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Identity politics in light of celebrating *sakela* Festival among the Rai-Kirats in Kathmandu valley

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ABSTRACT

The Sakela festival is celebrated twice a year in the Kathmandu Valley by the Rai-Kirant indigenous peoples, during late spring and early winter seasons. As the organizer is the Kirat Rai Yayokkha, the representative organization of the Rai-Kirat adivasis in Nepal, the festival is a spectacular collective action and movement that speaks about Rai-Kirat's cultural ritual contexts as well as collective Rai-Kirat identity politics in Nepal. This paper reveals out how the Rai-Kirat adivasis, despite being a multilingual population, construct and demonstrate a sense of solidarity and oneness through the sakela festival celebration and how the Rai-Kirat adivasis resist the State's domination, particularly the naming of provinces, and claim for the name of the province as 'Kirat' based on Rai-Kirat's territorial history and collective identity. Based on observation of and participation in the sakela festival celebrations at five different locations in Kathmandu Valley over two years, this article argues that sakela festival celebrations in Kathmandu Valley speak about making the Rai-Kirat collective identity. Furthermore, the article demonstrates how the modality of the sakela festival celebration produces the relationships that bind the Rai-Kirat adivasis in collective political solidarity for the Kirat nation.

Key words: Collective Identity, Festival, Identity politics, Kirat-nation, Sakela

INTRODUCTION

This paper elucidates the facets of collective identity formation among the Rai-Kirat indigenous peoples under the auspices of the Kirat Rai Yayokkha, the

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representative organization of Rai-Kirat indigenous peoples in the Kathmandu Valley.

This paper explores how the Rai-Kirat *adivasis*, despite being a multilingual population, construct and demonstrate the sense of solidarity and oneness through the *sakela* festival celebration. This paper examines how Rai-Kirat *adivasis* reconstruct their history, and collective identity in relation to the territorial claim through the collective performances on the occasion of *sakela* festival. Furthermore, this paper explores the ways of Rai-Kirat *adivasis* resist the State's domination, particularly naming of province, and claim for the name of province as 'Kirat' based on the Rai-Kirat's territorial history and collective identity.

There is no dearth of anthropological studies on *sakela* collectively celebrated among the Rai-Kirat *adivasi* focusing on various dimensions of festival or ritual and their collective identity. (Hatuwali, 2064v.s.; Kirat (Rai), 2047; Rai, 2021; Rai, 2012; Rai, 2021; Rai, 2080; Rai, 2071; Schlemmer, 2004; Wettstein, 2018) Rai-Kirat's *sakela* festival collectively celebrated in Kathmandu valley involves not only the rituals, songs, dances, and with ritualistic regalia and paraphernalia but also combined with a formal political program inviting the leaders from different political parties, high-level officials from the government often including the Prime Minister too. In this way, the modality of collectively celebrating *sakela* festival in Kathmandu valley has been changed and transformed in many ways over the years that in the past the festival was celebrated as cultural-social festival while it has added political meanings with concerns of collective identity and history in relationships to their demands about naming the Kirat province based on their territorial history and collective identity.

Celebrating *sakela* festival in totality seems to be integral to *adivasi* identity politics, which are collectively performed and celebrated. This paper showcases the aspects of the Kirat identity politics in light of celebration performed during the *sakela* festival collectively performed among the Rai-Kirat *adivasis* in Kathmandu valley. *Sakela* festival is performed collectively in two occasions each year: One prior to plantation season (*ubhauri*), and another during the harvest (*udhauri*) season. Kirat *adivasis* express their gratitude to the Nature for bestowing upon them with the plentiful harvest enough for the whole year during the festival. They sing and dance together starting from the full moon day in the month of Mangshir as per the lunar calendar. Likewise, *sakela ubhauri* falls on the full moon day of Bhaishakh called Baishakh Purnima. *Sakela sili* is performed in *ubhauri* to revere nature and worship the ancestral deities and divinities, wishing for well-being of family members and community and for good plantation, healthy plants and good crops. It begins with *Bhumi Puja* by making sincere request to nature divinities and ancestral deities for good crops and protection from natural disasters. Rai (2021) asserts that Rai-Kirat consider their myths of *sakela* as a matter of pride and glory. On the occasion of *sakela*, the mythic and historical figures are sincerely remembered, worships of divinities

are propitiated as the essential aspect of *sakel* ritual, and all these are integrally connected to Kirat collective identity (Rai 2071, p.1-2).

The Kirat peoples have more than 25 different linguistic groups, each of them has their distinct languages (Census 2024). Rai-Kirat groups have various names for *sakela sili*. But the overall meaning is the same. For example, Rai (2012) asserts that Bantawa called *Sakanwa*, Chamling called *Sakela*, Thulung called *Tosi*, and Koyu called it *Sakal*. It is a name of cultural *sakawa* festival where *sili* dance is performed and worship takes place with three stones which symbolized the universe, ancestors and mother nature in Rai-Kirat religion (Rai, 2012, p. 31).

In modern times, “songs can be used to report and comment on current affairs, for political pressure, for propaganda, and to reflect and mold public opinion” (Finnegan, 2012, p. 265). The dissemination of political messages through song in Nepali politics is not a recent phenomenon. Ever since the advent of modern political transformation in Nepal in the 1950s, all phases of democratic movements and political parties have adopted songs for various purposes, e.g., political indoctrinations, election campaigns, dissemination of political consciousness, and nationalist campaigns (Chemjong, 2017).

This paper seeks to answer the basic question of how Rai-Kirat’s *sakela* festival celebration is combined with political phenomenon of collective identity based on *adivasi* Kirat’s unique history in relationships to the state making process in Nepal. This paper also seeks to answer how the sense of collective Kirat nation is being constructed through collective celebration of *sakela* festival. Rai-Kirat’s continuous demand and claim for the Kirat province for the past two decades through various political movements, forums, *sakela* festival celebrations, including both the Constituent Assembly sessions (2008–2015), and Rai-Kirats’ vehement denial of ‘Koshi’ name of the province #1 are the manifestations of the sense of Kirat collective identity. This paper showcases that the Rai-Kirat *adivasis*, through the *sakela* festival celebration, demonstrate and express themselves being uniquely different from those of the Hindu state-makers in the past Nepal. The objectives of this study are:

- To explore and interpret aspects of collective identity and political context of celebrating the Kirat *sakela* festival in Kathmandu Valley.
- To explore the roles of *sakela* festival plays in producing the binding relationships to form collective solidarity thereby constructing the sense of Kirat collective nation among the Rai-Kirat in Nepal.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Various locations in the districts of Kathmandu and Lalitpur were the field sites for observation and participation for this research. The *sakela* festival organized at Bhangal’s Bhumethan in Budhanilakantha in Kathmandu district, at Tuundikhel in the heart of Kathmandu city, at Tinkune near Koteswor in Kathmandu, at Hattiban

mang-him place in Lalitpur, and Baneswor nearby the Parliament House in Kathmandu were observed and participated over two years during 2022– 2023. The festival event organized in Baneswor in May 2023 was unique and special in its political purpose and ambiance, which specifically focused on demonstration, and public speeches by the leaders to protest the No. 1 Provincial parliament's decision to name the province 1 as 'Koshi'. The *sakela* event at Baneswor was organized in support of Kirat province, and to put pressure on the federal and provincial governments to amend and change the province's name to Kirat province.

This paper is based on qualitative data collected mainly through observation of the *sakela* events. The sources of data for this paper are the events. While observing and participating the events speeches and songs were recorded, and photographs and brief video clips were taken from the events. The voice records and brief video clips were listened and transcribed, and summarized to include in the paper as the findings or the data.

Conceptual Definitions and Review of Literature

Festival celebrations are no longer merely social and cultural events but they are also charged with political meanings concerned with collective identity. Anthropological studies of festivals have shown that collective celebration of festivals helps to create bonding and solidarity in society. Durkheim saw feasts and festivals as an 'effervescence' the intensity of which cements the solidarity of a group or a people, a representation of the invisible relationship between man and the laws of nature, a veritable institution whereby the bonds between the members of a society are maintained, regenerated and reproduced (Cudny, 2014, p. 641). Similarly, Durkheim states that every festival has certain characteristics of a religious ceremony, even if it is of purely secular origin. In every case, its effect is to bring individuals together, to put the masses into motion...Man is carried outside himself, pulled away from his ordinary occupations and preoccupations... When taken as a whole, a festival ceremony has a serious purpose (Durkheim, 1995, pp. 386–387). Cudny defines festivals as recurring social event that occurs regularly and in which all members of a community—connected by linguistic, ethnic, religious, historical, and shared worldview bonds—participate directly or indirectly and to varying degrees through a variety of forms and planned events (Cudny, 2014). Festivals are multidimensional. The religious, political, social and artistic are combined into a unique performance (Odotei, 2002, p. 17).

Peter Phipps argues,

“Indigenous cultural festivals may be seen as an assertion of rights and a call to recognition... Cultural festivals are one of the few consistently positive spaces for indigenous communities to forge and assert a more constructive view of themselves, both intergenerationally and as part of a drive for recognition and respect as distinct cultures in local, national, and international context.”(Phipps, 2010, p. 217).

In the present day era of identity politics, celebrating festivals collectively may be seen as part of political movements in relations to making and expression of collective identity. Collective identity movement is also associated with making of a nation, rather a sub-nation of indigenous peoples who belong to particular territory, sharing the similar historical memories, and having the sense of 'we feeling' as well as sense of solidarity. Guibernau and Rex define the nation as a group of people who are aware of their shared culture, are bonded to a clearly defined region, have a shared history, are working toward a shared vision for the future, and are asserting their right to self-govern. Thus, context—including consciousness, region, language, culture, history, and religion—all matter. In terms of this range of possibilities, it is uncommon to discover a real-world example of a nation with a distinct and homogenous character (Guibernau & Rex, 1997). Such definitions and characteristics of festival may be reflected in the ways Rai-Kirats collectively celebrate *sakela* festival under the leadership and organization of the Kirat Rai Yayokkha in Kathmandu valley.

In anthropology, Emile Durkheim was the one to state that collective performances of ritual and celebration of festivals create bonding relationships and solidarity among the individuals in society. In other words, such bonding relationships and a sense of solidarity may be seen from the viewpoint of collective identity. In this regard, Taylor & Whittier (1999, p.170) define collective identity as the shared definition of a group that derives from members' common interests, experiences, and solidarity (Taylor & Whittier, quoted in Owens et al, 2010, p.490). A sense of we-ness, or connection to other members of the group/category, is an essential component of collective identity (Owens et al., 2010, p. 490). Such notion of collective identity spectacularly manifests when the Rai-Kirats celebrate the *sakela* festival with various activities reverberating the messages of the Kirat collective nation.

The nation persists as an important source of identity, community, and collective memory for most of the world's populations (Young et al., 2007, p. i). The term 'nation' is also defined in relation to ethnicity and ethnic identity. Gellner et al. (1997) quote A.D. Smith to define a nation as having six characteristics: a common name, a shared origin story, a shared history, a unique shared culture, a connection to a particular region, and a feeling of unity (p. 14). A nation is a community of sentiment or an imagined community based on one or more of the following: race, ethnicity, language, religion, customs, political memory, and shared experience of the Other. A nation exists where a people succeeds in its claim to be one by securing recognition of it from others (Jary & Jary, 2000, p. 403).

"The nation as a whole can be seen either as a composite entity, a collectivity formed by the association of individuals, or in unitary terms, a collective individual... [This] conception results in a collectivistic vision or collectivistic nationalism" (Seymour, 2004, p. 46). In this regard, the construction of the Kirat

collective nation may be seen and explained through the songs, dances, and political speeches delivered by leaders and guests during the celebration of the *sakela* festival. Furthermore, the Kirat Rai Yayokkha plays a crucial role in uniting different Rai-Kirat *Adivasis* for this purpose.

We may find many literature regarding the different aspects and the significance of Kirat festival *sakela*. Most of the literature written on the topic *sakela* are engaged predominantly on the ecological, historical, cultural, social and economic facets.

Kirat Rai Sanskritik Tadartha Samiti published the collection of articles written on the topic of *sakela sili* in 2047v.s. with the title "*sakewa - toshi*". Of the ten articles consisting in the volume, six had used the term '*chandi*' instead of *sakela*. The term "*Chandi*" was later replaced by the Kirat word *sakela*, *shakawa*, *toshi*, etc, as Rai - Kirat community perceived "*Chandi*" connoting the Hindu influence on Rai-Kirat cultural identity, especially after the Peoples Movement Part I, 1990 and Peoples Movement Part II, 2006.

Rai (2071) writes, "With the latest political transformation, cultural resurrection has been in full swing. It used to be seen as a great accomplishment to celebrate our own culture without any restrictions. This was largely due to the strong influence of Hindu cultural domination... The current situation is completely different. The culture is now associated with identity. *Sakel* has become a fundamental aspect of identity. Moreover, *sakel* has developed as political language, providing the concept of nationalism and giving meaning to the nation and nationalism" (p. 60). He further argues that it was the result of the long and continuous struggle of various organizations within the Rai-Kirat community that the government has finally recognized *sakel* as an important national festival and a public holiday has recently been granted (p. 59).

According to Barth (1993), anthropologists should methodically choose events to examine their overall significance or effects. This method allows for a comprehensive investigation of the political and historical facets of any given event in great depth. Furthermore, a politically astute observation and study of these occurrences will aid in understanding the dynamics between the state and society. Chemjong (2017) interprets Barth's (1993) concept of 'outward in space and backward in time' as follows: "Outward in space means cultural, social, economic, and political aspects within the society as well as the relationship with other societies. Similarly, backward in time means the history of society itself and the historical relationship with the state" (p. 159). Observing the ceremonial performance of the *sakela* celebration with an open mind reveals the true essence of the Kirat *Adivasis*, their primordial identity, and their historical relationship with the state during the state-making process. Specifically, the *sakela* celebration in the Kathmandu Valley, organized by Kirat Rai Yayokkha, signifies the pressing demand

for Rai-Kirat peoples' political, social, cultural, and economic inclusion and territorial autonomy, at least in naming 'Kirat Province.'

Finding 1: Festival setting

On a warm Saturday morning of December 2022, Kirat youths, girls, boys, both male and females, attired and adorned in Kirat customary clothes and jewelries, from different areas of Kathmandu valley began to pour in a designated place located in the northern edge of Kathmandu valley. The field prepared for the *sakela* festival celebration was located on the lap of Shivapuri mountain, on the bank of Dhobi Khola, the place called Bhumethan, Bhangal at Budhanilakantha municipality. The festival was organized by the Municipality Committee of Kirat Rai Yayokha of Budhanilakantha municipality. The main stage for the guests and dignitaries was erected at the north-western part of the field, overlooking the field where the *sakela* altar was erected. A banner was hung by the front roof of the stage as the message and slogan on the banner was:

किरात राईहरुको महान चाड, साकला उधौली ५०८२, को हार्दिक शुभकामना ²

The year-date mentioned in the banner was the Kirati calendar year 5082 instead of 2078 V.S. or 2022 c.e. Mentioning of the Kirat calendar year 5082 may be said to have expressed the fact that the Kirat dynasty have started their own era which is said to have ruled over Nepal for 32 generations. The first King of the Kirat dynasty being the King Yalambar whose image is imprinted on the Kirat Rai Yayokha's national flag. The Kirat flag is displayed in all public festivals and occasions of political movements that claim and demand for the Kirat province. Various political dignitaries, and local leaders such as the Ward Chair and members, local Police post chiefs, civil service officers, and important personalities of society with dignified prestige and honor were called upon to take seats on the stage.

2 Hearty Best Wishes on the Occasion of the Kirat-Rai's Great Festival Sakela-Udhaulī -5082

Map 1

Kirat Rai people celebrating the Sakela festival



A tree sapling was erected in the field of the dance field, which may be called the altar of the festival. Different paraphernalia (such as gourde, khukuri, sickle, bow and arrow) of ritual and a drum were hung by the branch of the tree-sapling. The *Nakchong* (ritual performer of the Kirats) would perform rituals at the altar before the formal beginning of *sakela* dance and songs encircling the altar.

Nearby the main stage were various stalls displaying and for selling the Kirati products – fabrics, clothes, jewelries etc. Similarly, there were also Kirati food and drink stalls, and behind the main stage were the stalls of pork roast, one of the most desired menu for the Kiratis. The youths, elderly ones, and children alike were attired on unique Kirati costumes, and it seemed that they were attending the festival in formal dress-code based on their cultural and customary tradition.

The program announcer started formal program of the festival by announcing the Chair of the program, and gradually invited the guests and dignitaries representing the municipality, Kirat Rai Yayokha, and the local administration related officials to take their seats on the main stage. The guests were offered the scarfs and wishing them their head-held-high followed by series of speeches delivered by the guests.

On their speeches, the guests mostly expressed about how the *sakela* festival had been an integral to their collective identity, and marker of Kirat solidarity thereby also focusing on how and why the Kirat Rais have been observing the festival twice a year from the time immemorial. This indicated that the festival was their ancestral festival and it was also associated with the origin of the Kirat peoples.

Furthermore, the stage and the guests and dignitaries seated on the stage clearly symbolized and reverberated the fact that the *sakela* festival celebration meant more than a cultural and social event. It was even a politically charged and motivated event that claims and demands for Kirat province could be heard in the speeches as well as displayed in different forms such as clothing, jewelries, flag-displays etc.

After the series of speeches delivered by the dignitaries and guests, the participants started to dance encircling the altar – with the rhythm of drum-beat and the cymbals.

Findings-2: 'No Koshi' Campaign

On the 1st of May, 2023, an official announcement regarding the celebration of *Ubhauri/Sakela* was posted on the official Facebook page of *Kirat Rai Yayokkha*, Kathmandu Nepal which stated, “*Yas Patakko Ubhauri Chadmaa Sakel sili (dance) Maitighar Dekhi Naya Baneshwor Sammako Sadakma*”, meaning -*ubhauri* festival and celebration of *sakela sili* this time will be happening on the street from Maitighar to Baneshwor. The announcement further elaborates, how the decision of celebrating *Ubhauri Sakela* program as a movement/politics of cultural rights was possible in this chaotic political milieu. The Yayokkha requested different indigenous communities celebrating *Sakela* (Rai-Kirat), *Chasok Tangnam* (Limbu), *Syaadaar Pidaar* (Sunuwar), *Bhume* (Magar), *Toshi* (Thulung-Kirat) and others to join at *sano* Hattiban from 8 a.m. and participate the procession from Maitighar to Baneshwor with “NO Koshi” placards placed on chest and banners in the hand, along with playing the cymbals and drums.

This celebration of *ubhauri/sakela* as a “*Sanskritik Aandolan*” in the Kathmandu valley was organized conjointly by different organizations like, Kirat Rai Yayokkha, Lalitpur District Working Committee, Valley Working Committee of *Kirat Yakthung Chumlung*, Central Working Committee of *Sunuwar Sewa Samaj*, Valley Working Committee of *Yakhha Chhuma*, Central Working Committee of different Kirat organizations and ‘1 no. Pradesh Puna: Namakaran Samyukta Sangharsha Samiti’ (Province No.1 Re-naming Joint Struggle Committee).

5th of May, 2023 – 12:00 PM (Baneshwor – Kathmandu)

Like every year, for the *sakela* celebration, the Rai – Kirat community gathered at Hattiban, Lalitpur at around 8 am for the ritual performance and commemorate their relationship with their sacred space where they associate themselves to their collective identity, history, ancestral deity and divinities. The group of the Rai- Kirat community would basically arrive in Tundikhel after the completion of ritual performance and restart their major celebration. However, it was different this time, in many ways.

The group of Rai - Kirat community arrayed the left side of the street at Baneshwor, near the federal parliament building, marched from the Maitighar Mandala at around 12 pm. Unconcerned of the scorching mid-day sun, the peoples were entirely absorbed for this peaceful cultural protest, carrying banners, Kirati flags, headbands, pamphlets, and placards of 'No Koshi', vis-à-vis the naming of Province no. 1. The various slogans demanding the name "Kirat province" were seen during the *sakela* celebration in the street of Baneshwor. Slogans like, "*Kirat Pardesh Goshna Gara*" (officially announce the Kirat Province); "*wollo Kirat, pallo hai Kirat, majhama majh Kirat semuna ni lai lai ha ha ha; Koshi Pradesh Mandainau, Kirat nalyaai chaddainau*" and others were used in the banners of different Kirat organizations. This *Ubhauri Sakela* festival was unique in terms of celebration, as they were demanding for the renaming of Province no. 1, reclaiming their Kirat territory, reviving their ancestral history and cultural identity that was erased and wiped out in the state making process of modern Nepal.

This time, it was completely different to see the Limbu community joining the cultural protest along with the celebration of *Chasok Tangnam* after more than decades. Basically, Kirat Rai community would come to Tundikhel and Limbu community would stay at Lalitpur for the celebration of *Sakela Sili* and *Chasok Tangnam* respectively, after the ritual performance at Sano Hattiban.

Kirat indigenous peoples of different age groups and from different sub - groups, were decked in their traditional attire and jewelries that was matched accordingly. The rousing mass in the boiling temperature with their unwavering claim, unshaken faith and not even bothered by the huge number of deployed police force, was something unique to witness. The heavy barricading by the Armed Police Force could be seen on the sight to halt the group from moving towards the Federal Parliament. The formal program at Baneshwor started at around 1 pm. The group of Kirat and Limbuwan committee has demonstrated various protest against the naming of province no. 1 and have urged the state and the center government to endorse the common name based on their ethnic identity as 'Kirat Province'. This ritual performance of *Ubhauri/Sakela* as a cultural movement, was a part of the resistance and protest against the state hegemony.

DISCUSSION

Celebration of *sakela* festival has always been an occasion to express the opinion and raise voice against state's domination and rejection amidst numerous politically chaotic phase. Schlemmer writes, "On the other hand, ... the atmosphere it creates both in and out, is more about resisting and questioning the state, challenging their hegemonic authority, demanding for rights and recognition, negotiating for the meaningful participation and fighting for the liberation." (Schlemmer, 2004, p. 135) Similarly, Kamaljung Rai, in his book '*Sakhewa Sili: Ek Adhyan*' writes that different *sakela* songs sung and performed during the *sakela sili* is merely not limited to

represent the Sakhewa culture, but it carries the core political connotation of that period. (Rai, p. 195) Rai further elaborates the *sakela* song used and performed during the Panchayat era which evidently expressed their frustration and challenged the state directly/indirectly through the celebration of festival.

Jindaabaad!Jindaabaad! (Long Live! Long Live!)

Panchayati byabastha Murdabaad(Death to Panchayat system)

After the democratic revolution of 1990, indigenist movements (locally known *asadivasi- janajati*) gained new strength and momentum. Freedom of expression made room for the creation of diverse Kirat organizations (Schlemmer, 2003/2004, p. 123) Particularly, the print and visual media attention and the participation with their reporting during this festival has not only covered the *sakela* as a celebration of festivals but it rather criticizes the impact of Hindu domination, Mahendra's policy of one nation, one language, one religion and others (Schlemmer, 2004).

Both, the Kirat academics and activists, take part in public discourse right before, after or in around this occasion. Their newspaper articles and editorials, interviews in television, podcast, radio, and newspaper regarding the Kirat identity, cultural practices, land and territorial autonomy are frequently published and broadcasted. The booklets distributed freely, the several outlets of Rai-Kirat's traditional ornaments, Kirati dress, musical instrument, stalls for Kirati food, and sometimes, stalls for the Kirat authors and artists meet and greet programs, during this celebration is the concrete examples how this community is resisting the state domination.

Schlemmer (2004) writes, "It's easy to understand why these dances have been chosen as a federative Kirat symbol. It is one of the few rituals performed collectively, and is present among all Kirat groups. Moreover, dance is a pleasant and apparently neutral folkloric practice, often the only kind of ethnic manifestation that the state tolerated (p.136). He further questions, by celebrating such cult in the heart of Kathmandu, do these people, claiming a direct filiation with the glorious Kirat Kings, perhaps try to express their rights to the soil, their soil? (p. 136) Like Schlemmer (2004) questions, ultimate motivation of this *Sakela/Ubhauli* event in Kathmandu valley is about reasserting and recognizing Kirat *adivasis'* primordial identity, history, territory, cultural practice and the relationship that exist since the time immemorial. Similarly, the references of power, fight, war, defeat, victory, bow and arrow (arms) are relevant to anthropological interpretation of *sakela* from political dimension, particularly the territorial belongingness. The *sakela* dance is performed displaying the shield, bow, arrow, and swords. Such displays of arms may be anthropologically interpreted as the Kirats being able to defend their ancestral territory which was once lost to the Sen king and the Hindu king in the past. Dancing of *sakela* is performed in a circle thereby encircling a space/territory.

This also resonates that all Kirats are united to defend their territory (Chemjong, 2017).

Styles and techniques of dance are also considered to be communicating political messages in society (Reed, 1998, 2010). Despite of different name of *sakela* regarding setting, language, sub-clan, region etc. and its manifestation of *sili* (dance style), it has unity in purpose that binds and holds the Rai-Kirat community together. It gives the sense of pride, solidarity and the real meaning of being the descendant of Kirats.³ Brandes concludes that “the dances performed in the festivals and other occasions also disseminate and impart politically charged messages, and such messages are also shared among the performers in relationships to their collective national identity (Brandes, 1990).

Several protest and demonstrations has been continuously happening in the province no. 1 and in Kathmandu valley, ever since the province’s name as ‘Koshi’ was decided by the Provincial parliament on the 1st of March, 2023. During the *sakela Ubhauri*, on the Baishak, right after the endorsement of new name, The Kirat Rai Yayokkha, Kirat Yakthung Chumlung, Kirat Yakhha Chumma, Sunuwar Sewa Samaj and others, collectively celebrated *Sakela* festival demonstrating protest against the naming of province no. 1 and had urged the state and the federal government to endorse the common name based on their collective identity as ‘Kirat Province’ near the National Assembly building, New Baneshwor. During the protest program, the president of Kirat Rai Yayokkha, Jivan Hathacho Rai said,

“It’s a strange combination that,..we were supposed to sing and dance at Tundukhel, yet we are compelled to stage our protest near the National Assembly House, Baneshwor. I am wishing you all happy *Sakela* form the street. It’s happening not because of our wish, but because of the political, cultural, social, religious and economic discrimination and exclusion by the state.” He further added how the State has systematically campaigned for the cultural elimination by negating the Kirat’s ancient civilization, historical background, and cultural identity. He told, “Let’s play our drum and cymbals, let’s sing and dance so that the government could hear our voice and wake up.”

This festival celebration as *Sanskritik Andolan* (cultural movement) focuses on paving the way towards the liberation. And the starting step towards that liberation will start with the renaming of province no. 1 and endorsing it as *Kirat Pradesh*. This cultural movement was joined by some social activist and progressive writers like Khagendra Sangraula, and Yug Pathak, who stands in solidarity with Kirat - Rai community and supported their demand for Kirat Province. Yug Pathak said,

“The name Koshi is totally a Panchayat kalin (from the regime of Panchayat) name. We can feel, the outdated ideology of Panchayat era has been transformed to such name now and being revived ultimately. For thirty years, Panchyat has engraved their doctrine in our mind through school text-books and knowledge system. Now

3 Personal communication with Dambar Chemjong

it's time to held high our head and demand for our territorial autonomy. It's not only about the face or race but, it's about our ideology and philosophy."

Likewise, the chairperson of Kirat Yakthung Chumlung, Prem Yakten, the vice - president from the Sunuwar Sewa Samaj, Sobha Sunuwar, and the chairman of Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities, Mr. Gelje Lama (Sherpa) expressed how their land has been snatched and their language, religion and belief system has always been threatened by the state and pushed to the margin. They all challenged the state saying "No Koshi".

The large number of masses, of different age groups were gathered in the street of New Baneshwor from Kirat community, and some from the non-Kirat community, to participate in the 'NO KOSHI' protest.

CONCLUSION

The *sakela* festival serves as a unifying force for the Kirat communities, fostering political solidarity, a collective Kirat national identity, and a sense of territorial belonging. This has been clearly demonstrated by the vibrant and consistent performance of the *sakela* festival in the Kathmandu Valley over the past three decades. The collective celebration of the festival by various Kirat groups—including Chamling, Bantawa, Sunuwar, Khaling, Thulung, Lohorung, Mewahang and others—illustrates that the festival holds significant political value. It transcends mere entertainment, becoming a powerful medium for reinforcing a shared sense of identity and belonging within the Kirat nation through its collective and spectacular observance. Although the Kirat peoples are composed of distinct linguistic and economic groups with diverse ecological adaptations, such as the Chamling, Bantawa, Khaling, Sunuwar, Thulung, Lohorung, Mewahang including others, they remain politically united through their collective celebration of the *sakela* festival. The slogan 'NO KOSHI,' prominently featured in the *sakela* celebration on May 5, 2023, exemplifies this unity. The event, which garnered support from the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN), Kirat Yakthung Chumlung, and even non-Adivasi intellectuals, underscores a broader coalition of solidarity in the quest for the establishment of a Kirat province. This collective support demonstrates that the Kirats' pursuit of political and territorial recognition is shared by other groups and individuals, reflecting a broader commitment to their cause.

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