances as integral to the ongoing construction of cultural identities and community cohesion.

Victor Turner, a pioneering anthropologist, introduced the concept of performance as a transformative social process in cultural analysis. Turner argued that rituals and other performances are not merely displays of cultural norms but dynamic events where social meanings are contested, negotiated, and reconfigured. In *"From Ritual to Theatre"*, he famously described "rituals as 'social dramas' where individuals and communities engage in symbolic actions to address tensions and conflicts within their cultural context" (46). Turner's

concept emphasizes the performative aspect of culture, viewing performances as potent sites for the expression and resolution of social contradictions. His approach encourages scholars to explore how performances function as mechanisms for social change and continuity, illustrating how cultural identities are both affirmed and challenged through ritualistic practices. Similarly, in *Forest of Symbols*, Victor Turner explores the intricate symbolic dimensions of Ndembu rituals in Zambia, emphasizing their role as transformative cultural performances. Turner views these rituals not merely as religious ceremonies but as dynamic processes through which social identities and relationships are enacted and negotiated. He argues that rituals function as "social dramas" where tensions and conflicts within Ndembu society are symbolically addressed and resolved. This study illuminates the profound cultural meanings embedded in ritual performances, highlighting their significance in shaping social cohesion and identity formation.

Diana Taylor's concept of performance, particularly in her work *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, explores how performance serves as a mode of transmitting and embodying cultural memory. Taylor argues that performances, including rituals, theater, and every day practices, are crucial for preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge that may not be easily documented in traditional archives. She states, "The repertoire is a system of embodied memories, emphasizing the embodied and often non-verbal aspects of performance as repositories of cultural history" (27). Taylor's approach underscores the importance of performance in cultural survival and resilience, suggesting that performances not only reflect but actively contribute to shaping collective identities and histories. Her work has been influential in performance studies, cultural anthropology, and discussions on the politics of memory and identity.

Catherine Bell, a prominent scholar in ritual studies, introduces the concept of "ritualization" as a process through which rituals are socially constructed and transformed

over time. She argues that rituals are not static events but dynamic processes that evolve through repeated performances within specific cultural contexts. According to Bell, “ritualization’ involves the continual negotiation and reiteration of symbols, actions, and meanings that constitute rituals” (45). This process of ritualization allows participants to negotiate their identity and reinforce their sense of community. By engaging in ritualized actions, individuals experience a sense of unity and belonging, which is essential for maintaining social cohesion. Rituals often incorporate symbols, narratives, and actions resonant with the community's historical and cultural context, thus providing continuity and stability, especially in times of change or crisis. Bell’s approach challenges the notion of rituals as rigid and unchanging ceremonies. Instead, she highlights how rituals are shaped by interactions between participants, cultural traditions, and external influences. Through “ritualization”, rituals acquire their efficacy and transformative power within communities, serving to reinforce social identities, express collective values, and mark significant life events.

Rational of Selecting *Siruwa* Festival

The choice to focus on the *Siruwa* festival as a site of Rajbanshi identity is grounded in its profound cultural significance and role in shaping communal identity. This festival stands as a vibrant manifestation of Rajbanshi heritage, encapsulating centuries-old traditions, rituals, and beliefs that define the community's unique cultural fabric. By exploring *Siruwa*, this study seeks to delve into the rich tapestry of Rajbanshi cultural practices, offering insights into how these rituals serve not only as markers of cultural continuity but also as mechanisms for reinforcing social cohesion and community solidarity. In a contemporary context marked by globalization and cultural homogenization, the festival becomes a poignant expression of resistance to assimilation, asserting the distinctiveness and resilience of Rajbanshi identity. Furthermore, by examining *Siruwa* through an academic lens, this

research aims to contribute to the broader discourse on ethnic identity dynamics, highlighting the significance of cultural festivals in preserving intangible heritage and fostering cultural pride among indigenous communities like the Rajbanshi.

Rajbanshi Identity Problem

The Rajbanshi people were mostly found in the area that now includes West Bengal, Assam, and Nepal during this time. But historical occurrences like the Anglo-Nepalese War (1814–1816) brought about important geopolitical shifts in the area.

The Sugauli Treaty, which was signed in 1815 by the British East India Company and the Kingdom of Nepal, placed a great deal of land under British suzerainty, including areas inhabited by the Rajbanshi people.

The incorporation of these territories into British India brought about socio-political changes for the Rajbanshi people. With the advent of British colonial rule, administrative boundaries were redrawn, and new identities began to emerge. The delineation of borders led to the separation of communities that had previously shared cultural, linguistic, and historical ties.

The gradual integration of the Rajbanshi people into the broader Nepali identity can be attributed to various factors, including administrative policies, cultural exchanges, and economic opportunities. Despite residing in areas that fell under British administration, the Rajbanshi people retained their distinct linguistic and cultural heritage, which shared similarities with Nepali culture. Furthermore, the establishment of the Gorkha Kingdom in the mid-18th century by King Prithvi Narayan Shah played a pivotal role in shaping Nepal's identity. The unification of various principalities under the banner of the Gorkha Kingdom laid the foundation for a unified Nepali identity, which encompassed diverse ethnic groups, including the Rajbanshi people.

Over time, as Nepal underwent socio-political transformations, the Rajbanshi people gradually became integrated into the fabric of Nepali society. Today, they are recognized as one of the many ethnic groups that contribute to Nepal's rich cultural tapestry, while also preserving their distinct linguistic and cultural heritage. Despite the challenges of modernization and globalization, the Rajbanshi people continue to maintain their unique identity, rooted in their historical legacy and ancestral ties to the land.

The Rajbanshi people of Nepal have mixed cultures historically as a result of their migrations, exchanges, and marriages with other ethnic groups in the nation. The Rajbanshi community is related to other communities in Nepal by language, culture, and history. Originally from parts of India like West Bengal, Assam, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh. One significant factor contributing to the blending of Rajbanshi culture in Nepal is the historical movement of people across borders. Over the centuries, migrations between the Indian subcontinent and Nepal have been relatively common, facilitated by factors such as trade, employment opportunities, and social ties. As Rajbanshi people settle in border regions, their cultural practices, language, and traditions, intermingled with the other local cultures of Nepal and north-western border areas of India.

Interactions between the Rajbanshi people and other ethnic groups in Nepal have also played a crucial role in cultural mixing. Through trade, intermarriages, and shared social spaces, the Rajbanshi community has engaged with diverse ethnic communities within Nepal, leading to the exchange and adoption of cultural elements. This interaction has contributed to the diversity and richness of both Rajbanshi culture and the broader cultural landscape of Nepal. Additionally, historical events and political dynamics have influenced the cultural integration of the Rajbanshi people in Nepal. Changes in governance, territorial boundaries, and administrative structures have shaped patterns of settlement and cultural exchange. For

example, periods of political instability or conflict may have forced migrations and resettlements, further facilitating cultural mixing.

Furthermore, modernization and globalization have accelerated cultural exchange in Nepal, providing opportunities for the Rajbanshi people to engage with a wider range of cultural influences. Access to education, media, and communication technologies has also facilitated the sharing of cultural practices and ideas among different communities, contributing to the dynamic evolution of Rajbanshi culture in Nepal. Overall, the mixing of Rajbanshi culture in Nepal is a complex and multifaceted process influenced by historical, social, political, and economic factors. This ongoing exchange and integration continue to shape the cultural identity of the Rajbanshi people within the diverse tapestry of Nepal's ethnic mosaic.

The influence of media on the culture of the Rajbanshi people, like many other ethnic communities, has been multifaceted and profound. One significant impact is the exposure to a diverse range of cultures and perspectives through television, radio, the internet, and other media platforms. The Rajbanshi community has been exposed to new ideas, customs, and lifestyles from throughout the globe as a result of this exposure, which has expanded their horizons. On the other hand, Media platforms also serve as crucial channels for the dissemination of cultural knowledge and heritage. Through documentaries, news programs, and cultural shows, media can help preserve and promote Rajbanshi traditions, music, dance, folklore, and rituals. Furthermore, the digital age has enabled the sharing of cultural artifacts and oral histories, facilitating intergenerational transmission and preservation of cultural practices. Media influences Rajbanshi community cultural norms, shaping attitudes and behaviors. It can challenge traditional norms, promote social change, and challenge gender roles, family dynamics, and social expectations. Language is another aspect deeply influenced by media. Exposure to different languages through media content can lead to

shifts in language preferences and usage patterns within the Rajbanshi community. While this can enrich linguistic diversity, it may also impact the preservation and transmission of traditional languages and dialects among younger generations.

However, it's essential to recognize that media's impact on Rajbanshi culture is not always positive or straightforward. Negative representations, cultural appropriation, and the spread of Westernization and consumerism are also concerns that need to be addressed. Furthermore, the dominance of mainstream media may marginalize indigenous voices and perspectives within the Rajbanshi community.

In short, media has both enriched and challenged Rajbanshi culture. While providing opportunities for cultural exchange, preservation, and advocacy, it also presents risks of cultural erosion and distortion. By critically engaging with media content and promoting cultural diversity and authenticity, the Rajbanshi community can navigate the complexities of media influence while safeguarding their cultural heritage for future generations.

Rajbanshi youths have transitioned into a glocal identity through a myriad of interconnected factors. Firstly, the proliferation of technology and media has played a pivotal role. Growing up in the digital age, they have easy access to the internet, social media, and global entertainment platforms, exposing them to a diverse array of cultural influences and trends from around the world. This exposure has broadened their horizons, allowing them to engage with global ideas, lifestyles, and communities, while still retaining their local identity and cultural roots.

Education has also been instrumental in shaping the glocal identity of Rajbanshi youths. Increased access to education has provided them with opportunities for intellectual growth and exposure to diverse perspectives. Whether through formal schooling or informal learning experiences such as travel and cultural exchange programs, they have gained a

deeper understanding of global issues and cultures, contributing to their glocal outlook on life.

Migration has further contributed to the glocal identity of Rajbanshi youths. Many have moved from rural to urban areas, or even internationally, seeking better educational and economic opportunities. Living in cosmopolitan cities or multicultural neighborhoods has exposed them to a melting pot of cultures, languages, and traditions, fostering a sense of openness and adaptability to global influences.

Language and communication are also integral to their glocal identity. Rajbanshi youths often navigate between multiple languages. This linguistic diversity enables them to connect with people from various backgrounds and engage in cross-cultural communication, facilitating their integration into both local and global contexts. Cultural hybridity is a defining feature of the glocal identity of Rajbanshi youths. They adeptly blend elements of their traditional culture with global influences, whether it's through fashion, music, food, or social norms. This cultural fusion reflects their ability to embrace diversity and adapt to changing cultural landscapes while still cherishing their heritage and customs.

Ultimately, the global identity of Rajbanshi youths is characterized by a dynamic synthesis of local and global influences. They navigate between different cultural spheres, drawing from their heritage while embracing the opportunities and challenges of an interconnected world. In doing so, they contribute to the richness and diversity of contemporary society, bridging the gap between the local and the global in their pursuit of identity and belonging.

The identity of the Rajbanshi people has undergone a process of complex mixing at national, regional, and global levels, shaping their sense of self and belonging in diverse ways. Nationally, within the borders of countries such as India, Nepal, and Bangladesh, the Rajbanshi identity is intertwined with the broader national identities of these nations. As

citizens of these countries, Rajbanshi individuals participate in national cultural, political, and social narratives. They may celebrate national holidays, speak the national language, and engage in national-level politics and governance, while still maintaining their distinct Rajbanshi cultural heritage.

Regionally, the identity of the Rajbanshi people is shaped by their specific geographic and cultural context within the regions. Within these regions, they interact with other ethnic groups, languages, and traditions, influencing their cultural practices and worldview. Regional identities often manifest in dialects, cuisine, festivals, and social customs unique to each locality, enriching the Rajbanshi cultural landscape with regional nuances and flavors.

Globally, the identity of the Rajbanshi people is increasingly influenced by transnational flows of culture, technology, and migration. Globalization has facilitated connections between Rajbanshi communities scattered across the world, fostering a sense of global Rajbanshi identity transcending national and regional boundaries. Diasporic communities maintain ties with their homeland while also adapting to the cultural norms and practices of their adopted countries. This global perspective exposes Rajbanshi individuals to diverse ideas, languages, and lifestyles, contributing to a cosmopolitan outlook and an appreciation for cultural diversity. The mixing of Rajbanshi identity at these different levels reflects the dynamic interplay between the local, national, regional, and global forces shaping their sense of self and belonging. Despite various challenges to Rajbanshi identity, the *Siruwa* festival has played a crucial role in sustaining it.

Overall, the *Siruwa* festival integrates the psychological, emotional, and professional aspects of the Rajbanshi people's lives. It fosters community solidarity, cultural expression, and economic activity, reflecting the multifaceted presence of individuals within the community. The festival's rituals and activities contribute to the well-being and continuity of

the Rajbanshi culture and society, ensuring that their traditions and professional practices are celebrated and sustained for future generations.

Rajbanshi Identity through *Siruwa*

During the *Siruwa* festival, Rajbanshi individuals come to realize their distinct cultural identity through a series of immersive and symbolic experiences that highlight their unique heritage. This festival, celebrated predominantly by the Rajbanshi community, is a vibrant showcase of their traditions, rituals, and social practices. The realization of their distinct identity is often a multi-faceted process, involving a deep engagement with cultural symbols, community interactions, and personal reflections.

Firstly, the rituals and customs performed during the *Siruwa* festival are deeply rooted in the Rajbanshi cultural ethos. These practices, passed down through generations, are distinct from those of other communities. Participating in traditional ceremonies, such as the worship of local deities, ancestral veneration, and the performance of specific dances and songs, reinforces a sense of belonging and continuity. The use of traditional attire, language, and food further distinguishes the festival as uniquely Rajbanshi, helping individuals connect with their ancestral roots and recognize their cultural distinctiveness.

Secondly, the communal aspect of the *Siruwa* festival plays a crucial role in reinforcing identity. As Rajbanshi people gather to celebrate, they engage in collective activities that foster a strong sense of community. This collective participation underscores the shared cultural and historical experiences of the Rajbanshi people. Through storytelling, communal feasts, and collaborative preparations, individuals experience a profound sense of solidarity and mutual recognition. The interactions with elders and peers during the festival serve as a living repository of cultural knowledge, reinforcing the individual's awareness of their unique heritage.

Finally, the *Siruwa* festival encourages personal reflection and introspection by deeply engaging with cultural rituals, allowing individuals to consider their place within the broader cultural narrative. The festival acts as a reminder of their distinct linguistic, religious, and social traditions, which may differ significantly from those of the surrounding populations. This process of self-reflection, prompted by the immersive cultural environment of this festival, often leads to a heightened awareness of one's Rajbanshi identity.

Hence, *Siruwa* festival is a powerful medium through which a Rajbanshi individual comes to understand and appreciate hi/ her unique cultural identity. Through ritual participation, communal engagement, and personal reflection, the festival reinforces the distinctiveness of the Rajbanshi heritage, allowing individuals to connect deeply with their cultural roots and recognize their place within the vibrant tapestry of their community.

Chapter II

Siruwa as Performance

Festivals serve as vibrant reflections of a community's identity, encapsulating its cultural heritage, religious beliefs, social values, and historical narratives in dynamic celebrations. Barry Quinn illustrates, “Festivals are shared histories, practices, and ideals that create social interaction through which local knowledge is produced and reproduced” (131-143). Festivals are communal celebrations that perpetuate shared histories, practices, and values, fostering social interaction and ensuring the transmission of local knowledge. According to Erving Goffman, “When an individual or performer plays the same part to the same audience on different occasions, a social relationship is likely to arise” (48). Festivals are crucial in facilitating social interaction and also strengthening the identity of the group by bringing it together. Clifford Geertz says that “one motivation for participating in festivals is social interaction, it strengthens the identity of the group by bringing it together; the festival reflects the shared experience of the group which communicates about the particular society while telling a story which people tell themselves about themselves” (54). From traditional rituals to contemporary adaptations, festivals showcase a community's collective memory, aesthetic sensibilities, and interpersonal relationships. Through art, music, dance, cuisine, and communal gatherings, festivals foster a sense of belonging and solidarity among community members, reinforcing shared values and fostering cultural continuity. They also serve as platforms for showcasing regional diversity, adapting to changing societal dynamics, and promoting inclusivity, thereby enriching the tapestry of human experience while preserving the essence of community identity.

Siruwa, a significant festival for the Rajbanshi community, is a profound reflection of their cultural identity through its various performances and rituals. Traditional music and dance play a vital role in this celebration. Like a text, this festival consists of symbolic

elements such as dances, costumes, music, and specific rituals. Each of these components carries meanings that are significant to the community celebrating the festival. Geertz studied culture as text in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973). He suggested that understanding a culture requires an in-depth analysis of its symbols, rituals, narratives, and social practices. "Reading" of culture is important. To understand a culture, the organization of social activity, its institutional forms and the system of ideas which animate it must be understood; culture and social structure are two important analytical aspects in the study of culture. As Geertz says, "Culture is public because meaning is" (12). One is to dig out the meanings and "the facts as facts are of little immediate interest beyond the confines of ethnography" (360). The personality of individual human beings, history, symbols (rituals, gestures, practices, tools etc) are important to study a culture. Geertz himself argues for a "semiotic" concept of culture as:

Believing . . . that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun . . . I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning. It is explication I am after, construing social expression on their surface enigmatical.

(5)

In order to interpret a culture's web of symbols, Geertz contends that researchers must first separate its constituent parts, elucidating the internal connections between them, and then broadly characterising the system as a whole in terms of the central symbols that organise it, the underlying structures that it is a surface expression of, or the ideological tenets that support it. It was his view that culture is public, because "meaning is," and systems of meanings are what produce culture, because they are the collective property of a particular people. We cannot discover the culture's import or understand its systems of meaning, when,

as Ludwig Wittgenstein noted, “we cannot find our feet with them” (42). Geertz wants society to appreciate that social actions are larger than themselves.

Rituals and ceremonies during *Siruwa* highlight the Rajbanshi's connection to their land and spirituality. Offerings to local deities and ancestral spirits blend Hinduism with indigenous beliefs; showcase the community's syncretic religious practices. These rituals emphasize the agrarian lifestyle and the deep spiritual connection the Rajbanshi people maintain with their environment, reinforcing their cultural identity. Victor Turner suggests the first place to look is in ritual behavior:

By ritual, I mean prescribed formal behaviour for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to belief in mystical beings or powers. The symbol is the smallest unit of ritual which still retains the specific properties of ritual behaviour; it is the ultimate unit of specific structure in a ritual context. (Forest 19)

Turner defines ritual as a set of prescribed, formal behaviors distinct from everyday, linked to beliefs in mystical beings or powers. In this context, he identifies the symbol as the smallest unit of ritual that retains the specific properties of ritual behavior. Thus, symbols are the fundamental components that structure and convey the meaning of rituals, each maintaining its unique significance within the ritual framework.

Catherine Bell offers a transformative approach to understanding rituals, viewing them not as static sets of prescribed actions but as dynamic practices imbued with meaning and purpose. Bell introduces the concept of "ritualization," highlighting how certain actions are strategically distinguished from everyday activities, thus creating a special status and meaning for these ritual actions. She emphasizes the role of power and agency in rituals, arguing that participants use rituals to negotiate social relationships and power dynamics within their communities. Bell also underscores the importance of embodiment, noting that rituals involve sensory experiences and physical actions that reinforce their meanings and

impact. Her approach critiques traditional structuralist and functionalist theories that see rituals as merely maintaining social order, instead presenting them as fluid, contested, and capable of both reinforcing and transforming social structures. Bell's work, grounded in practice theory, provides a nuanced understanding of how rituals are enacted and continually reshaped, offering valuable insights into their role in social life. According to her "Ritualization is a way of acting that specifically establishes a privileged contrast, differentiating itself as more important or powerful." Further, she says "Ritual does not merely express or communicate social meanings; it actively generates and modifies them"(74). Bell redefines the understanding of rituals by viewing them as dynamic, strategic practices rather than static sets of prescribed actions. She introduces the concept of "ritualization," which involves distinguishing certain actions as special and significant, thereby shaping social reality and power dynamics. Bell emphasizes the active role of participants in using rituals to negotiate power and asserts the importance of embodiment, highlighting that rituals engage the body and senses in profound ways. Critiquing traditional structuralist and functionalist theories, she argues that rituals are not merely tools of social order but are continuously shaped by ongoing social processes and interactions, making them both conservative and transformative. Bell's work provides a nuanced and comprehensive framework for understanding the complex role of rituals in cultural and social life.

The Rajbanshi people prepare for the *Siruwa* festival, which marks their New Year according to the Bikram Sambat calendar, with a series of traditional activities that reflect their cultural heritage and agrarian lifestyle. Leading up to the festival, families engage in a thorough cleaning of their homes and surroundings. This practice is not only about physical cleanliness but it also symbolizes purification and a fresh start for the New Year. Houses are decorated with vibrant colors and traditional motifs, with special attention given to the main entrance and common areas, adorned with flowers and traditional decorations.

The preparation, pre-performance activities, and rehearsals for celebrating the *Siruwa* festival among the Rajbanshi people involve a series of cultural and agricultural practices that are deeply rooted in their traditions. Here's a detailed breakdown of how they typically prepare and celebrate:

Preparation for *Siruwa*

The preparation for *Siruwa*, the vibrant and culturally significant festival celebrated by the Rajbanshi community, is an intricate process that involves meticulous planning and community participation. The preparations begin well in advance of the actual festival, reflecting the importance of *Siruwa* in the social and cultural life of the Rajbanshi people.

Cleaning and Decoration

One of the first steps in preparing for *Siruwa* is the thorough cleaning of homes and community spaces. This act of purification is believed to welcome prosperity and ward off negative energies. Families work together to clean their houses, repair any damages, and decorate their homes with traditional designs, often using rice flour to create intricate patterns known as "alpana" on the courtyards and thresholds.

New Clothes and Gifts

Purchasing new clothes and gifts is an integral part of the *Siruwa* preparations. It is customary for families to buy new garments for each member, symbolizing a fresh start and new beginnings. Additionally, gifts are exchanged among relatives and friends, strengthening social bonds and community ties. The market places buzz with activity as people shop for new clothes, household items, and festival essentials.

Rituals and Ceremonies

Invocation of Deities: Before planting begins, Rajbanshi families gather for rituals and prayers to invoke blessings from their ancestral deities or local gods associated with agriculture and fertility.

Offerings: Offerings of rice, fruits, flowers, and other symbolic items are made during these rituals as a gesture of gratitude and to seek prosperity for the upcoming farming season.

Cultural Traditions: Traditional songs, dances, and chants may accompany the rituals, reflecting the cultural heritage and spiritual beliefs of the Rajbanshi community.

Pre-Performance and Rehearsal

Traditional Dance and Music

Learning and Rehearsal: Rajbanshi youth and community members interested in performing traditional dances like Jhumur, often begin practicing well before the festival.

Choreography and Coordination: Rehearsals involve learning specific dance steps, understanding the rhythm of the music, and coordinating movements to ensure a synchronized performance during the festival.

Costume Preparation

Costume Design: Participants in traditional dances prepare their costumes, which often include vibrant attire adorned with traditional jewelry and accessories.

Costume Fittings: Fittings and adjustments are made to ensure that costumes fit comfortably and enhance the overall aesthetic of the performance.

Musical Instrument Practice

Instrumental Training: Those involved in playing traditional musical instruments such as dhol, madal and flute practice their skills to accompany the dance performances.

Ensuring Harmonious Ensemble: Musicians rehearse together to achieve a harmonious blend of sounds that complement the dance routines and enhance the festive atmosphere.

Scripted Performances and Narratives

Narrative Development: In some cases, performances may include scripted narratives or skits that depict cultural stories, myths, or historical events relevant to the Rajbanshi community.

Dialogue Practice: Participants rehearse their lines and delivery to ensure clarity and emotive expression during the performance.

Celebration of *Siruwa* Festival:

Cultural Performances:

Main Event: On the day of the festival, the community gathers at a central location or in the fields to celebrate. Cultural performances, including traditional dances and music, take place as a highlight of the festivities.

Audience Engagement: The performances are not just entertainment but also a means of connecting with cultural roots and fostering community pride and unity.

Feasting and Community Meals

Communal Feast: After the performances, there is often a communal feast where traditional Rajbanshi dishes are served. This feast promotes social bonding and solidarity among community members.

Reflection and Gratitude

Reflecting on Traditions: The *Siruwa* festival serves as a time for reflection on agricultural traditions, the importance of the land, and the spiritual connection to nature.

Expressing Gratitude: Participants express gratitude for the harvest season ahead and for the community's support and unity throughout the year.

In summary, the preparation, pre-performance activities, and rehearsals for celebrating the *Siruwa* festival among the Rajbanshi people are multifaceted, involving agricultural readiness, spiritual rituals, cultural performances, and community engagement. These activities reinforce the cultural identity and social cohesion of the Rajbanshi community.

Bathing Cattle and Fishing

For the Rajbanshi people, who reside predominantly in the Terai region of Nepal, West Bengal, Assam, and parts of Bangladesh, traditional practices such as bathing cattle and fishing hold significant cultural, economic, and social importance. These activities are deeply embedded in their way of life and reflect their connection to the environment, community values, and livelihoods.

Bathing cattle is not merely a routine activity but a culturally significant practice for the Rajbanshi people. It underscores their reliance on livestock for agriculture, dairy, and economic stability. The meticulous care given to cattle, including regular bathing, demonstrates the community's emphasis on animal husbandry and the well-being of their livestock. This practice is often associated with *Siruwa*, where cattle are bathed as part of the

celebrations, symbolizing prosperity and gratitude. The communal aspect of this practice fosters social bonds and reflects the Rajbanshi values of cooperation and respect for animals.

Bed Narayan Rajbanshi, 48 years old social worker, states in the interview with me:

Cattle are crucial for the Rajbanshi's agrarian economy. They are used for plowing fields, providing manure for fertilizing crops, and as a source of dairy products. Cattle bathing is part of the care that ensures the health and productivity of the cattle, directly affecting the community's agricultural output and economic stability.

Because it involves the whole family—neighbors and friends coming together to share the intensive chore, so fostering togetherness and cooperation—cattle bathing is an important social and community-building activity. This practice often coincides with *Siruwa*, creating a festive atmosphere filled with communal celebrations that enhance the joy and spirit of togetherness.

Additionally, it serves as a means of cultural transmission, where elders pass down knowledge and skills to younger generations, thereby preserving cultural heritage and family bonds. The communal participation fosters a support network, reinforces social norms, and provides a platform for resolving conflicts, ensuring social cohesion and harmony within the community. Through these multifaceted roles, cattle bathing strengthens the Rajbanshi community's social fabric and collective identity. Nitai Singh Rajbanshi, an elderly person of 75 years old says in the interview with me:

The practice of bathing cattle often involves collective participation from family members and neighbors. It fosters a sense of community and cooperation, as people come together to assist each other. This collective effort strengthens social bonds and reinforces community solidarity.

This activity holds significant economic importance, primarily due to its impact on the health and productivity of the cattle, which are vital to the agrarian lifestyle of the community.

Healthy cattle are essential for various agricultural tasks, such as plowing fields and providing manure, which is used as a natural fertilizer to enhance crop yields. Regular bathing helps prevent diseases and parasites, ensuring that the cattle remain robust and able to perform these crucial tasks efficiently.

Additionally, healthy cattle produce higher quality milk and dairy products, which are important sources of nutrition and income for the community. By maintaining the well-being of their cattle through regular bathing, the Rajbanshi people safeguard their agricultural productivity and economic stability, ensuring a reliable source of food and income that supports their livelihoods and sustains their way of life. Jay Rajbanshi, a 59 years old, teacher, says in the interview with me:

Bathing cattle is a ritualistic practice among the Rajbanshi people, often associated with festivals and religious ceremonies. It is believed to purify the animals and bring good fortune to the household. This ritual underscores the community's reverence for cattle, which are considered sacred and integral to their agricultural lifestyle.



Fig.1 and Fig.2. Bathing cattle in the river/ pond

In summary, bathing cattle during *Siruwa* is a significant practice for the Rajbanshi people, blending cultural, religious, social, and economic elements. It symbolizes purification and renewal, strengthens community bonds, ensures the health and productivity of essential livestock, and preserves cultural heritage, making it a vital aspect of the Rajbanshi way of life.

Fishing is another practice that vividly illustrates the distinct identity of the Rajbanshi people, particularly those living near rivers and water bodies. It is both a means of sustenance and a cultural activity, integral to their diet and economy. Traditional fishing techniques, passed down through generations, involve the use of locally crafted nets, traps, and other tools, showcasing the community's ingenuity and adaptation to their environment. Fishing often involves community participation and is accompanied by customs and beliefs specific to the Rajbanshi culture. Seasonal fishing activities are aligned with local ecological cycles, reflecting a deep understanding and respect for nature.

On this day, Rajbanshi people take their cattle to the rivers and bath them to cool them. Fish is favourite dish of Rajbanshi people. They go to fishing in the rivers as celebration. The Rajbanshi people have traditionally practiced sustainable fishing methods, respecting the ecological balance of their aquatic environments. This sustainable approach reflects their deep understanding of and connection to their natural surroundings, ensuring that fish populations remain healthy for future generations. Karna Bahadur Rajbanshi, a 52 years old social worker, keeps his opinion in the interview with me:

Fishing in the river is a great celebration in *Siruwa*. It balances the aquatic creatures. Human body gets adequate calcium and minerals from fish. Catching fish is not only the purpose, but it is also an opportunity to learn swimming. Fishing is followed with swimming. It works as therapy or exercise and it is also preparation to face if deadly flood occurs in the future.

Fishing during *Siruwa* is a multifaceted practice of great importance to the Rajbanshi people. It is a cultural tradition that reinforces their heritage, a social activity that strengthens community bonds, an economic practice that supports food security and income, and an expression of their connection to and stewardship of the environment. This practice plays a

vital role in the holistic well-being and sustainability of the Rajbanshi community. Prakash Rajbanshi, a 38 years old academician, says in the interview with me:

Fishing is not just an economic activity but also a cultural practice intertwined with the Rajbanshi's traditions and folklore. Various fishing techniques and tools are passed down through generations, preserving the community's indigenous knowledge and heritage. Festivals and rituals often incorporate fishing activities, celebrating the community's relationship with water bodies and aquatic life.

Fishing holds paramount importance for both livelihood and nutrition. As a primary livelihood activity, fishing provides essential income through the sale or trade of fish, supporting economic stability for many families. Simultaneously, fish is a valuable dietary staple, rich in protein and essential nutrients, enhancing the nutritional intake and food security of the community. The interdependence between fishing, livelihood, and nutrition underscores its critical role in sustaining the economic well-being and nutritional health of the Rajbanshi people during *Siruwa* and throughout the year. Abhay Rajbanshi, a 40 years old academician, states in the interview with me:

Fishing is a primary source of livelihood and nutrition for the Rajbanshi people. The rivers, ponds, and wetlands in their regions provide abundant fish, which are a critical part of their diet. Fishing ensures food security and contributes to the dietary diversity of the community, offering essential proteins and nutrients.

Hence, for the Rajbanshi people, bathing cattle and fishing are more than just daily activities; they are integral to their cultural identity, economic sustenance, social structure, and environmental stewardship. These practices reflect the community's values, traditions, and their harmonious relationship with nature, ensuring the continuity of their way of life and cultural heritage.



Fig.3 and Fig.4. Fishing in the river/ pond

Both these practices are embedded in the Rajbanshi way of life and are celebrated through festivals, songs, and folklore. They provide insights into the community's harmonious relationship with their environment and their sustainable practices. Bathing cattle and fishing are more than just economic activities; they are woven into the social and cultural fabric of the Rajbanshi people, reinforcing their unique identity and traditions.

In summary, bathing cattle and fishing exemplify the Rajbanshi people's distinct identity by highlighting their agrarian lifestyle, environmental harmony, and cultural heritage. These practices, rich in tradition and community involvement, underscore the values and way of life that set the Rajbanshi apart.

Food Preparation

Food items are a powerful medium through which the distinct identity of a particular community is expressed. This connection between food and identity manifests in various ways, each reflecting the community's history, culture, geography, and social structures. Traditional food items in festivals reflect a community's identity by serving as cultural symbols and mediums of communication, as various theorists suggest. Claude Lévi-Strauss sees "Food is good to think with" (23), emphasized that food, particularly traditional festival foods, carries significant cultural meanings, reflecting a community's identity, values, and social relationships. He argues food as a way to understand cultural structures and social relationships, while Mary Douglas views, "Food is a field of action affecting every other field of action" (99), emphasized food's role in social life, reflecting culture, religious beliefs, and family structures. Festival foods, governed by rituals, reinforce social cohesion and transmit cultural values. Pierre Bourdieu gives his viewpoint, "Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier" (6). He argues that tastes and culinary preferences are socially constructed, and traditional festival foods serve as markers of cultural identity, social distinction, and cultural heritage. Marvin Harris views, "The material constraints of the environment, rather than ideological or religious factors, have the primary role in shaping human culture" (12). He argues that material conditions significantly influence cultural practices, including food traditions.

Examining traditional festival foods can reveal community adaptive strategies and resource management, shaping cultural identity. Arjun Appadurai illustrates, "The central problem of today's global interactions is the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization" (32), explores the complex relationship between cultural exchange and identity in a globalized world, highlighting the significance of traditional festival foods in expressing community distinctiveness and Roland Barthes interprets that "The whole world is

present in the act of eating” (24). He views food as a system of signs communicating cultural narratives, with festival foods representing myths, values, and norms. Interpreting culinary codes can uncover deeper cultural messages. Collectively, these perspectives underscore how traditional festival foods encapsulate historical, social, economic, and symbolic aspects of a community's identity.

Food preparation plays a central role in the *Siruwa* festivities. Families prepare a variety of traditional dishes, including rice, lentils, vegetables, and various meat. Special sweets and delicacies, such as rice cakes, are made and shared among family members and neighbors. This sharing of food fosters a sense of community and togetherness, which is a hallmark of the *Siruwa* celebration. The communal aspect of food preparation and sharing highlights the importance of social bonds within the Rajbanshi community. As the Rajbanshi people became Hindus, so they eat everything in accordance with the Hindu religion. Food items such as *Gaji muri* (gram and puffed rice), *Dahi Chiura* (curd and beaten rice), *Pelka*, *Panta bhat*, *Chheka Shak*, *Lapha Shak*, *Sukta* and *Sidal* are traditional Rajbanshi dishes. The spread of education in globalized culture allowed many indigenous people to become educated and gain services, leading to them becoming habituated with the food habit of multi-characterised dishes. The food habit of educated people has influenced the other people of the villages, such as using turmeric, cumin, coriander instead of burning fishes. Sitangshu Prasad Chakraborty states that “The educated Rajbanshis and the Rajbanshis of urban areas use modern food. The field survey found that all indigenous people use modern type of food according to the global culture of food habit”(192). Bhumi Prasad Rajbanshi, a 46 years old provincial parliament member, reported that “Rajbanshi people rarely use traditional food, and their children prefer modern food to traditional food. There are no differences between the Rajbanshis and other Bengali people in their food habit. However, they prefer to eat traditional food items some times and in some occasions.”

Satsagi

This vegetable holds significant cultural and culinary importance for the Rajbanshi people, particularly during the *Siruwa* festival. This dish comprising a mixture of seven different vegetables is an integral part of these celebrations. The preparation and consumption of this vegetable dish are deeply rooted in the traditional practices of the Rajbanshi people, symbolizing the richness of their culture and agricultural heritage. On the last day of Chaitra, following the Vaskar Sambat day (Nepali Sambat 1st Baishakh, 13/14 April), they cook *Satsagi* in the evening and eat on the following day of Baishakh 1st (Nepali Sambat 2nd Baishakh). They say this *chaiter nanda baishakhat khhae* (food cooked in Chaitra, eating in Baishakh). They believe that this day is the transition of the New Year and it makes connection to the spirituality. It is eaten for the good health of the body because it works as medicinal herb for the human body from which the body absorbs different types of necessary nutritional elements which makes our immune system strong to prevent from diseases. Jhapat Lal Rajbanshi, 81 years old spiritual person states in the interview with me:

Nutritionally, *satsagi* is a well-balanced meal, combining various vegetables that provide essential vitamins and minerals. This aspect of the dish underscores the Rajbanshi community's traditional knowledge of health and nutrition. By preparing and consuming *satsagi*, they emphasize the importance of a balanced diet, which is crucial for maintaining good health, especially during festive times when dietary indulgences are common.

The term *satsagi* itself means seven vegetables, representing a mixture of different vegetables cooked together. This dish symbolizes unity in diversity, reflecting the Rajbanshi community's values of togetherness and harmony. By combining various vegetables, the dish showcases the community's ability to come together and create something greater than the sum of its parts. This symbolism is particularly poignant during *Siruwa*, a festival that marks

new beginnings and the strengthening of communal bonds. Harishchandra Rajbanshi, a 62 years old social worker states in the interview with me:

The *satsagi* vegetable dish is a powerful symbol of unity among the Rajbanshi people. It represents the coming together of diverse elements to create a cohesive and meaningful whole, both in culinary and cultural terms. Through the collaborative preparation and communal consumption of *satsagi*, the Rajbanshi people celebrate their shared identity, cultural heritage, and the strength that comes from unity.

Food plays a central role in the celebration of festivals, and *satsagi* is a special dish prepared for *Siruwa* that brings families and communities together. The act of preparing and sharing this meal reinforces social bonds and collective joy. It is during such communal activities that the Rajbanshi people strengthen their sense of unity and shared cultural identity, making the festival a time of not just individual, but collective celebration.

Moreover, by continuing the tradition of making *satsagi*, the Rajbanshi people preserve their culinary heritage and pass it on to future generations. This practice ensures that their cultural identity and traditional knowledge are maintained, fostering a strong sense of pride and continuity within the community. In essence, the *satsagi* vegetable during *Siruwa* is more than just a dish; it is a powerful symbol of the Rajbanshi people's cultural identity.

Panta Bhat

Similarly, *Panta bhat*, a traditional Rajbanshi dish made by soaking leftover cooked rice in water overnight allowing it to ferment slightly, is significant for Rajbanshi communities in the Terai region. It's often enjoyed as a refreshing and cooling dish, especially during hot summer months. Since *Panta bhat* uses leftover rice that could otherwise go to waste, dish is renowned for being straightforward and frugal.

Accompaniments for *Panta bhat* vary widely and can include fried fish, pickles, green chilies, onions, and sometimes yogurt or buttermilk. These additions enhance the flavor and

add a variety of textures to the dish. This food is not just a meal but a cultural symbol, deeply rooted in Rajbanshi culinary tradition and often enjoyed during hot season. They cook more rice in the evening than they need on the last day of Chaitra and eat it adding water to the rice called *Panta bhat* on the following day (Baishakh 1st). It is believed to be good for health.

Dhiren Rajbanshi, a 50 years old shaman clarifies in the interview with me:

Normally, hot season begins from the New Year and many diseases are likely to occur in summer due to extreme heat in the body. We begin to eat *Panta bhat* from the New Year. Eating this food item during the hot season keeps cool the body and stomach and prevent from diseases. From the economic point of view, it is cheaper also.

Panta bhat holds historical significance for the Rajbanshi people through its association with their agricultural heritage, cultural traditions, and dietary practices. As an agrarian community, the Rajbanshi people historically cultivate crops like rice, making *Panta bhat* a practical solution for utilizing leftover rice and minimizing food waste. Embedded within Rajbanshi culture, this food item reflects the simplicity and communal dining ethos that resonate with the Rajbanshi community's values. Its nutritional value and role as a filling meal during periods of scarcity further underscore its importance in their historical diet. Additionally, *Panta bhat* serves as a centerpiece for social gatherings, contributing to the cohesion and shared identity of the Rajbanshi people through communal dining experiences. Asin Lal Rajbanshi, a 66 years old shaman, states that “the Rajbanshi people have a rich agricultural history, reflected in their dish *Panta bhat*, made from leftover rice, which evokes memories of simpler times”.

This food offers nutritional benefits through its fermentation process, which enhances its probiotic content, aiding digestion and promoting gut health. According to Maria Marco and Quilez Amparo, “this fermentation increases the availability of nutrients like vitamins and minerals, including B vitamins, iron, and zinc, potentially boosting overall nutrient

absorption. The dish also has a lower glycemic index compared to freshly cooked rice, making it a suitable option for managing blood sugar levels” (471). Furthermore, *Panta bhat* retains its fiber content, contributing to digestive health and promoting satiety. Lastly, as it is typically consumed with water, *Panta bhat* also aids in hydration, supporting various bodily functions. Jagat Rajbanshi illustrates:

Panta bhat is not only tasty but also nutritious. The overnight fermentation process increases the nutritional value of the rice, making it easier to digest and enhancing its probiotic content. For communities like the Rajbanshi people, who may have traditionally relied on rice as a staple food, *Panta bhat* could have provided essential nutrients and aided digestion.

The cultural significance of *Panta bhat* for the Rajbanshi people is multifaceted and deeply rooted in their heritage. As an integral part of Bengali cuisine, it represents a connection to their cultural identity and traditions. Its preparation and consumption often evoke memories of sharing meals and strengthen social bonds. It reflects values of simplicity, resourcefulness, and sustainability, as it utilizes leftover rice and transforms it into a flavorful dish through fermentation.

Additionally, the accompaniments served with *Panta bhat*, such as pickles, fried fish, and green chilies, add layers of flavor and texture, enhancing the overall dining experience and highlighting the rich culinary heritage of the Rajbanshi people. Overall, *Panta bhat* serves as not just a meal but a symbol of cultural pride, community, and shared identity for the Rajbanshi people. Pani Lal Rajbanshi, a 65 years old retired teacher views in the interview with me that “*Panta bhat* is deeply rooted in Rajbanshi culture and tradition. It's not just a food item but a cultural symbol, often associated with rural life, simplicity, and frugality. For the Rajbanshi people, who have their own distinct cultural heritage and significance”. This food holds significance beyond its culinary appeal, embodying

adaptability and resilience in the face of challenges. The dish's creation from leftover rice showcases a practical approach to minimizing food waste and making the most of available resources, reflecting the community's resourcefulness and ability to thrive with what they have. This adaptability extends to the fermentation process, which not only transforms the rice into a flavorful dish but also enhances its nutritional value and shelf life, making it a practical choice for sustenance in resource-limited environments.

Furthermore, the nature of *Panta bhat* consumption fosters a sense of unity and support among the Rajbanshi people, reinforcing their resilience in coming together to share meals and support one another, even in challenging circumstances. Thus, *Panta bhat* serves as a symbol of adaptability, resilience, and communal strength for the Rajbanshi people in *Siruwa* and beyond. Dal Singh Rajbanshi, a 65 years old social worker gives his opinion in the interview with me that

Panta bhat exemplifies the ingenuity and resourcefulness of Rajbanshi cuisine. It's a dish born out of necessity, utilizing leftover rice to create a new meal. For communities like the Rajbanshi people, who may have faced challenges such as food scarcity or economic hardships in the past, *Panta bhat* represents adaptability and resilience in the face of adversity.

Thus, in *Siruwa*, food holds immense significance for the Rajbanshi people, serving as a cornerstone of their cultural identity and heritage while distinctly showcasing their traditions and customs.

The food items prepared and enjoyed by the Rajbanshi community in *Siruwa* often reflect their agrarian roots, with dishes prominently featuring locally sourced ingredients such as rice, vegetables, fish, and poultry. These culinary traditions, passed down through generations, not only sustain the community physically but also serve as a tangible link to their ancestral past, reinforcing a sense of continuity and pride in their heritage. Moreover,

the unique flavor profiles, cooking techniques, and rituals surrounding food preparation and consumption in *Siruwa* further emphasize the distinctiveness of Rajbanshi cuisine, setting it apart as a defining aspect of their cultural identity within the broader mosaic of regional cuisines. Whether it's the communal sharing of *Panta bhat* during festivals or the intricate preparation of traditional dishes for special occasions, food in *Siruwa* acts as a powerful symbol of Rajbanshi culture, strengthening social bonds, fostering community cohesion, and preserving a sense of belonging for generations to come.



Fig. 5. Panta bhat with onion, chilly and alu sana (potato pickle)

In this modern period, especially youth members of the family are scattered in the globalized society inside and outside the country for education, jobs, or other different purposes. *Siruwa* is the occasion in which these scattered members come back to their homes. It is an opportunity to meeting and getting know each other. They meet their relatives and share their experiences. Especially the married daughters and sons in law's go to *sasurali* (father in law's home). They give great honours and respect the guests. They serve the guests veg and non-veg items as they prefer. For the non-veg, they eat fish or meat of he- goat with rice. Sakat Lal Rajbanshi, a 72 years elderly person states in the interview with me:

Siruwa is the beginning festival of the year. We invite the married daughters and son in law's to share happy moments with huge respect. For this, we eat our favourite dishes *gaji muri* (puffed rice and cooked gram), fish or meat of he-goat on this

occasion to forget the bad happenings of the previous year and hoping for good fortunes for the coming days throughout the year.



Fig.6. Food with meat



Fig.7. Cooked fish



Fig.8. Gaji (cooked gram)



Fig.9. Muri (puffed rice)

The Rajbanshi people celebrate the *Siruwa* festival with a variety of traditional foods that reflect their cultural heritage. Central to the festivities are dishes like meat and fish, which are staples in their diet. Additionally, they prepare *gaji muri*, a flavorful mixture of puffed rice and gram, which adds a unique texture and taste to the celebratory meals. These foods are not only enjoyed for their flavors but also play a significant role in bringing the community together, reinforcing their shared cultural identity and traditions.

Meat and Fish is also the favourite dish of the Rajbanshi people and their cooking way is also different from others. These cuisines are also special for this day and it makes the

day special too. It is prepared with special traditional style and gives different taste. They share it with guests and other visitors. Since the Rajbanshis inhabited in the river sides in the ancient times, they enjoy fishing and eating. They feel insulted if they cannot serve this food item to the guests, relatives and new comers. Every families invite daughters and the sons in law and this item is served in respect.

These cultural food items are a significant marker of the Rajbanshi people's identity, reflecting their heritage, lifestyle, and values. Traditional dishes prepared during *Siruwa* preserve their culinary heritage and connect them to their ancestors. The use of locally sourced ingredients, such as rice and vegetables, highlights their agrarian lifestyle and ties them to their region. Religious practices shape their dietary customs, with specific foods prepared for rituals and festivals reflecting their spiritual beliefs. Sharing traditional foods during communal gatherings fosters social bonds and reinforces their collective identity. These food items also showcase their culinary artistry and connect them to family traditions, preserving their cultural uniqueness and history. In essence, the Rajbanshi people's traditional foods are a profound expression of their rich cultural tapestry and unique identity. They serve as a living archive of history, geography, social norms, and communal values, making food a profound expression of cultural identity.

Clothes

In literary texts, dress plays a crucial role in the construction of one's identity and invokes a web of sociological, political cultural, psychological meanings. Dress is not a mere choice an individual makes; it metonymizes almost every aspect of one's identity. According to Gregory Peter Stone, "Dress contributes to the acquisition of identities and the development of a sense of self when socially situated" (86-118). This explores clothing's role as a form of communication, conveying personal preferences, social status, cultural

affiliations, and psychological states. Hence, fashion trends reflect societal values and norms, shaping individual identities and collective cultural expressions.

Traditional clothing is often seen as a significant marker of a community's identity, reflecting various aspects of their culture, history, and values. Malcolm Barnard argues, "Traditional clothing serves as a visual language, communicating cultural values and identity through its distinctive styles and materials" (87-116). He views the intricate patterns and vibrant colors of traditional *Maasai* clothing in East Africa, which symbolize their cultural heritage and social status within the community. According to Roland Barthes, "Clothing is a semiotic system where garments symbolically represent social norms and historical continuity, shaping collective identity" (Fashion 95-128), asserts that traditional clothing is a vital component of a community's semiotic system, symbolizing historical continuity, collective identity, and reinforcing social norms. Joanne Entwistle views traditional clothing as more than just a form of dress; she sees it as a powerful symbol of cultural identity and social differentiation: "Traditional clothing practices are not simply a matter of aesthetic preference or personal choice; they are deeply embedded in social and cultural contexts, serving to reinforce community boundaries and signify collective identity" (247). Yuniya Kawamura discusses that "Traditional clothing signifies authenticity and heritage, providing a sense of cultural identity and continuity with the past" (113-36). She emphasizes the importance of traditional clothing in preserving cultural heritage and history, as they serve as living symbols representing a community's identity and values.

Rajbanshi cultural dresses exhibit a distinct identity through their unique designs, patterns, materials, and the cultural significance attached to them. The men and women wear their own traditional clothing, which they do for both formal and informal occasions as well as for everyday activities. The traditional clothing and jewelry of Rajbanshi are available for both women and men. Women typically wear *patani* from the chest to just below the knee,

but not all the way down to the ankle. The fabric remains six cm or so above the ground. The sarees are often in bright colors and adorned with intricate patterns that are unique to their culture. The *patani* is a distinct wrap-around skirt paired with a blouse and a shawl. The *gamchha* (five feet long) or *naucha* (nine feet long) are worn by men from the waist to the knee, never reaching the ankle. Rajbanshi men traditionally wear the *dhoti* or *lungi* paired with a *kurta* or *gamchha*. The *dhoti* is often white or in earthy tones, reflecting simplicity and connection to their agrarian lifestyle. For this purpose, Dhiren Rajbanshi states:

Rajbanshi men and women wear these traditional dresses because they believe that water is sacred as it is a part of the nature so while crossing lake or river the cloth should not touch the water, it is a mark of respect to the nature and they believe that if cloth touch the water the purification of the water goes away and thus how they cannot use it in their traditional ritual practice of worshipping nature. But now, they have gradually adopted modern dress, with the young generation wearing pants, shirts, shoes, and the old men wearing *dhoti*. There is no difference in dress between the indigenous people and the immigrated people due to the emergence of global culture.

The *dhoti* represents continuity with the past and a commitment to maintaining traditional practices and attire, reflecting the Rajbanshi community's respect for their ancestors and cultural roots. Rajbanshi men wear *dhoti* during the *Siruwa* festival to honor and preserve their cultural heritage, express communal unity, and fulfill ritualistic roles. It symbolizes continuity with ancestral traditions and is considered appropriate for performing religious ceremonies and making offerings, signifying purity and devotion. Wearing *dhoti* during *Siruwa* enhances social cohesion, as the uniform attire underscores shared values and identity within the community. Additionally, the *dhoti* is practical for the hot and humid climate of

the festival period, providing comfort and ease of movement during the lively celebrations, making it an ideal choice for this important cultural event. Harischandra Rajbanshi states:

The *dhoti* holds special ritualistic significance during the *Siruwa* festival. It is considered appropriate attire for performing religious ceremonies, making offerings, and participating in various rituals that seek blessings for prosperity, health, and happiness in the coming year. Wearing the *dhoti*, which is often associated with purity and respect, enhances the spiritual atmosphere of these ceremonies. It signifies the wearer's devotion and reverence for the deities and ancestors being honored during the festival.

The *patani* worn by Rajbanshi women holds profound ritual significance as it symbolizes purity, renewal, and respect for tradition. This traditional garment is essential for participating in religious ceremonies, making offerings to deities and ancestors, and performing ritual practices, all of which seek blessings for the New Year. The *patani* embodies cultural values, enhances the visual and spiritual ambiance of the celebrations, and fosters a sense of social unity and communal identity. By wearing the *patani*, Rajbanshi women actively engage in preserving their cultural heritage and upholding the sacred traditions of their community. Fulmani Rajbanshi, a 54 years old social worker, views in the interview with me:

The *patani* holds specific ritualistic importance during *Siruwa*. It is worn during religious ceremonies and offerings, symbolizing purity and respect. The traditional attire is believed to attract blessings and positive energy for the New Year. The *patani*'s intricate designs and bright colors are thought to bring good fortune and happiness, making it an essential part of the *Siruwa* celebrations. By wearing the *patani*, Rajbanshi women actively participate in these rituals, embodying their cultural and spiritual values.



Fig. 10 and Fig. 11 *Rajbanshi cultural dresses*

Rajbanshi cultural dresses distinctly showcase the identity of the community through their unique designs, materials, and cultural significance. Men typically wear *dhoti* paired with a *kurta* or *gamchha*, often in white or earthy tones, reflecting their agrarian lifestyle. Women wear brightly colored *patani* or *saree*, adorned with intricate, nature-inspired motifs and *kantha* embroidery, highlighting the community's artisanal skills. These garments are made from natural fibers like cotton and silk, emphasizing sustainability and traditional hand weaving techniques. Wearing ceremonial clothing for festivals and life events, along with handcrafted silver jewellery, is symbolic of protection and wealth.

In this way, Rajbanshi cultural dresses are a vibrant expression of their heritage, reflecting the community's values, skills, and connection to their environment. The distinct identity of the Rajbanshi people is showcased through their traditional attire, which embodies their cultural history and artistic legacy.

Ghatosari Songs

Song is a constitutive part of culture and hence is important for individual and social identity formation. It can serve as a space and practice that binds group members together so

that understand themselves as belonging to each other and may be even having a specific task or mission to accomplish. Richard Schechner emphasizes the embodied nature of cultural performances: "Performance is not just about representation but about enaction, embodying cultural identities through ritualized actions" (89). Folk songs during festivals are performative acts that embody and enact community identities, fostering collective experiences. During festivals, folk songs may reclaim cultural heritage and challenge dominant narratives, empowering marginalized communities. These songs act as a form of cultural resistance against dominant narratives by preserving and articulating the unique experiences and identities of the Rajbanshi community. These songs often highlight issues of gender, caste, and socio-economic oppression, providing a voice to those marginalized within the broader societal context. According to Émile Durkheim, "Cultural practices, particularly rituals, are crucial in fostering social cohesion and collective consciousness, which are vital for societal stability and unity" (427).

Folk songs during festivals function as rituals that unify the community, reinforcing collective norms and values. Symbols are central to the formation and reflection of a community's identity. From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist, Mead discusses how symbols, particularly language, are used in social interactions to create shared meanings and understandings. He states, "The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity" (135). This process of using symbols to communicate and negotiate meanings helps to establish and reflect the collective identity of a community. Folk songs during festivals serve as symbolic tools that facilitate communication and reinforce social bonds among community members. Stuart Hall suggests that folk songs serve as powerful tools for reflecting and constructing a community's identity. He argues that cultural identity is a "matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being,' "emphasizing that it is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history,

and culture” (225). Folk songs, by encapsulating the lived experiences and traditions of a community, contribute to this ongoing process of identity formation. He suggests that folk songs during festivals are dynamic expressions that negotiate between tradition and adaptation, shaping the community's identity over time.

In this discussion, folk songs function as a larger term used to describe the ways in which songs express historical differences and constructs identities in a society. In an indigenous community, folk songs preserve culture, language, customs, folklore, and social and family interaction from the root identity; have a great importance because they embody the memory of the past.

Rajbanshis maintain distinct cultural and ethnic characteristics: a local dialect which is rather different from the standard language; religious traditions. Rajbanshi women have preserved their traditional singing style. In forefather's times, there did not use to be bridges in the rivers in rural areas. People used to cross the rivers where the water would be low. They would call it *ghat*. On this day, married women go to the *ghats* of the rivers. They offer *prasad* to the deities in the bank of the river. Women tell folklores in the form of folk songs. Rajbanshi women express a rich tapestry of emotions and themes through *ghatosari* songs, capturing the essence of their daily lives, cultural values, and spiritual beliefs. These songs celebrate the joy and renewal of the New Year, reflect on the beauty of nature, and narrate their roles and responsibilities within the family and community. They articulate feelings of love, relationships, and communal bonds, while also giving voice to the challenges and hardships they face. Through this musical tradition, women preserve and convey their cultural heritage, express their spirituality, and reinforce social and moral values, fostering a sense of unity and identity among the Rajbanshi people. They sing these folk songs in groups holding each other or one another with body movements. These songs express their sentiments and emotions to their original cultural roots. Nirmala Devi Rajbanshi, a 47 years

old social worker, keeps her opinion in the interview with me that “Married women express joy, sorrow, love, affection, union, separation, and bravery through songs, sung to please deities and protect family members from bad events and well-being.”

Rajbanshi women express their daily life and experiences through *ghatosari* songs during *Siruwa* by intricately narrating the rhythms and nuances of their routines, from household chores like cooking and caring for children to agricultural endeavors such as planting and harvesting. These songs encapsulate the emotions, challenges, and joys of their daily existence, portraying the interconnectedness of family, community, and nature. Through vivid imagery and heartfelt lyrics, women convey their resilience, love, and the profound significance of their roles within the fabric of Rajbanshi society, fostering a shared cultural heritage that binds generations together.

The festival, beyond its rituals and communal activities, is deeply enriched by the folk songs performed by Rajbanshi women. These songs are not merely a form of entertainment but a vital cultural artifact that encapsulates the collective memory, traditions, and values of the Rajbanshi people. The *ghatosari* songs sung by Rajbanshi women during the *Siruwa* festival, it's essential to highlight how these songs contribute to the festival's cultural richness and the preservation of Rajbanshi identity.



Fig. 12. Women worshipping *ghatosari*



Fig. 13. Women singing *ghatosari* songs



Fig. 14. Women going to the river/ pond side for worshipping ghatosari

Song,

Sete milmil kali seter sindur khan ge
Chhalkie pareche kali tor seter sindur khan ge
Sange nai ge kali tor mali bhatar ta ge
Sariya dele tok situr sindur khan ge
Galaye milmil kariye tor galar hasli khan ge
Dhalkiye pareche kali tor beniya bhatar ta
Sariye dibe galar haslikhan ge
Kamarer milmil kalir kamarer karasot khan ge
Dhalkiye pareche kamarer karasot khan ge
Chhariye dibe tohok beniya bhatar ta ge
Thagemil thagemil kali tohor thenger bajula ge
Sange nai tohor beniya bhatar ta ge
Sariya dibe tohor thenger bajula ge

English Translation,

Sister, the red vermilion of your siudo (parting of hair)
The vermilion of your siudo is pouring out
Your hubby is not with you
He might have transferred your love
Your necklace is shining brightly

Your hubby moves on leaning

Maybe he transfer your necklace

Your belly chain is shining brightly and

Moving down

Your hubby leaves you

Your anklet is shining brightly

Your hubby is not with you

He might have transferred your love

These songs serve as a medium for expressing a wide range of emotions, including joy, sorrow, love, and longing. The content of the songs often reflects the personal and communal experiences of the women, encapsulating their daily lives, struggles, and aspirations. Through the festive and ritualistic elements of *Siruwa*, these songs celebrate cultural identity and ensure the transmission of traditions to younger generations.

Traditional style of performing in groups is rather deeply rooted in a traditional community. It is organized by the local villagers, the song repertoire performed is exclusively observing the festival and in the dialect, the costumes worn are regional and in most cases inherited from preceding generations; traditional dishes are prepared, dances are danced; family members from far gather to celebrate the festival. All the singing groups who have turned up at the celebration are granted the opportunity to perform during a limited time range at the main event of the festival. Among the performers, the female sex is predominant. The relations between the performers and the audience are interactive. The song texts carry intended messages for the attentive listeners, and the traditional customs acted on the stage communicate directly to the observers who are expertly familiar with the performed rites. This celebration is arranged with the special objective to demonstrate and experience

particularly the root traditions. The occasion is a manifestation of community life and identity.

Performing Shaman

Shamanism exhibits religious performance as spectacle in a highly dramatic way. Shamans and stage actors share similarities in that they both portray a variety of roles while utilizing both traditional and contemporary forms of expression. Emile Durkheim states, "Religious phenomena are collective representations which express collective realities; rituals are collective actions which serve to maintain society" (62). This highlights how religious rituals are not merely individual acts of faith but are crucial for reinforcing the shared values and beliefs that bind a community together.

Shamans, in festivals, perform rituals that reinforce community values and norms, promoting solidarity and social cohesion. George Herbert Mead highlights the role of symbols and interactions in shaping identity. "Symbols are essential for human interaction and the construction of self and society" (45). Shamans during festivals may reclaim and reaffirm indigenous spiritual practices, resisting cultural assimilation and asserting cultural autonomy. Richard Schechner's perspective focuses on the performative aspects of cultural rituals: "Performance is a mode of communication and a site of cultural negotiation, embodying and enacting identities" (23). Shamans' performances during festivals embody spiritual beliefs and cultural traditions, actively constructing and expressing community identity. Shamanism is a profound aspect of Rajbanshi cultural identity, reflecting their deep spiritual connection to nature and their unique cosmological beliefs. The Rajbanshi people practice a form of shamanism that involves rituals, ceremonies, and the mediation of shamans—known locally as *Ojhas* who are believed to possess the ability to communicate with the spirit world. These shamans play a crucial role in community life, conducting rituals

to heal the sick, protect against evil spirits, and ensure agricultural prosperity, which underscores the community's reliance on and reverence for natural forces.

The rituals often include offerings, chants, and dances that are specific to the Rajbanshi tradition, further distinguishing their spiritual practices from those of neighboring communities. Shamanistic practices are typically performed at sacred sites such as groves, rivers, and specific altars, highlighting the community's belief in the sacredness of their natural surroundings. Additionally, these practices are passed down through generations, preserving the cultural heritage and reinforcing community bonds.

On this day, a shaman goes to nearby forests and collect some medicinal herbs and is invited to a particular home. A shaman recites tantric mantras and bury the prepared herbs secretly in the four corners of the home's compound (*chauhadi band*). Asin Lal Rajbanshi keeps his view that *tantric* (shamanistic) *mantras* and herbs are recited and buried in the four corners of a home compound to protect family members from evil spirits and *tantric* attacks.



Fig. 15 and Fig. 16: *Performing shaman/ chanting mantra (chauhadi band)*

Mantra,

Shri Krishna damodar (sick's name) anger moday dushman kar sangharan

Chaitnidananda thakur tumhar charane kari nivedan

Shri vashtam gasai tumhar charane felnar anger jogjadu jaribati

Vanved tumhar charane kari sangharan jalpushpa pani khaya tahak

Khaya felnar anger jogjadu jaribati aji hate

shree chait nitanander charane bandi kari

Bhashma bhashma naam brahma name hare Krishna vaner naam

Vishnu name kar bhasham

Harivaan chale parvat saman hari name shaktishil vaan kar bhasham

Lakhan shilavaan upare ghure sitare

hangrivaan felnar ghar chhariya durat pare

English Translation,

Shri Krishna Damodar God, Destroy the (pronounce sick's name) enemy

Chaitnidananda God, I beseech you

Shri Vastam Gurudev, the magic herb of the body of (sick's name) at your feet

Destroy the magic herb (tantra) by taking this water

Accept the flower and the water,

Destroy the magic herb of (pronounce sick's name) body

Oh God Brahma, Vishnu, Krishna, I beseech you

Destroy the magic herb,

Protect (pronounce sick's name) from all these magical dangers

Put your power on this home to protect from all the magic dangers

The mantras chanted by shamans hold deep spiritual and cultural significance. These mantras are believed to invoke divine blessings, protection, and healing for the community. They are often used to ward off evil spirits, ensure a good harvest, and bring prosperity and well-being to the people. This chanting reinforces the cultural heritage and spiritual beliefs of the Rajbanshi community, creating a sense of unity and continuity.

The *chauhadi band* ritual is a ritual by *Ojhas* during *Siruwa*, involving creating a protective boundary around homes to protect families from evil spirits and negative energies. It invokes blessings from deities and ancestral spirits, promoting prosperity, health, and

happiness for the coming year. This practice strengthens the connection between the physical and spiritual realms.

Shamanism also influences Rajbanshi art, music, and folklore, with stories of spirits, ancestors, and mythical beings woven into their cultural narrative. Alan Dundes' examination of folklore provides a compelling framework for understanding the cultural significance of traditional narratives. He argues that "Folklore is the mirror of culture. It is a window through which we can see the values, fears, and hopes of people" (123-45). It means that folklore reflects and provides insight into the essential beliefs, emotions, and aspirations of a culture. This spiritual framework not only provides a sense of identity and continuity but also instills a collective sense of purpose and belonging.

Additionally, the mythology, folklore, and artistic expressions influenced by shamanistic traditions provide a rich narrative that reinforces the community's distinct cultural identity and continuity. Hence, the Rajbanshi people maintain a distinct cultural identity that emphasizes their unique spiritual traditions, connection to nature, and cohesive social structure through shamanism.

Pani (Water) Siruwa

The *Pani Siruwa*, or water festival, of the Rajbanshi people is a vibrant celebration deeply rooted in cultural, social, and spiritual significance. As an essential part of their tradition, it marks the commencement of the New Year, embodying themes of renewal, purification, and new beginnings. Water, the central element of the festival, symbolizes cleansing, both physically and spiritually, washing away the troubles and misfortunes of the past year to pave the way for a fresh start. This symbolic act of purification not only prepares individuals but also rejuvenates the community as a whole, fostering a sense of optimism and hope for the future.

The Rajbanshi people sprinkle water on one another as a blessing on this day. Early in the morning, the seniors would take a bath, carry a jug of clean water, and bless the juniors by sprinkling it on their heads or bodies while the younger would do the same at the seniors' feet to ask for their blessing. Individuals of equal age and status—particularly young people—throw water on one another's bodies. Depending on their age, sex, and nature, people may also splash water on bystanders. This activity symbolizes washing all the psychological dirt. People re-establish a connection with nature during this celebration. They play with mud and water on each other's bodies and faces, which foster a sense of brotherhood and unity.



Fig. 17 and Fig. 18: *Pani (water) Siruwa celebration*

Participants in the *Siruwa* Festival include members of the Rajbanshi community across all age groups, with both men and women actively engaging in the festivities. Skilled dancers, musicians, and performers showcase their talents, captivating audiences with rhythmic movements and melodious tunes. The festival provides a platform for community members to express their cultural pride and artistic prowess, strengthening bonds within the community and passing down traditions to future generations. Additionally, the festival attracts visitors from neighboring communities and regions, contributing to the exchange of cultural practices and fostering a sense of solidarity among diverse groups.

Pani Siruwa is more than just a ritual; it is a communal celebration that strengthens social bonds and enhances community cohesion. The festival brings together people of all ages and social backgrounds, providing an opportunity for collective participation in joyful water-related activities. Through playful water splashing and shared laughter, individuals forge connections, share joy, and celebrate their shared heritage. This collective celebration fosters a sense of unity and togetherness among the Rajbanshi people, reinforcing their sense of belonging and solidarity as a community.

Beyond its social aspect, *Pani Siruwa* is a testament to the Rajbanshi community's cultural resilience and identity. The festival encompasses various traditional practices and rituals unique to the community, serving as a means of cultural preservation and transmission. Through this celebration, the Rajbanshi people reaffirm their cultural heritage, passing down traditional knowledge, customs, and values to future generations. This transmission ensures the continuity of cultural practices and fosters a sense of pride and belonging among community members.

Moreover, it holds agricultural significance, often coinciding with the onset of the monsoon season. The festival celebrates the arrival of rain, which is essential for agriculture and the sustenance of the agrarian community. Rituals and offerings during *Pani Siruwa*, they seek blessings for a bountiful harvest and a prosperous agricultural year ahead. Additionally, the festival promotes environmental awareness and respect for nature, highlighting the community's harmonious relationship with the environment and their commitment to sustainable practices.

Spiritually, *Pani Siruwa* involves various rituals and offerings to deities, seeking their blessings and protection for the New Year. Water, as a sacred element, is used in these rituals to invoke divine grace and ensure the well-being of the community. Furthermore, the festival provides an opportunity to honor and connect with ancestral spirits, expressing gratitude for

their guidance and blessings. In essence, it encapsulates the rich cultural heritage, social cohesion, spiritual beliefs, and environmental stewardship of the Rajbanshi people, making it a vital and cherished event in their calendar.

Kado (Mud) Siruwa

Kado Siruwa, or the mud festival, holds profound significance for the Rajbanshi people, encompassing cultural, social, spiritual, and agricultural dimensions. This traditional festival, celebrated during the New Year, is deeply rooted in the community's heritage and identity, serving as a symbol of renewal, fertility, and communal solidarity.

At its core, it represents a symbolic rebirth and rejuvenation. The act of covering oneself or others in mud signifies the shedding of past impurities and hardships, embracing a fresh start and new opportunities. This ritual cleansing, both physical and spiritual, marks the beginning of the New Year with optimism and hope for prosperity and success.

The festival also embodies the agricultural ethos of the Rajbanshi people. Mud, as the primary element of *Kado Siruwa*, is closely associated with fertility and the renewal of the earth. The application of mud on the body or on agricultural fields is believed to invoke blessings for a fruitful harvest and abundant crops in the upcoming agricultural season. Thus, it serves as a ritualistic invocation of agricultural prosperity and the cycle of life and renewal.

Beyond its agricultural symbolism, *Kado Siruwa* fosters social cohesion and community bonding. The festival is characterized by collective participation, as individuals come together to engage in mud-related activities, such as mud-wrestling, mud-slinging, and other playful games. These communal activities promote camaraderie, laughter, and shared joy, strengthening social ties and reinforcing a sense of unity among community members.

Moreover, it holds spiritual significance, with rituals and prayers offered to deities and ancestral spirits. The mud, considered sacred during the festival, is believed to possess purifying and healing properties, making it an integral part of religious ceremonies and

offerings. Through these rituals, the Rajbanshi people seek divine blessings for health, prosperity, and overall well-being in the New Year.

It also serves as a means of cultural preservation and transmission, ensuring the continuity of traditional practices and values across generations. By celebrating the festival, the Rajbanshi community reaffirms its cultural identity and heritage, passing down ancient customs, songs, and stories to future generations. This cultural continuity fosters a sense of pride and belonging among community members, reinforcing their collective identity and shared sense of history.

Rajbanshi people are devoted to nature. They believe that the human body ultimately belongs to the soil. So, with the respect to the nature, they play with mud on this day. It is the way of making the life connection with the nature by playing with mud each other. In this point, Hansha Narayan Rajbanshi, 55 years old social worker puts his opinion in the interview with me, “Mud and water are therapeutic for the body and mind, promoting physical fitness and robustness. *Siruwa* showcases our past way of life, influenced by farmers' enjoyment of these resources.” Mud and water, historically used in agricultural societies for healing, are now integral to modern wellness practices, emphasizing sustainability and a return to natural living, reflecting the connection to nature and the importance of natural wellness.

In essence, it is a multifaceted festival that encapsulates the cultural, social, spiritual, and agricultural dimensions of the Rajbanshi community's life. It represents a time of renewal, fertility, and communal solidarity, celebrating the cyclical nature of existence and the interconnectedness of human life with the natural world. Through rituals, festivities, and shared experiences, *Kado Siruwa* brings people together, fostering bonds of friendship, kinship, and cultural pride that endure throughout the year.



Fig. 19 and Fig. 20: *Kado (mud) Siruwa celebration*

This celebration, marked by the playful and symbolic use of mud, carries deep cultural and social significance. Community members engage in mud play, which involves smearing each other with mud and engaging in joyful activities that emphasize equality and unity. This ritual fosters a sense of camaraderie and unity, promoting equality as participants of all ages and social statuses engage in the festivities together. *Kado Siruwa* emphasizes the agrarian roots of the Rajbanshi people and serves as a form of cultural preservation, ensuring that traditional practices are passed down through generations and keeping the community's heritage alive and vibrant.

Rang (Colour) Siruwa

Rang Siruwa, or the color festival, holds profound significance for the Rajbanshi people, serving as a vibrant celebration of unity, diversity, and cultural heritage. This traditional festival, observed during the New Year, is characterized by the joyful and playful throwing of colored powders, symbolizing the triumph of good over evil, the arrival of spring, and the renewal of life.

At its core, *Rang Siruwa* embodies the spirit of inclusivity and community. The festival transcends social barriers, bringing people together from all walks of life to participate in colorful festivities. Regardless of age, gender, or background, individuals join in the revelry, fostering a sense of unity and togetherness among community members. Through the shared experience of throwing and splashing colors, bonds of friendship,

kinship, and cultural pride are strengthened, reinforcing the collective identity of the Rajbanshi people.

The festival also serves as a celebration of diversity and individuality. The kaleidoscope of colors represents the myriad facets of human existence, each unique and valuable in its own right. By embracing diversity and honoring individual expression, it promotes acceptance, tolerance, and respect for all members of the community. It is a time to appreciate the richness of cultural heritage and the contributions of each individual to the tapestry of communal life.

On this day, Rajbanshis from all age groups and sexes take part in this occasion. They share their happiness through smearing different colours each other. They forget all the bad happenings in the past year. Abhay Rajbanshi puts his view, “The *Rang* (Colour) *Siruwacelebrations* bring the entire Rajbanshi group together. These gatherings put an end to their animosity, help them forget the unfortunate events of the past, and give them hope for a joyful new year. In this way, they have the chance to get to unite and know one another.” Through shared activities, the celebrations provide a unique opportunity for individuals to bond, strengthening kinship and friendship. Ultimately, the *Siruwa* celebrations symbolize the community's resilience and commitment to cultural preservation, promoting a cohesive and harmonious society.

Moreover, it holds spiritual significance, with rituals and prayers offered to deities and ancestral spirits. The vibrant colors used in the festival are believed to possess auspicious qualities, symbolizing prosperity, happiness, and divine blessings. Through colorful processions, music, and dance, participants seek the favor of the gods and goddesses for health, prosperity, and well-being in the New Year.

The festival also serves as a cultural renaissance, with traditional songs, dances, and performances showcasing the artistic talents of the Rajbanshi people. These cultural

expressions not only entertain but also educate, transmitting ancient customs, legends, and values to future generations. By celebrating it, the Rajbanshi community reaffirms its cultural identity and heritage, ensuring the continuity of traditions that have been passed down through the ages.

In essence, *Rang Siruwa* is a joyous and colorful expression of the Rajbanshi spirit, uniting people in celebration and solidarity. It is a time to revel in the beauty of diversity, to honor the past, and to embrace the promise of the future. Through rituals, festivities, and shared experiences, it brings people together, fostering bonds of friendship, kinship, and cultural pride that endure throughout the year.



Fig. 21 and Fig. 22: *Rang (colour) Siruwa* celebration

The *Rang (Color) Siruwa* celebration is a lively and joyous part of the *Siruwa* festival among the Rajbanshi community, characterized by the use of vibrant colors to mark the festivities. Participants throw colored powders and splash colored water on each other, creating a vibrant and festive atmosphere. This celebration symbolizes the arrival of spring and the renewal of life, reflecting the agrarian roots of the community. The use of colors fosters a sense of unity and joy, breaking down social barriers and bringing people together in a spirit of equality and celebration. *Rang Siruwa* also serves as a means of cultural preservation, passing down the tradition and its symbolic meanings to younger generations, ensuring the continuity of the Rajbanshi heritage.

Staged cultural performances, organized in public, during *Siruwa* hold profound significance for the Rajbanshi community, acting as vibrant showcases of their cultural richness and heritage. These performances, often featuring a diverse array of artistic performances such as music, dance, theater, and storytelling, serve as dynamic platforms for the expression, preservation, and celebration of Rajbanshi traditions. All the Rajbanshi and non-Rajbanshi community people take part in it in the form of actors and audiences which facilitate social interaction and strengthens the identity of the group by bringing together. These theatrical performances , dramatic spectacles, and public events all share one thing.



Fig. 23 and Fig. 24 : *Staged cultural programmes in Siruwa*



Fig. 25 and Fig. 26 : *Staged cultural programmes in Siruwa*

One of the primary roles of these cultural programs is the preservation and transmission of Rajbanshi cultural heritage. Through captivating performances, younger generations are immersed in the cultural legacy of their community, ensuring that traditional customs, rituals, folklore, and artistic traditions are passed down from one generation to the next. These

programs become living repositories of Rajbanshi culture, safeguarding it from erosion and ensuring its continuity in the face of modernization.

Moreover, staged cultural programs foster a strong sense of community cohesion and identity among Rajbanshi people. By providing a collective space for celebrating their shared cultural heritage, these programs strengthen bonds of kinship and solidarity. Participants and attendees alike are united in their appreciation for the rich tapestry of Rajbanshi traditions, languages, rituals, and customs, reinforcing their sense of belonging to a vibrant cultural lineage.

Furthermore, these cultural programs serve as joyous celebrations of heritage and diversity. Through music, dance, and theatrical performances, participants showcase the multifaceted nature of Rajbanshi traditions, highlighting the unique regional variations and influences that contribute to the community's cultural mosaic. By embracing and celebrating this diversity, cultural programs during *Siruwa* foster an atmosphere of inclusivity and mutual respect among community members.

Additionally, staged cultural programs provide invaluable opportunities for local artists, performers, musicians, and artisans to showcase their talents and creativity. By presenting their work to a wider audience, artists contribute to the preservation and promotion of Rajbanshi cultural arts, while also nurturing artistic excellence within the community. These programs become platforms for fostering the next generation of Rajbanshi cultural ambassadors and ensuring the continued vibrancy of artistic expression. These cultural programs facilitate intercultural exchange and dialogue, attracting audiences from diverse backgrounds. Visitors, tourists, scholars, and cultural enthusiasts gain insights into the unique customs, beliefs, and practices of the Rajbanshi community, fostering mutual understanding and respect. Additionally, these programs contribute to cultural tourism and support

economic development within the community, generating revenue for local businesses, artisans, and cultural organizations.

The staged cultural performances during *Siruwa* are vital expressions of Rajbanshi cultural identity and heritage. They serve as platforms for cultural preservation, community cohesion, artistic excellence, and intercultural exchange, ensuring the continued vitality and relevance of Rajbanshi culture in an ever-changing world. Amidst the festivities, rituals, and cultural performances, the *Siruwa* also encompasses moments of reflection and gratitude. Offerings of fruits, flowers, and traditional delicacies are made to the deities, accompanied by prayers for a prosperous agricultural season and the well-being of the community. Communal feasting further reinforces the spirit of unity and abundance, as families come together to share meals and celebrate the blessings of nature. Ultimately, the *Siruwa* Festival serves not only as a time of jubilation but also as a poignant reminder of the interdependence between humanity and the natural world, echoing the enduring resilience and vitality of the Rajbanshi culture.

The festival typically involves various cultural performances, including traditional dances and music. Preparation for the *Siruwa* cultural performances among the Rajbanshi people involves meticulous rehearsals of traditional dances and music, ensuring participants master their roles and movements. They meticulously arrange traditional costumes and jewelry, essential for reflecting their cultural heritage during performances. Musical instruments like the *dhol* and flute are tuned and practiced, enhancing the authenticity of their musical renditions. Choreography and coordination among performers are refined through collective practice sessions, ensuring synchronized and impactful presentations. Beyond artistic preparation, there's a focus on understanding and preserving Rajbanshi cultural significance, with community participation playing a crucial role in organizing logistics and offering support, all aimed at ensuring the festival's success as a celebration of their heritage.

Publicly organised cultural events that are staged during *Siruwa* are very important to the Rajbanshi community because they serve as colourful displays of their heritage and rich cultural diversity. These programs, often featuring a diverse array of artistic performances such as music, dance, theater, and storytelling, serve as dynamic platforms for the expression, preservation, and celebration of Rajbanshi traditions. All the Rajbanshi and Non-Rajbanshi community people take part in it in the form of actors and audiences which facilitate social interaction and strengthens the identity of the group by bringing together.

These theatrical performances , dramatic spectacles, and public events all share one thing. Rituals, arts, and public displays have crucial role in the preservation and reinforcement of cultural heritage. As James Leland Peacock argues, "Cultural performances often serve as powerful expressions of solidarity and collective memory, reinforcing a group's identity and values in times of social upheaval" (123). This suggests that cultural performances are not merely forms of entertainment but are vital for maintaining social cohesion and identity, especially during periods of societal stress. They provide a space for communities to come together, affirm shared values, and remember collective histories, thereby strengthening the bonds within the group and ensuring the continuity of cultural traditions.

Peacock's perspective underscores the transformative power of cultural performances in preserving traditions, promoting social cohesion, and navigating challenges within communities. He delves into how marginalized communities use cultural performances to assert their identities and resist dominant cultural narratives. James L. Peacock argues that cultural performances serve as powerful acts of resistance within societies. These performances are not only expressive of cultural identity but also function as strategic tools for challenging dominant norms and reclaiming cultural autonomy. Peacock contends that "through rituals of resistance embedded in cultural performances, communities assert their

unique identities and narratives, thereby resisting hegemonic forces and promoting cultural diversity and resilience” (74). This viewpoint highlights the agency of communities in using cultural performances as tools of empowerment and cultural revitalization. Further, he highlights the role of cultural performances in shaping societal dynamics, going beyond mere spectacle, engaging individuals with traditions, and facilitating adaptation and negotiation in the face of social change. He explores how cultural performances are integral to the construction and expression of national and social identities, especially in times of transition and modernization. His work on cultural performances reveals how they represent a community's identity, tradition, resilience, and negotiation, influencing anthropological studies on cultural identity and performance.

Diana Taylor, a prominent scholar in performance studies, has extensively explored the role of cultural performances in shaping collective memory, identity, and social change. Her work emphasizes how performances function as vital modes of cultural expression and political resistance: "Performance offers a way of understanding how social forces affect the body, as well as how the body might be mobilized to resist those forces" (45). During the Argentine Dirty War, the Madres de Plaza de Mayo used public performances as political protest, symbolizing resistance against regime violence and demand for justice for disappeared children. Further, Diana Taylor's *The Archive and the Repertoire* emphasizes the importance of recognizing and valuing embodied performances, such as rituals and everyday enactments, as essential components of cultural preservation and resilience against dominant narratives. She examines how performances act as a means of transmitting cultural knowledge and identity across generations.

Bauman asserts that verbal art performances in traditional settings are crucial for cultural transmission, intergenerational knowledge transmission, and maintaining social cohesion within communities. "In traditional societies, verbal art forms such as storytelling

and ritual recitation serve not only as entertainment but as vital means of cultural expression, embodying and transmitting collective knowledge, values, and identities" (123). He emphasizes the significance of verbal art in traditional societies as a means to express collective knowledge, values, and identities, reinforce cultural cohesion, and educate younger generations. The storytelling event is shaped by the interaction between the storyteller and the audience, making it a dynamic communicative practice. Erving Goffman's central argument in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* is that individuals engage in impression management, akin to actors on a stage. He posits that people strategically present different versions of themselves depending on the social context, using various techniques to shape how others perceive them: "In social interaction, the individual is not simply a passive participant but an active manipulator of the impression he presents to others" (45). This perspective emphasizes the active role individuals play in constructing and maintaining their social identities through everyday interactions and performances.

Victor Turner argues that performances are like social mirrors, reflecting and shaping a community's identity through rituals and symbolic actions, fostering solidarity and reaffirming shared values. As he states, "Performances can be understood as 'social dramas' that reflect and shape a community's identity through ritual and symbolic action" (11). "Symbols are not only instruments for reflecting a culture, they are also instruments for creating it" (123). He views performances as dynamic social processes where rituals and symbolic actions both reflect and shape a community's identity through shared meanings and collective experiences. Clifford Geertz's *The Interpretation of Cultures* emphasizes culture as a system of inherited beliefs, influencing communication and attitudes, advocating for an interpretive approach. Further, he notes "Culture is a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (89). Understanding cultures requires

interpreting the symbolic meanings individuals attribute to their actions and beliefs within their social contexts. Geertz's cultural performance theory emphasizes the interpretive analysis of culture as a symbolic system, focusing on the deeper symbolic meanings within cultural contexts, and their role in shaping social identities and relationships.

Rituals and artistic performances serve as symbolic expressions that reinforce social cohesion, transmit cultural heritage, and adapt to reflect changes within the community, thereby shaping and preserving its identity over time. According to James Leland Peacock, "Rituals and artistic performances are vital expressions of a community's values and beliefs, serving to maintain social cohesion and transmit cultural identity across generations" (56). Here, Peacock suggests that cultural performances, such as rituals and artistic displays, are not merely aesthetic expressions but are vital in constructing and communicating a community's sense of self amidst societal changes.

Performance perspectives provide multifaceted approaches to understanding the role and impact of performances in society. These perspectives highlight *Siruwa* as a communicative act, a form of social interaction, a ritual and social drama, a means of cultural memory and identity, and a process of ritualization. By examining performances through these lenses, scholars can gain insights into how performances of Rajbanshi people are shaped by cultural, social, and individual contexts.

Chapter III

***Siruwa*: Preserving Rajbanshi Heritage in Globalization**

The *Siruwa* festival is a significant cultural and spiritual event for the Rajbanshi people, marking the advent of their New Year. As the celebrations draw to a close, the Rajbanshi community experiences a profound sense of cultural pride and identity. This festival is a vibrant reminder of their rich traditions and customs, and its observance helps in preserving and perpetuating these cultural elements. The rituals, dances, songs, and communal activities performed during *Siruwa* reinforce their collective heritage, instilling a renewed sense of pride and belonging among the Rajbanshi people.

Community bonding is another key outcome of the *Siruwa* festival. The celebrations involve the participation of families, friends, and neighbors, fostering a spirit of togetherness and camaraderie. This collective participation helps strengthen social ties and builds a sense of unity within the community. After the festival, people often feel a deepened connection with their community, appreciating the mutual support and shared joy that comes from such communal events.

On a spiritual level, *Siruwa* holds significant importance for the Rajbanshi people. It is a time of spiritual renewal and purification, marking a fresh start with the New Year. Many participants feel spiritually rejuvenated, carrying a sense of optimism and hope for the future. The festival's rituals, which often involve cleansing and renewal, leave individuals feeling refreshed and more attuned to their spiritual beliefs and practices.

The joy and fulfillment derived from *Siruwa* are palpable. The various festive activities, from traditional dances to communal feasts, bring immense joy and satisfaction. This period of celebration and merriment fills people with happiness, leaving them with lasting positive memories. Additionally, the conclusion of *Siruwa* prompts reflection and gratitude. It is a time to look back at the past year, to acknowledge and appreciate the

blessings received, and to express thankfulness for the support and love of family and community.

Finally, the *Siruwa* festival infuses the Rajbanshi people with renewed energy and motivation. The symbolic cleansing and the sense of new beginnings inherent in the festival provide a psychological boost, encouraging individuals to face the upcoming year with vigor and enthusiasm. The sense of a fresh start, combined with the positive communal and spiritual experiences, equips people with the motivation to pursue new goals and embrace new opportunities in the year ahead.

Living in a globalized and politicized Nepali society presents the Rajbanshi people with both significant challenges and unique opportunities. To navigate this complex environment, they must balance their rich cultural heritage with the demands and influences of broader societal dynamics. Preserving their cultural identity while adapting to globalization is a delicate task. They continue to practice traditional customs, celebrate festivals like *Siruwa*, and speak their native language, all of which reinforce their cultural uniqueness. At the same time, they embrace modern technologies and global cultural trends, creating a hybrid cultural identity that helps them remain relevant in a rapidly changing world.

The *Siruwa* festival plays a pivotal role in bridging ideological divisions among the Rajbanshi people by reinforcing a shared cultural heritage. During the festival, the community engages in traditional rituals, dances, songs, and communal feasts, which serve to highlight their collective identity and values. These cultural practices create a common ground that transcends political and ideological differences, fostering a sense of unity. By participating in these shared traditions, community members are reminded of their common roots and heritage, which helps to mitigate ideological rifts and promote solidarity.

In conclusion, while the *Siruwa* festival fosters a sense of unity and togetherness among the Rajbanshi people, the realities of daily life and the persistence of economic, political, and social factors often lead individuals to revert to their fields of different ideological and economic divisions post-festival. Efforts to address underlying inequalities, promote inclusivity, and foster understanding may help mitigate these divisions over time, contributing to a more cohesive and resilient Rajbanshi community.

In addition, the celebration of *Siruwa* can be interpreted as a symbolic rejection of the negative impacts of globalization on traditional ways of life. As globalization brings about rapid social, economic, and cultural changes, indigenous communities like the Rajbanshi people may perceive these changes as threats to their cultural survival and autonomy. Through the festival, they reaffirm the value of their own cultural heritage and reject aspects of globalization that undermine it, such as the erosion of traditional livelihoods and the loss of indigenous languages and practices.

Overall, the ritual performance of the *Siruwa* festival among the Rajbanshi people serves as a complex and multifaceted expression of cultural pride, resilience, and resistance. By celebrating their indigenous identity, asserting autonomy, resisting cultural hegemony, and rejecting the negative impacts of globalization, the festival becomes a powerful assertion of agency and a testament to the enduring spirit of the Rajbanshi community in the face of historical and contemporary challenges.

The *Siruwa* festival celebration holds a multifaceted significance, encompassing global, national, and regional identities within its cultural expression. Globally, the festival serves as a platform for the Rajbanshi people to showcase their unique cultural heritage to the world. In an era of increasing globalization, cultural festivals like *Siruwa* provide opportunities for communities to share their traditions, values, and customs with a global audience. Through social media, cultural exchanges, and tourism, the festival can attract

attention from people worldwide, contributing to the global visibility of the Rajbanshi culture and identity. *Siruwa*, thus becomes not only a local celebration but also a global representation of the Rajbanshi community's rich cultural heritage.

At the national level, the *Siruwa* festival celebration reinforces the Nepali identity while also highlighting the diversity of cultures within the nation. Nepal is home to a rich tapestry of ethnic groups, each with its own unique traditions and customs. By celebrating *Siruwa*, the Rajbanshi people contribute to the mosaic of cultural diversity that defines the national identity of Nepal. The festival serves as a reminder of the unity amid diversity that characterizes the Nepali nation, promoting a sense of inclusivity and solidarity among its diverse ethnic groups. Through state recognition and support, *Siruwa* can also become a symbol of national pride and heritage, further strengthening the collective identity of the Nepali people.

Regionally, the *Siruwa* festival celebration is deeply rooted in the identity of the Rajbanshi community and its connection to the Terai region of Nepal. The festival's rituals, dances, songs, and cuisine are unique to the Rajbanshi culture and reflect the region's historical and geographical context. *Siruwa* serves as a celebration of the Terai's agricultural heritage, with rituals related to farming, harvest, and nature playing a central role in the festivities. The festival also fosters a sense of regional pride and solidarity among the Rajbanshi people, strengthening their bond with the land and community. Through local governance and grassroots initiatives, *Siruwa* can contribute to the development and promotion of the Terai region's cultural identity and tourism potential.

Despite numerous challenges, such as modernization, migration, and cultural assimilation, the *Siruwa* festival has played a pivotal role in preserving Rajbanshi identity. The festival acts as a vital repository of traditions, encompassing unique rituals, songs, dances, and culinary practices. It provides a platform for intergenerational knowledge

transfer, where elders teach the younger generation about their cultural roots. By fostering social cohesion, *Siruwa* strengthens community bonds and reinforces a collective identity through communal activities like group singing, dancing, and feasting. It serves as a powerful assertion of cultural presence and resilience, showcasing the vibrancy of Rajbanshi traditions in contemporary society. The spiritual practices during this festival offer psychological comfort and continuity, connecting the community to their ancestral beliefs. Additionally, the festival revitalizes traditional crafts, music, and dance forms, ensuring these cultural expressions remain alive. As a global showcase of cultural heritage, a symbol of national unity, and a celebration of regional identity, *Siruwa* serves as a testament to the richness and diversity of the Rajbanshi people and their contribution to the cultural tapestry of Nepal.

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Appendix

Interview Questionnaire

1. Can you tell us about the history and origin of the *Siruwa* festival?
2. What is the significance of the *Siruwa* festival for the Rajbanshi community?
3. How has the celebration of *Siruwa* evolved over the years?
4. What are the main religious and cultural rituals performed during the *Siruwa* festival?
5. How do these rituals reflect the beliefs and values of the Rajbanshi people?
6. Are there any specific deities or spirits worshipped during *Siruwa*?
7. How do families and the community prepare for the *Siruwa* festival?
8. What traditional foods are prepared and consumed during the festival?
9. Can you describe the traditional attire worn during *Siruwa*?
10. What are the main events and activities that take place during the *Siruwa* festival?
11. Are there any traditional dances, songs, or performances associated with the festival?
12. How do children and young people participate in the celebrations?
13. What is your most memorable experience from past *Siruwa* festivals?
14. How do you think the *Siruwa* festival impacts the sense of community among the Rajbanshi people?
15. Have you noticed any changes in how the festival is celebrated in recent years?
16. What challenges does the Rajbanshi community face in preserving the *Siruwa* festival?
17. How do you see the future of the *Siruwa* festival in the context of modernity and globalization?
18. What efforts are being made to ensure that the younger generation understands and values the *Siruwa* festival?
19. What does the *Siruwa* festival mean to you personally?

20. How do you feel the festival contributes to the cultural identity of the Rajbanshi people?