

Tribhuvan University

Sakela/Sakhewa Dance as a Performance of Kirant Rai Identity

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Letter of Approval

This research report entitled “*Sakela/Sakhewa* Dance as a Performance of Kirant Rai Identity” submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, by Dipak Rai has been approved by the undersigned members of the Research committee:

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## *Sakhewa/Sakela Dance is a Performance of Kirant Rai Identity*

### **Abstract**

*This thesis analyses how Sakela Sili is a mark of cultural identity of Kirant Rai community. It closely observes the methods of observing the festivals, Silis, songs, nature, history, and activities that are performed in the festival. This paper, hereby, claims that Sakela essentially serves as an emblem of cultural identity in a sense that it incorporates, strengthens and preserves Kirant Rai language, songs, literature, culture, philosophy and principles of living. Moreover, Sakela unleashes history, civilization and evolution of Rai clan. Similarly, Sakela sili is assumed to have begun with the commencement of agrarian civilization. For the justification of the arguments, this paper brings theoretical concepts from Richard Schechner who has theorized the concept of performance in terms of theatre and ritual. He argues that performances mark the identities and bend time. It reshapes and adorns the body, and tells stories. Performances such as of art, rituals, or ordinary life are made of twice-behaved behaviors, known as restored behaviors, and of performed actions that people train to do, that they practice and rehearse. Similarly, the paper uses Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity who, unlike his second version of cultural identity, defines the cultural identity in terms of one and shared culture. This version of definition focuses on our cultural identities that reflect the common historical experiences as well as shared cultural codes. Thus, cultural identity treats people as one people in common. This is supposed to be stable and unchanging.*

**Keywords:** Sakhewa, Performance, Culture, Identity, Nature, Sumnima and Paruhang

This research report has attempted to deal with one of the Rai peoples' cultural dances known as *Sakhewa*. This dance is a culturally typical and traditional in its performance. The dance is deeply associated with Kirant religion and *Mundhum*. Rai community celebrates *Sakela Dance* in the remembrance of their ancestors. They thereby strongly believe that this cultural dance emerged from their dynasties, and passes from one generation to the next. They associate *Sakhewa Dance* with their identity, and are obliged to their ancestors.

The *Mundhum*, an oral traditional religious scripture has a holy relation to *Sakela* cultural dance, also to a way of life in Rai community. Basically, *Sakela* dance is carried out as per *Mundhum's* exhortations. People of community get assembled in the public places wearing their cultural attires. Men and women carry the traditional musical drums; *Dhol*, and *jhyamta* in their hands respectively and hit them in a rhythm. Meanwhile, they sing *Sakela* song called *Mampa* making a round on the ground. They dance all the day with joy and happiness. In addition, men also hold the yak's tails, *Chamar* and women with a bunch of green branches of plants, *Syaula*. Particularly, men wear *Daura Salwar* with a turbine, *Pheta* around head, and *Khukuri* at waist whereas women put on *Guniu Cholo*, hanging traditional musical instruments like *Binayo* and *Murchunga* in its less. Women also carry a sharp weapon called *Khurmi* in their waists. What's more, the youths of Rai people also carry an arrow and bow at their back in order to show that the history and civilization of Rai clan.

The cultural dance exists in an oral form, especially it is a native folklore of the clan. In other words, the Kirant Rai ritual narrative texts are now documented in oral and written forms. It comprises legends, folktales, prehistoric accounts, and sermons, moral or philosophical exhortations in a poetic language. The word *Mundhum* connotes the power of great strength, the divinity. The Kirant Rai of east Nepal

assume it to be a holy and a powerful scripture. Moreover, the *Mudhums* are the source of inspiration, information, and enlightenment for Rai clans. It is the guidance and the way of life, customs.

Every religious or ritual actions which are observed through the guidance of *Mundhum*. In this context, *Sakela* as stated early a typical native cultural dance relies on Kirant Rai *Mundhum*. To reinforce the idea further, sociologist Chaitanya Subba, in *Limbu Culture and Religion*, opines, “Rituals, often regarded as sacred performances, provide the clue for the correct exegesis of the *Mundhum* and demonstrate their symbolic values, functional importance and social sequences”. Similarly, the vice chancellor of Pragya Academy of Nepal Bairagi Kainla says; “*Mundhum* occupies great social and cultural importance in the Kirant tribe. It gives a superb expression to the development of religious, moral and social beliefs and assumptions in many mythological legends and folk tales” (33). In this respect, this report seeks how *Sakhewa Dance* as a ritual performance provides religio-historical and socio-cultural representation and reflection in the life of the Kirat Rai people.

The *Sakhewa Dance* is traditional cultural dance of Rai community. The way people used to celebrate it has tangibly changed along with the time and space. As the Kirant Rai started spreading out of their historical territory over the various places in the world, there is a mentionable modification in the performance of the *Sakhewa Dance*. The globalization and modernization had great impact on the way of performing the *Sakhewa Dance*. In this respect, the researcher primarily has made the attempts to show how *Sakhewa Dance* is prevailing even in this globalized modern world, thereby making *Sakela* a marker of Rai people’s identity. Secondly, it has aspired to shed light upon how this cultural dance represents Rai community through its ritualistic performances in Nepal. The subsequent and meaningful explanation of

lyrics of *Sakela*, and its detail about performance process has been high-lightened to strengthen its arguments. Eventually, the report has explored the social and religious significance in relation to Rai's *Mundhum* in this present scenario.

The researcher has dealt with what identity *Sakela* carries on on the part of Rai community. Dynamic of identity that *Sakela* carries can be witnessed in the recent observation of the ritual. In addition, the globalization and modernization have directly affected the cultures and rituals of the minority. The major thing to know about the continuation of this cultural dance even today is because of the amendment in the way of observing it as per the time and space. That is why, the culture has become a source of collective identity. Moreover, the dance is observed twice a year on the occasion of festival called *Udhauli* and *Ubhauri*. On this occasion, they are collectively organized themselves in order to worship the natural entities like river, new crops, soil and the like. These rituals are carried out according to the exhortation of the *Mundhum*. More importantly, this typical dance has embodied a great range of significance. It is such a traditional event that brings all the Rai people together twice a year. It reinforces the bond among them. It strengthens harmony, and sense of co-operation among Rai people. The major part of this dance is that it has been an emblem of cultural identity. *Sakhewa Dance* has carried on a sense of we-ness, and pass on to the next generation which is the fundamental element in keeping the community alive.

*Sakhewa Dance* has been successfully drowned a great attention in the cultural discourse within Kirant Rai community. Many scholars and institutions associated with Rai community have written about and documented this cultural dance performance. Since the identity movement got space in Nepali society and politics, this dance has been considered to have a great significance of identity.

Dr. Taramani Rai, in his book *Sakel*, writes about this cultural dance as;

The Kirant Rai community worships the *Chula* (traditional furnace) in the kitchen during this performance. This has got a cultural and symbolic significance in their community. On this occasion, the relatives and guests are invited to take part in it and the Rai necromancers adore their ancestors *Sumnima* and *Paruhang*. The Kirant Rai assumes their mythology about Sakela as a matter of pride and glory. On this occasion, the historical figures are sincerely remembered and ritual worships are carried out accordingly which is the specific part of cultural significance in the community. (27)

This review on *Sakhewa* has explained about how it is observed and followed in Rai community. Taramani has emphasized the cultural and symbolic importance of the traditional dance. According to him, *Sakhewa* is such occasion in which historically important figures like their ancestors are respected and recalled. By asserting Sakela as matter of pride and glory, he seems to view the occasion as a ritual endowed with Rai identity.

Similarly, Chandra Kumar Hatuwali has published his book *Sakenwa*. He, in this work, mentions;

In accordance with the diffusion principle in sociological and anthropological study, Rai clan's *Sakenwa Dance* is the absolute example of this principle. According to this standard, culture gets emerged in a certain time and space. Gradually, it starts getting diffused all over the spaces through various ways. (47)

In this review, the author has dealt *Sakhewa Dance* from the perspective of sociology and anthropology. He seems to give more focus on how culture gets created and diffused. He argues that *Sakhewa Dance* has fitted itself into this principle. People of



Rai community observe this festival in different part of Nepal as well as in overseas today.

The writers Ajay Kumar Tamang and Chandra Kumar Rai Hatuwali have collectively produced a drama called *Sakenwalak*. In the play, the protagonist Paruhang says:

Everyone who resides in our state has to observe the Kirant religion. They have worship Shime-Bume (soil and water) as it our tradition and culture. These are our protectors; god who has had grace upon us. If we failed to follow this tradition, the savors would get agitation. As a result, it is believed that people will suffer from the natural disasters like draught, feminine and plague. (23)

The author has explored that belief the people of Rai community hold with regarding to the Sakhewa dance. This dialogue of the protagonist reveals that cultural ritual should be observed and followed compulsorily because a risk and obscene might suffer people in the case of ignoring it. This is how the author explores psychological and mythological opinions in the Kirant Rai Clan.

Dik Bahdur Rai has done thesis entitled *Impact of Modernization on the Traditional Sakawa Sili Festival in the Rai Kirant Community of Nepal: A case study of the Rai Community*. He writes:

. . . [D] igital modern technology is the one supporting factor to modernize the festival. It is affected in Lak (*Sakhewa Dances*) which are traditional rhythms and lyrics of the song which are used in festival. Traditionally Lak is developed through *Mundhum* but modern Lak is more full of love songs. So, . . . who are in Kiranti cultural community they have to seriously think up on Lak's lyrics. (32)

In quoted lines, the researcher has emphasized the impacts of modernization and complex relationship with globalization on the *Sakhewa Sili* festival. Similarly, he seems to concern over the use of songs and lyrics. They are getting changed nowadays. Such change may put Sakela at stake as its originality gets lost in the new lyrics. Hence, the researcher finds them to be influenced by the ethos of global popular culture.

What's more, Professor Dr. Gopal Siwakoti in his work *Kirant Jati* reviews:

*Sakela* dance is a culture associated with the land and production. This ritual is observed at the time of *Ubhauri* and *Udhauri*; when the Kirant farmers plant and harvest the crops respectively. They respect their mother land and nature as Gaiety. They treat Sakela culture as their way of life and divine asset. It has also established a profound relationship between Kirant Rai and their origin of land. (298)

It explains the cultural significance of *Sakhewa dance*. The dance connotes an asset of Rai community, and is way of life. The life of members of community is based on what they celebrate *Sakela* every twice a year. Here, harvesting and planting crops indicates that Rai people emerged with agro-business in the very civilization. To Rai people, *Sakela* connects them to mother nature. To the large extent, these three components function as a cultural identity as they have to do something with farming, production and celebration. The dance, by and large, carries the distinctiveness as it directly associates lives with their motherland. Hence, they regard their land and nature as their divinity. They are equally obliged to their ancestors for this historical continuation of *Sakhewa*.

In the same vein, *Chasuma sili* is the major fragment of *Sakela*. In this regard, the writer and scholar from Rai community, Chandra Kumar Hatuwali's observation

on *Chasuma Sili* would be noteworthy. In his book *Sakenwa: Kirat Haruko Mahan Chad*, he reiterates the fact: "*Sili* is the heart of *Sakela* . . . the activities of nature and animals and social activities are imitated by the *Sili*. The sillies are named as the natural elements" (13). The description clearly implies that *Sakela* is the heart of Rai people's distinctiveness that makes them what they are known as Rai, a celebrant of nature. On the top of it, the social activities involved are influenced and shaped by natural elements like plants, animals, rivers, stone, soils and so forth. In the *Sakela* occasion, Rai people and *Silies* imitate them in different ways and enjoy the festivals themselves. Furthermore, Hatuwali further writes:

*Chasuma Sili* is also called *Sumnima Sili* or mother *Sili*. According to kirat mythology *Sumnima* is the earth and mother of *Kirat Rai*. She is worshipped with great respect as the first mother of agrarian system. The process of agrarian system is pervasively found in *Chasuma Sili*. The steps like destroying the forest, ploughing, seeding, uprooting, planting, weeding round the plants, cutting down, heaping, chaffing, drying, weighing and to act or imitate of eating rice and to put rice inside the pocket are basic elements in *Sili*. (16)

Each *Sili* is about the natural aspects that resembles the agrarian Rai clan's identity somehow. In the aforementioned lines Hatuwali asserts that Rai people identifies themselves with the natural sources and its celebrant. The activities they perform demonstrates that their civilization emerged along with agricultural phenomena. And this is what *Chasuma Sili* unfolds through its melodies. The elements in each *Sili* makes clear that *Sakela* is the festival of the nature, and more than that it is the identity of Rai Community in Nepal.

Correspondingly, Tanka Bahadur Rai, in his book *Kiratharuko Dharma Ra Sanskriti- Samchhipta Adhyayan*, writes, “*Sakela* is the festival of *Kirat Rai*. It is based on natural *Kirat Mundhum*” (48). Here, Rai also asserts that *Sakela* is the festival that only the *Kirant Rai* people celebrates. By this idea, the author is making his point that *Sakela* is an emblem of identity of his people. According to him, this cultural dance is performed on the exhortation of *Rai Mundhum* which is based on natural miracles. Thus, it reinforces the idea that for *Kirat Rai* people, *Sakela* retains nature as an identity.

Another writer Gangaraj Rai (Hatuwali), in his article *Rai Samajma Chandhi Naach Harsa Ra Umangako Jagaran*, mentions; “Even though there is difference among the *Rai* people in accordance with the place, they celebrate *Sakela* in the same way and the *Sakela* is a festival that it is totally based on agrarian system and natural aspects” (10). Here, Gangaraj Rai explains that *Sakela* is wide spread festival among different *Rai* ethnics. He informs that the ritual varies as per time and space. However, the way of observation remains the same. They revere the same nature as their god and divine. Also, different *Rai* ethnics origins from the same agricultural evolution. The relation between them sounds inseparable in many ways when it comes to dealing with *Sakela*, a festival of *Kirat Rai*.

Like other authors, Bayansingh Rai has written thought-provoking knowledge and facts about *Rai* people. He, in his book, *Utpati Ra Paramparaka Chamling Mithakharu*, states; “*Kirat Rais* believe that everything happens in this world because of the nature. So, *Kirat Rais* worship nature and follow *Sakela Sili* oriented to the nature and they believe that life is possible because of the nature” (37-38). The author emphasizes the fact that *Rai* people observe *Sakela* in the spirit of nature. They assume that their lives came to existence owing to wildlife. For that reason, they

identify themselves with celebrants of nature when observing the very festivals. Therefore, Rai people's *Sakela* serves as a marker of identity to them in their everyday affairs.

Since nature is the most imperative part in *Rai* community, Om Aastha Rai, in his article, "Sanskriti, Kirat: Shaharma *Sakela*" portrays; "Though there are various *Sillies* in *Sakela*, the only purpose of *Sillies* is to worship nature and its aspects" (48). The writer focuses on the purpose of the festival in which nature is revered. The insistent emphasis merely on nature is to proclaim the uniqueness from other ones. They want to establish an identity that elevates their head high through *Sakela* performance.

According to aforementioned scholars, the *Sakela* marks the identity to Rai community. The festival is performed keeping nature in its spirit, and *Sakela* becomes the heart of the community all in all. The performances of *Sakela Sili* manifests the cultural significance in the diverse ethnic groups in Nepal. It is deeply associated with agrarian Rai society although it is on the verge of change in the modern world.

The researcher has analyzed the cultural dance from the perspective of Richard Schechner's theory of performance. Schechner theorizes the concept of performance on the basis of theatre and ritual. The idea of performance he introduces us in some ways is revolutionary in that he seems to challenge the traditional practices and perspective of theatre, performance, and ritual. According to him, drama is not merely a province of stage, but of everyday life, and is a cross cultural phenomena. In the same way, Rai *Sakhewa dance* has also a cultural performance that takes place in the life of every member of Rai clans twice a year. Similarly, the theory of performance has some key principles like presentation of self, restored behavior and expressive culture, and includes social drama and ritual. Moreover, Richard

Schechner sharply focuses on the importance of different system of transformation that varies from culture to culture and throughout the historical period, and movements.

Secondly, the researcher also deploys some theoretical insights from the essay *Cultural identity and Diaspora*, and *Questions of Identity* by Stuart Hall. The *Sakela* festival is equally interpreted from the perspective of identity in relation to culture and tradition. In so doing, the idea of identity and cultural identity propounded by Hall can help to deal with the issue. Moreover, Hall defines the cultural identity in terms of one and shared culture. It represents a kind of collective self'. That said, it hides inside the many other, meaning that it cannot encompass all individuals as they are. So, cultural identities seem to be more superficial imposed selves. However, cultural identity introduces the fact that it characterizes people who have common and shared history and ancestry. This version of definition focuses on our cultural identities that reflect the common historical experiences as well as shared cultural codes. Thus, cultural identity treats people as one people in common. This is supposed to be stable and unchanging. But Hall seems to be reluctant to that fact that such identities get changed over the times, thereby it is dynamic in its theme and form.

Similarly, Hall, regarding the notion of identity, thinks in the way he deals with of his second version of cultural identity. He wants us to think of identity as a production. Such production is never complete at all. According to him, identity is always in a process of transformation. It is made and re-built within the selves or subjects. It does not take place outside. He says that identity cannot represent one's self and their community to the accurate extent because of its nature of being unstable and fluctuation. So, he argues that the identities are merely the names that we give to the different ways in which we are positioned and we position ourselves within. This

position is simply guided by the narratives of the past and history that we are taught (225). However, Hall seems reluctant in talking about ethnic groups and native people like Rai clan in Nepal who are somehow tied with their community. They claim that they are proud of their culture and tradition in common. This indicates that they represent their community collectively. However, this representation is not as accurate as Hall claims. That is why, *Sakela* is culturally and traditionally dealt with as a collective representation of Rai clan in Nepal.

*Sakela* is a ritual performance in Kirant Rai community. It is widely celebrated twice a year on regular basis. All it begins with a Rai priest called the *Nakshong* who offers *raksi* (liquor made locally at homes from crops) around the *Sakela Thaan* - a holy place where there are stones, bamboo branches, banana leaves and other stuffs needed for worship. The *raksi* is kept inside a *chindo* - a local pot. In the course of celebration, The *nakshong* chants the *mundhum*. Rest of Rai people listen to him. They follow the way the *nakshong* does, and dance in a circle group together. While dancing, they hold *Chamaar* (yak's tails), *Seulaa* (bunch of tree's green leaves), *Khurmi* (like a scythe), Bow and Arrow, *Dhol* and *Jhyamta* (traditional musical instruments) in the hands. They dance in a certain pattern as per Rai tradition and the priest. With regard to the definition of ritual performance, the theorist, Richard Schechner opines;

In business, sports, and sex, "to perform" is to do something up to a standard – to succeed, to excel. In the arts, "to perform" is to put on a show, a play, a dance, a concert. In everyday life, "to perform" is to show off, to go to extremes, to underline an action for those who are watching. In the twenty-first century, people as never before live by means of performance. (22)

He specifies the term performance in a broader sense. For him, 'To perform' can also be understood in relation to: Being, Doing, Showing doing and Explaining showing doing. According to him, 'Being' is existence itself, while 'Doing' is the activity of all that exists, from quarks to sentient beings to super galactic strings. Similarly, 'Showing doing' is performing: pointing to, underlining, and displaying doing. 'Explaining showing doing' is the work of performance studies. (22)

He argues that performances mark the identities and bend time. It reshapes and adorns the body, and tells stories. Performances such as of art, rituals, or ordinary life are made of "twice-behaved behaviors," known as "restored behaviors," and of performed actions that people train to do, that they practice and rehearse. That training and conscious effort go into making art is clear. By Restored behaviour, he means to say that they are physical or verbal actions that are not-for-the first time, prepared, or rehearsed. A person may not be aware that they are performing a strip of restored behaviour. It is also referred to as twice-behaved behaviour. (22)

Similarly, Erving Goffman (1959) in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* defines performance in the following way;

A "performance" may be defined as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants. Taking a particular participant and his performance as a basic point of reference, we may refer to those who contribute to the other performances as the audience, observers, or co-participants. The pre-established pattern of action which is unfolded during a performance and which may be presented or played through on other occasions may be called a "part" or a "routine." These situational terms can easily be related to conventional structural ones. (15)



Goffman says that performance is the activities done on the occasions. It expects to have participants, audience and observers. The already existed pattern of action is repeated in the performance. This is conventional in its essence and may be everyday routine. He further says;

When an individual or performer plays the same part to the same audience on different occasions, a social relationship is likely to arise. Defining social role as the enactment of rights and duties attached to a given status, we can say that a social role will involve one or more parts and that each of these different parts may be presented by the performer on a series of occasions to the same kinds of audiences or to an audience of the same persons. (16)

Performance involves the social relationship among its people. Certain people have been assigned the social roles and duties to perform such activities on various occasions to its same audiences. This indicates that performance is social phenomena taken place regularly in different periods of time. It represents certain section of the society with its unique characteristics.

To Marvin Carlson (1996, *Performance: A Critical Introduction*), performance means as follow;

The term “performance” has become extremely popular in recent years in a wide range of activities in the arts, in literature, and in the social sciences. As its popularity and usage has grown, so has a complex body of writing about performance, attempting to analyse and understand just what sort of human activity it is. [. . .] The recognition that our lives are structured according to repeated and socially sanctioned modes of behaviour raises the possibility that all human activity could potentially be considered as “performance,” or at least all activity carried out with a consciousness of itself. (4)

Carlson admits that performance is human activities. The importance and popularity of performance is growing in this modern era that has created its complex implications to comprehend itself. He recognises human behaviours and modes of lives are in one way or other repeated which are assumed to have been done with consciousness. He adds;

[. . .] If we consider performance as an essentially contested concept, this will help us to understand the futility of seeking some overarching semantic field to cover such seemingly disparate usages as the performance of an actor, of a schoolchild, of an automobile. (5)

Carlson insists that dealing with performance is a complex perception. Understanding it helps us understand the meaning and implications of an actor or anything that performs

*Sakela*, as Richard Schechner's explanation, is a form of art in which he defines the art. To him, to perform something is to put on a show, a play, a dance, a concert. The *Sakela* resembles what Schechner call it an art in a sense that this cultural performance has something to do with dance, it requires a certain place and stage. When it is performed in a public place, it becomes a concert; a sole cultural concert of Rai community. This cultural dance can be performed in the several different steps that are called *Sili* in Rai language. *Sili* varies from one location and language to other. The art of performing *sili* in *Sakela* dance also differs among Rai ethnicity and their local place. Similarly, the name of the *Sili* can be different types that is determined on the basis of the place and the language. However, on the top of everything, the meaning of all the *silis* is the same.

In the course of *Sakela* dance, dancers make an art of vibrant shake of *Silimi* (a knife) and *Chamar* (yak's tails) that fundamentally indicate the alteration of *Sili* or of

the dancing steps. Such changes in performance are guided by the hands of *Silimoppa* (team leader). When the *Silimoppa* shakes of *Silimi* vibrantly with hands raising upward the sky, it means to change in *Sili*. Other *Sili* dancers have to understand the symbolic meaning of the skills and art performed by the team leader, and they have to act accordingly in spirit of leader. In this performance, there is customary use of traditional musical sound of *Dhol* and *Jhymta* which indicate the dancers to follow and change in *silis* or steps correctly.

Richard Schechner proposes the eight kinds of Performance. He states that performances occur in eight sometimes separate, sometimes overlapping situations. They are 1. in everyday life cooking, socializing, “just living”, 2. in the arts, 3. in sports and other popular entertainments, 4. in business, 5. in technology, 6. in sex, 7. in ritual – sacred and secular, and 8. in play (25). As far as *Sakela* festival is concerned, this comes to fall in Schechner’s seventh category as *Sakela* is a widely celebrated sacred ritual performance in Rai community in Nepal. On this occasion Rai people gather in a certain historical place with their cultural musical instruments, attires, and traditional food and beverages. They essentially perform a cultural dance singing native songs at the same time in a group.

There are numerous kinds of *Sakela Silis*. In fact, *Silis* are found to be different according to setting, place, language, ethnicity and sub-clan. Although they are not the same, they essentially connote the same cultural significance. Chandra Kumar Hatuwali presents a list of *silis* in his book *Sakenwa, Kiratharuko Mahan Chad*. For examples: they are: *Mangchhama Sili, Chhongwalak Sili, Longlenchip Sili, Narokwa Sili, Berawa Sili, Chasumkopma Sili, Parulak Sili, Rohompara Sili, Chanukama Sili, Chathoma Sili, Kongthokchapak Sili, Narawa Sili, Sumnima Sili,*

*Tayama Sili, Khyama Sili, Sumni Sili, Wapa Sili, Ngasa Sili (fish), Fakleawa Sili and Chasuma sili.*

When it comes to dealing with a particular performance, it is normally connected to a particular group of culture. In essence, culture is always should be viewed in connection to a specific group of people living in a particular time and space. Richard Schechner, moreover, asserts;

One cannot determine what “is” a performance without referring to specific cultural circumstances. There is nothing inherent in an action in itself that makes it a performance or disqualifies it from being a performance. From the vantage of the kind of performance theory I am propounding, every action is a performance. But from the vantage of cultural practice, some actions will be deemed performances and others not; and this will vary from culture to culture, historical period to historical period. (30)

Here, Schechner comes with the notion that every action can be regarded as a performance. However, performance is defined differently when it comes to cultural practices. According to him, all action does not deserve to be performance, thereby outlining between performances. It varies from culture to culture, time and space. In Schechner’s perspective, Sakela can be a cultural practice, and thereby it is a cultural performance and practice.

*Sakela* dancers are well-disciplined. They should not dance the way they wish. The dancers have to co-opt the cultural codes and norms of *Sakela* dance. For women and the girls, they are supposed to show up with the traditional, attire, uniform, and wear cultural ornaments. In the case of men, they should put on the traditional Rai attire with *Daka Topi* on the heads. All the men and women *Sakela* dancers sing the folks songs that is one of the attractions about *Sakela*. They collectively sing *Sakela*

songs by uttering *Soisoila ho soisoila . . . hurra ha ha ho . . . hurra ha ha . . . Soi dhole soi arko dhole khoi . . .* These are some of the fundamental lyrical segment of *Sakela* song.

What makes a performance is deeply associated to how people consider it in a different time and setting. The understanding of performance is largely affected by how people take it to be. Any event; social or cultural is not a performance by itself. They are given a particular value and aura, thereby deeming it a performance.

Schechner, more specifically accounts on the performance;

What “is” or “is not” performance does not depend on an event in itself but on how that event is received and placed. Today the enactment of dramas by actors “is” a theatrical performance. But it was not always so. What we today call “theatre” people in other times did not. The ancient Greeks used words similar to ours to describe the theatre (our words derive from theirs), but what the Greeks meant in practice was very different from what we mean. (31)

He points out the changing definition of performance through an example of ancient drama that its meaning is intermittently changed over the periods. It is indeed a matter of how you perceive the idea of performance. In the past, performance was widely taken as a cultural phenomenon whereas today it has turned to be something else for many. Unlike in the past, every action we perform today is categorised in a different kind of performance. We receive an action and give it to meaning and value, and that’s where a new form of performance we add up to the concept of performance. It occurs over the period of time. However, *Sakela*, to the largest extent, adheres to the previous cultural practice. It is widely recognised and received as cultural dance and practice. It has made a long history, especially in the Rai community in Nepal. The

dance is performed and passed on to the new generation, and this is how cultural performance enlivens.

If anyone aspires to see how *Sakela* dance evolved and originated, they need to give a glance to its history. Though the dance was not considered a performance in the past because of lack of the very term. But, today scholars are in search of their origin, language, culture and history that somehow help them to what identification they want to give themselves. Chandra Kumar Hatuwali, *Sakenwa, Kiratharuko Mahan Chad*, further asserts;

*Chasuma sili* is also called *Sumnima sili* or mother *Sili*. According to *Kirat* mythology Sumnima is the earth and mother of *Kirat Rai*. She is worshipped with great respect as the first mother of agrarian system. The process of agrarian system is pervasively found in *Chasuma Sili*. The steps like destroying the forest, ploughing, seeding, uprooting, planting, weeding round the plants, cutting down, heaping, chaffing, drying, weighing and to act or imitate of eating rice and to put rice inside the pocket are basic elements in *Sili*. (16)

Each *Sili* reveals that Rai people historically came from agricultural occupation. The imitation in *Silis* proves this fact undoubtedly. The civilization of Rai clan originated along with nature. To truth, all the points the author makes here justify the festival directly and reciprocally represent Kirant Rai's identity. He seems to claim that *Sakela* has to be viewed in terms of the way Kirant Rai live all their existence.

Putting together ideas drawn from various sources, Richard Schechner finds seven functions of performance altogether. They are, to entertain, to make something that is beautiful, to mark or change identity, to make or foster community, to heal, to teach, persuade, or convince, and to deal with the sacred and/or the demonic

respectively (38). In the context of *Sakela*, the primary function is to maintain the Kirant Rai's identity as it is. The festival somehow fosters Rai community throughout the Rai societies regardless of where they live today. However, Richard Schechner, unfolds the fact that this hierarchy of the functions get changed according to who you are and what you want to get done. No performance accomplishes all of these functions, but many performances emphasize more than one (38). He says that unlike "As" performance, "Is" performance refers to more definite, bounded events marked by context, convention, usage, and tradition. (42)

The *Sakela* dance is 'is performance' more than 'as performance' in its nature and ritual. As Schechner suggests, *Sakela* dance is historically meaningful; it has a context of commemoration of their ancestors, it has already taken a form of tradition. Chandra Kumar Hatuwali further states;

*Sili* is the heart of *Sakela*. It is the method of *Sakela* dance. It becomes different according to place and caste. There is the change in the movement of hand and foot according to the change of *Sili*. The activities of nature, animals and social activities are imitated by the *Sili* along with the dancers. The sillies are named as the natural elements. (13)

Here author explains how *Sakela* dance is performed. There is well use of dexterous and feet skills that harmonize in the movement. Especially, *Silis* means an imitation of activities performed by nature, animals and birds. Such performance is intensively accompanied by traditional music and songs sung along with the dance. This implies that *Sakela* festival is all about ritual performance.

Answering to the question, where do performances take place? Richard Schechner responds;

A painting “takes place” in the physical object; a novel takes place in the words. But a performance (even of a painting or a novel, when treated “as” performance, a concept I will explain shortly) takes place only in action, interaction, and relation. Performance isn’t “in” anything, but “between.” . . . .

A performer in ordinary life, in a ritual, at play, or in the performing arts does/shows something– performs an action. (23-24)

He argues that performance is all about treating things as action. He emphasizes the interrelation amongst different actions because he believes that every performer necessarily does something or exhibits something that always occurs in an action. This action does not take place in vacuum but in between and among the things which are related to each other essentially. On the top of everything, he argues that separating “art” from “ritual” is particularly difficult. He has noted that ritual objects from many cultures are featured in art museums. But he also considers religious services with music, singing, dancing, preaching, speaking in tongues, and healing (26).

*Sakewa Sili* is completely an action, meaning that it is a performance. It is done in a group; performing a singing, dancing in a pattern, playing musical instruments together. The dance not only the festivals but also, in depth, it introduces the whole Rai community who they are now. They celebrate it to preserve itself, to show they are the different ethnic group, and to ultimately keep Rai’s identity alive. The essence of being member of Rai community lies in this culture and tradition. The festival reveals that the Rai civilization grew out of agriculture and horticulture. So, *Sakela* is the most important and celebrated festival of Kirant Rai. This is observed every year on the occasion of *Ubhauli - Bhaisakh Purnima* (It is the time of planting the crops) and *Udhauli - Mangshir Purnima* (It is the time of harvesting crops).



Kirant Rai people believe, in every moment of happiness and bereavement, that there is influence of their ancestors' spirits and natural phenomena like the Sun-water, Land, Sky, flora and fauna, Nag, and so forth.

That's why they revere and worship those divines. On the auspicious *Udhauli* and *Ubhauli* festivals, they worship their deities with the help of *Nakshong*. On these occasions, they offer, fruits, ginger, fish, beef, sacred *Janda*, *Raksi*, and sacrifice pig, cocks, and local animals. In *Sakela*, Rai people are supposed to carry out *Huilung* Ritual. According to this ritual, people are expected to adorn their Chulo (traditional Furnace) on the very day. Similarly, they also need to throng into sacred place called *Sakela Thaan* where they worship and dance. On the last day, they worship *Seuli* and *Sakela* dance is carried out on different locations. In *Sakela*, songs are sung in the interval between *Silis*. It means they take some leisure time in between two *Silies* to sing the *Sakela* songs. That is how, *Sakela* is celebrated.

Stuart Hall in *The Questions of Cultural Identity*; "Who Needs Identity" talks about the identity as such a concept operating 'under erasure' in the interval between reversal and emergence. This is an idea which cannot be thought in the old way, but without which certain key questions cannot be thought at all (2). On the top, on this topic, he says;

I have made an appropriation of the term identity which is certainly not widely shared and may not be well understood. I use 'identity' to refer to the meeting point - the-point of suture, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to 'interpellate', speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be 'spoken'. (5-6)

Hall (1995) states that the identities are the points of temporary attachment to the subject positions. The discursive practices construct such ideas for us. They are the result of a successful articulation or chaining of the subject into the flow of the discourse. Identities are, as it were, the positions which the subject is obliged to take up while always 'knowing' that they are representations. As a matter of fact, this representation is always constructed across a lack, across a division, and from the place of the Other. Eventually representation of the subject positions can never be adequate and identical to the subject processes which are invested in them (6).

With regard to how identities are created, Hall remarks that they are precisely constructed within, not outside, discourse. We have to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies (4). On the contrary, Hall also chimes to Derrida to the extent that identities are constructed through, not outside, difference.

Now, Hall answers to the question; where does this *irreducibility* of the concept, identity, emerge? He thinks that answer lies in its centrality to the question of agency and politics. He further says that by 'agency' he means to express no desire whatsoever to return to an unmediated and transparent notion of the subject or identity as the centred author of social practice, or to restore an approach which places its own point of view at the origin of all historicity. He agrees with Foucault that what we require here is 'not a theory of the knowing subject, but rather a theory of discursive practice. However, Hall believes that what this decentring requires is not an abandonment or abolition of the subject but a reconceptualization. In fact, it is rethinking of it in its new, displaced or decentred position within the paradigm. Similarly, by politics Hall means both the significance in modern forms of political movement of the signifier 'identity' and its pivotal relationship to a politics of

location. But he also means the manifest difficulties and instabilities. They have characteristically affected all contemporary forms of identity politics (2).

This involves the radically disturbing recognition that identity emerges only through the relation to the Other. It means that identity gets created through the relation to what it is not. To be precise, what it lacks. This is called constitutive outside. For Derrida, identities can function as points of identification and attachment only because of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render 'outside', abjected (4-5). For Bhabha and Hall, the unities which identities proclaim are, in fact, constructed within the play of power and exclusion. They are the result, not of a natural and inevitable or primordial totality but of the naturalized, over-determined process of closure (5). Hall, in common sense language, argues that the idea of identification is constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation (2).

Hall avows;

Identification is a process of articulation, a suturing, an over-determination not a subsumption. There is always 'too much' or 'too little' - an over-determination or a lack, but never a proper fit, a totality. Like all signifying practices, it is subject to the 'play', of *difference*. It obeys the logic of more-than-one. And since as a process it operates across difference, it entails discursive work, the binding and marking of symbolic boundaries, the production of 'frontier effects'. It requires what is left outside, its constitutive outside, to consolidate the process. (3)

He accepts that the identities are never unified. In late modern times, they are increasingly fragmented and fractured. They are never singular but multiply

constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization. They are constantly in the process of change and transformation. Indeed, the identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we came from', so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves(3). To comply it with Rai's *Sakela*, they share some of its qualities; the dance is being made and positioned as a matter of pride of the community. They represent themselves in this cultural performance. However, it is largely constructed within its community discourse as a matter of cultural identity.

What's more, *Sakela* is one of the major cultural identities of Rai community as described in the *Mundhum*. As a matter of fact, it is cultural and traditional dance in which *Sumnima* and *Paruhang* or, and the nature in centre has been put in its heart. All the methods of celebrating *Sakela* regard the stone to be a symbol of the God or the creator. In *Sakela*, people of Kirant Rai community, remembers their forefathers, and they are requested to save the crops, wish for opportune rain, and for a good harvesting through singing and dancing in *Sakela*.

Besides, the *Sakela* dancers believe that raining from the sky is possible by pleasing their gods and ancestor through their cultural dance of *Sakela* during *Baishake Purnima* called *Ubhauri* and *Mangsire Purnima* called *Udhauri*. In fact, *Ubhauri* and *Udhauri* festivals have been an emblem of cultural identity of Rai community today. The festivals shapes the way of they live to the large extent, thereby functioning as the marker of different ethnic group with different cultural identity in Nepal.

A few lines of *Sakela* song from the book of Chandra Kumar Hatuwali, Sakenwa reveals the inner aesthetic beauty of *Sakela* below.

*Aakasaiko kalo mailo aahai badalule hoki semuna*

*Jethi vanda kanchhi ramri aahai gajalule ho ki semuna*

*Aakasako gadyang gudung aahai patalaiko vuichal semuna*

*Marne jati kailasaima aahai banchneko yo chhal semuna*

*Aakasaiko jhilkemilke aahai ek tara khasai deuna semuna*

*Yo man jasto tyo man vae aahai dilma basai deuna semuna. (17)*

This is a typical traditional *Sakela* song sung by *Sakela* dancers. The song ruminates on love, life, death, nature, and philosophy. It sutures clouds with beauty of girls. There is request for exchange of love between girls and boys. Similarly, it relates death to the present - alive people on earth. It also reveals plight of humankind overall. Essentially, *Sakela* song carries an identity of entire Kirant Rai. Rai Bantawa *Sakela* performers sings in the following way;

*Cheptesun kanma kumkumko*

*Vet vayo aaja thumthumko*

*Soi soila ho soi soila*

*Salala pani nau muni*

*Binti hai garchhu pau muni*

*Soi soila ho soi soila. (19)*

Such *Sakela* song symbolizes the immense depth of Kirant Rai literature. The richness in folklores and myth that create a sense of belongingness among members of Rai community. Basically, the songs involve containing a social relationship, brotherhood, love and compassion. The cultural songs serve as a bridge to emotionally join them, thereby strengthening the bonds and identity between them.

Of course, though identities and cultures are constructed, it carries some meaning regarding what it means to people of particular group. It represents them and they also invest themselves in them. This is how identities function mutually with its subjects. Stuart Hall in his book *Cultural identity and Diaspora defines the cultural identity*. According to him, there are at least two different ways of thinking about cultural identity. He says;

The first position defines 'cultural identity' in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history. (223)

*Sakela* can be defined in this version of identity. In other words, people of Rai community seems to reveal their same shared and common cultural performance as their identity both in the past and even today. Similarly, Hall proposes the second position of cultural identity that recognises;

[There are also critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute 'what we really are'; or rather - since history has intervened - 'what we have become'. We cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about 'one experience, one identity', without acknowledging its other side - the ruptures and discontinuities which constitute, precisely, the Caribbean's 'uniqueness'. (225)

Here, Hall states that the cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation (225).

Moreover, Hall opines that the cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture. They are made within the discourses of history and culture. Cultural identities are not an essence but a positioning. That is why, there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position, which has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental 'law of origin'(226). Though *Sakela* dance stems from its history, it is even today treated as an identity. Some changes and reformation in terms of celebration can be realised in its performance. But the community still seems in attempt to position itself in the dance they perform in the fashion that the very cultural dance entails a profound significance of who they are. Bhakta Kumar Rai, explains the myth of the first human being as per Kirant Rai Mundhum. He implicitly reveals historical and identical importance of them. He, in his book, *Sakenwa Kina* pens;

According to *Chasuma Sili*, when *Paruhang* and *Sumnima* originated human beings, Paruhang taught them to destroy the forest and plough the farm. Similarly, Sumnima taught her children for seeding on the farm for their food. In this *sili* the dancers act in the circle imitating the steps of agrarian system by the help of the dance leader. The steps like destroying the forest, ploughing, seeding, uprooting, planting, weeding round the plants, cutting down, heaping, chaffing, drying, sifting and to act and imitate of eating rice and to put inside of pocket. (17)

In the above lines, Bhakta Kumar Rai sees *Chasuma Sili* from the perspective of natural imitation and dedication towards it. *Paruhang* and *Sumnima* are the ones who started Rai Civilization for the first time in the history. They taught their decedents to survive by making use of flora and fauna, and soil. So, the steps and style of *Sili* are heavily influenced by agrarian activities. Overall, *Sakela* and *sili*, in one way or other, represent the identity of agrarian Rai society. The pervasiveness of nature in *Chasuma Sili* identifies Rai people with a different way of life. Let us read the song of *Sakela* followed by *syamuna* taken from work *Dumi Rai*;

*Pani paryo rimijhimi chhataile tarkaune a hoi syamuna*

*Dadai kati gaera pani man yatai farkaula a hoi syamuna*

*Ha ha soi soi*

*Goruko masu dhanko vat*

*Kiratiko yahi ho jat*

*Hutityauko pasula*

*Ghumi ghumi nachula.*

This *Sakela* song is a part of broader Kirant literature. Indeed, the folk songs like this are the heart of *Sakela* dance performance. The song revolves around the theme of love, harmony and village life. It is also a means of entertainment for them. Such *Sakela* songs give refreshments to its dancers and audiences. While singing folk songs, they are turned into question and reply form. It especially takes place between the groups of boys and girls. They express their love toward each other and request for tying a knot.

The song mentions the tradition of beef consumption in Rai community in the past. It was the best food for them. That is no longer now because it is restricted by law. This shows that the cultural transformation taken place within the community



over the times. Culture gets changed and reformed as per the spirit of time and society. The way Hall and Foucault argue that it is the power and discourse that creates selves, culture and also eliminates them when needed. So, change in law of Nepal powered by Rana regimes hundreds of years before putting this tradition of Kirant Rai into the brim of extinction.

As Foucault reminds us that every regime of representation is a regime of power formed by the fatal couplet, 'power/knowledge'. But Hall opines that this kind of knowledge is internal, not external. To be precise, he further claims that it is one thing to position a subject or set of peoples as the Other of a dominant discourse whereas it is quite another thing to subject them to that 'knowledge', not only as a matter of imposed will and domination, by the power of inner compulsion and subjective con-formation to the norm (225-226).

Hall sheds light on the interesting fact that it was only in the 1970s that this Afro-Caribbean identity became historically available to the great majority of Jamaican people, at home and abroad. In this historic moment, Jamaicans discovered themselves to be 'black', and in the same moment, they came to discover themselves to be the sons and daughters of 'slavery'. (231). Hall further clarifies that this profound cultural discovery, however, was not, and could not be, made directly, without mediation. It could only be made through the impact on popular life of the post-colonial revolution, the civil rights struggles, the culture of Rastafarianism and the music of reggae - the metaphors, the figures or signifiers of a new construction of 'Jamaican-ness'. Ultimately, these signified a new Africa of the New World, grounded in an old Africa. It was a spiritual journey of discovery that led, in the Caribbean, to an indigenous cultural revolution (231).

*Sakela* dance as an identity has been recently discovered phenomenon. It emerged pervasively in this way after the Second People's Movement in 2073 B.S in Nepal. The members of community became aware of who they are not, and who they are by caste and clan. They, then, started a cultural movement for national recognition as a different and indigenous group of the country. They demand for their representation in all tiers of the governance. This is how they want to re-create their identity, and represent themselves in the country. One example of what makes them difference is their songs; *Sakela* songs. It can justify their distinct position in a society, thereby claiming their identity through such cultural performance. The songs of *Sakela* dance in which crops and food is asked in the following ways. (*Kirati Bikram, Nipsung*)

*Shiva Parvatilai dhogi diyau hai*

*Prithivi Suryalai dhogi diyau hai*

*Majale geetiharu Gau hai*

*Shir ubhyauni ramro magau hai*

*Para para majale hera hai*

*Dhanule mriga hana hai*

*Sugurlai tirale hana hai*

*Timro hatama kukhura Liu hai*

*Rukh hatiyarale fad hai*

*Matolai kodalole khana hai*

*Biruwa ropne thau banau hai*

*Hamro thauma pakeko anna laijau hai*

*Anna magne geet gau hai*

*Dhan majjale ukhela hai*

*Anna pakyo sabaile kata hai*

*Katdai bokdai khoja hai*

*Soi dole soi, arko dhole khoi . . . (34)*

The above lines are of some *Chasuma Sili*. It is the key *Sili* dedicated to nature. The *sili* expresses the way agrarian Rai people cultivate and harvest crops. It depicts the community's lifestyles and activities they perform as farmers. This is a cultural way of paying homage to mother-nature. *Chasuma Sili* is based on the agrarian system. In this *Chasuma Sili*, Rai people revere the natural elements like earth, river, air, fire, hill, stone and sky. They are the source of making the lives exist. So, people sacrifice rooster in the name of these things. They also offer *Akshata*, ginger, alcohol to them.

Moreover, all the *Sakela* sillies are, in way or other, dedicated to elements of nature and the heavenly divine. For instance, *Ngasa Sili* is dedicated to fish. The *Sakela Sili* dancers sing such songs that glorifies the fishes and imitate its activity. In the same vein, other *silis* are imitated from natural activities such as cocks, planting seeds and harvesting rice paddy, poaching, sabotaging clearings and so on.

In a scenario and fact that every culture undergoes the process of transformation and recreation, *Sakela* has also experienced it over the time and generation. Hall expects us to think of identity as a production which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. The identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past (225).

To recapitulate, *Sakela Sili*, based on the cultural performance, is a hallmark of cultural identity of Kirant Rai community in a sense that it incorporates, strengthens and preserves Kirant Rai language, motherland, literature, culture, philosophy and principles of living. Such identical elements clearly unfold their

history, civilization and evolution of Rai clan. *Sakela* represents that Rai people are agrarian by origin who lived in the eastern pastoral sites of Nepal for centuries.

As a matter of fact, *Sakela sili* is said to have begun with the commencement of agrarian civilization. They believe in natural phenomena and revere them accordingly. The existence, culture, language, literature, and evolution of the clan is intensively associated with nature. Historical agricultural background of Kirant Rai community has become a marker of identity. Similarly, from the origin of humankind to today, it is said that *Sakela Sili* festival has been observing twice a year as a ritual performance in which folklores, songs, and art of dance is performed. *Sakela* festivals mediate Rai people to connect to their past, ancestors, culture, and love toward nature.

To borrow Stuart Hall's idea of cultural identity, identity is a matter of positioning oneself in a certain position in a certain period of time and space. Indeed, identity is by and large has to do with politics. Hence, Rai community seems to be actively involving in this politics. They endeavour to connect their identity with their ancestor, origins, *Mundhum*, to the present state of change and globalization. As Hall says that identity is in a continuous flux of change. The identity of the clan is being modified and transformed because an idea of self/subject is getting over the sense of collectiveness in the pretext of globalization. What's more, the community seems to be re-positioning, and re-creating their collective identity through cultural performance such as *Sakela* every year. This awareness, in one way or other, is a reviving and rejuvenating process of the self/subject to see themselves who they were, how they are, and what identity they want to create in the coming days.

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