



## Restored Behaviour and the Formation of Ethnic Identity: Critiquing the Rai Youths' *Sakela*

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### Abstract

This paper examines four YouTube videos on *Sakela*, a dance performance of the Rai community, in two major contexts: enormous shifts and deviations in the performances of youths and the signature of unique ethnic identity. *Sakela* in its primitive art form of Rai culture has a ritual connection with the transcendent forces for human health and agriculture. However, there have been many deviations and changes in its highly contextualized aesthetic manifestations like festive performances, ceremonial presentations, recreational activities, political demonstrations or urban, and diasporic discourses. Against this backdrop, the paper addresses the primary questions of why these performances recur in different forms and what role the restoration of behaviour plays in forming the ethnic identity. The study approaches these questions with the objectives of analyzing the restored behaviour in the Rai youths' *Sakela* and identifying the performances as preserving the signature of ethnic identity. The examination of primary data in the qualitative study includes the analysis of selected YouTube video contents comprising *Sakela* performances, using the content analysis method. Primary data are selected to quantify the phenomena of Rai youths' restored behaviours in *Sakela* dance, their cultural meanings, and their relationships to ethnic identity. To validate the collected data, the study draws theoretical insights from Richard Schechner's theory of restored behaviour. Schechner's theory promulgates that people are always performing anew out of old in a continual rehearsal. The behaviour is replicated and thus performances gradually emerge. Such behaviors ranging from small gestures to ritualistic performances become part of lives but they are no longer sticking to the original source. Pursuant to this conceptual framework, the paper argues that Rai youths' *Sakela* demonstrates the signs of restored behaviour, the symbolic and coded aspects of their culture. It also posits that embodied ethnic traits evident in the performance ensure the persistence of membership in their community. Thus, *Sakela* continues to be the signature of ethnic belief system and unique identity in the lives of Rai youths. In all its aspects of the repetition of never the same, the embodiment of ethnic identity keeps on sticking to youths' *Sakela*.

**Keywords:** *Sakela*, restored behaviour, ritual dance, ethnicity, performance

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## Introduction

Whenever the official Rai events such as jubilees, public celebrations, festivals or political events take place, some culturally attired and some fashionably clothed Rai youths are found to be dancing for hours in circle and such circles surround the venue. Sweat runs down their temples yet a loud sound of *Sakela* (a dance performance of Rais) with *Dhol* and *Jhyamta* (traditional drum and cymbals respectively) tunes remove their exhaustion. Enthusiastically engaged with synchronic body movements and gestures, these youngsters in-between the sequences of the dancing steps loudly make a rhythmic chanting, *soi dhole soi-soi dhole soi arko dhole khoi?* [Hurrah! Keep on dancing. Where's the next dancer?]. The young performers in their jolly and recreational mood feel that this is exactly what the *Sakela* dance is all about. However, the original ritual elements are missing in their performances. The influence of modern inspirations over their traditional performance as exhibited in their outfits, body movements, mimics, and conscious and unconscious adjustment of their language in term of code mixing with dominant Nepali language, shape and maintain a sense of communal identity and a sense of belonging to the community. In general, the process of folklorization is evident in the performance but it is characterized by the dance's gradual separation from its ritual context. The use of standardized costumes, the formation of skilled dance groups, the reduction of the ritual complexities, body posture and gesture in the dance movements, the adaptation of the spatial orientation to stage performance, and the incorporation of the modern dance form into the folk one are the contexts that indicate *Sakela* undergoing significant transformations. Therefore, the ritual act from which the dance originated has little to do with what is witnessed in *Sakela* at present. By this deviated mode of *Sakela* at present, Rai youths involve in "repetition-of-the-never-the-same" (Schechner ix) and thus retain the ritual bits of previously behaved behaviours. In this background, this paper posits that Rai youths perform *Sakela* in a different way than its conventional modes of ritual. Yet these dynamics of restored behaviour have helped them to preserve their ethnic identity and become a member of their community within the country and in transnational settings.

When I asked why enormous deviations and shifts are taking place in indigenous cultural practices such as *Sakela*, Professor Abhi Subedi responded, "*Sakela* performance is one of the indicators of spontaneous embedding of dominant pop culture to the native one. Indigenous folklores are deviating its form and content from the original" (Lecture). He was illustrating his observation of this kind taking place in the performance of Limbu *Palam* (cultural song) in which the modern generation of youths keep on constantly nativizing Nepali into their language. In the similar context, focusing on interdisciplinarity of folklore and pop culture, Ray B. Browne contends, "cultures have been modified or changed. That means folklore is surviving in and being influenced by different dynamics—the mass media, new cultural concepts, different ways of life" (25). Browne focuses on why folklore cannot survive in its disassociation from pop culture since folkloric yearning of ethnic identity embeds with pop cultural pantry. The folk essence of *Sakela*, its traditional significance revives through the performance of young generation influenced by the dynamics of mass media, new cultural concepts, and new forms of life. Akin to this background, the study comprises two major contexts: the enormous shifts and deviations in the performances of new generation hugely influenced by modern inspirations in the country and across the globe, and, nevertheless the persistence of performance safeguarding the unique ethnic identity. *Sakela*, a prehistoric art form of Rai culture, has a ceremonial relation with the supernatural forces that ensures agricultural and human health. However, in its highly contextualised artistic forms, such as celebratory performances, ceremonial presentations, leisure pursuits,

political demonstrations, or urban and diasporic discourses, it has undergone significant variations and alterations.

The study addresses the primary questions of why these performances recur in different forms and what role the restoration of behaviour plays in constituting the ethnic identity. It approaches these questions with the objectives of analyzing the restored behaviour in Rai youths' *Sakela* and identifying the performances as preserving the signature of ethnic identity. To pursue these objectives, the study applies content analysis method while evaluating four YouTube videos pertaining to *Sakela* as part of the qualitative study's assessment of primary data. Primary data are chosen in order to measure the phenomena of the restored behaviours of Rai youths, their cultural significance, and their connections to ethnic identity. Then, bringing the valid inferences from data to their context, the theoretical issues are tested and interpreted in the heuristic light of the Richard Schechner's theory of restored behaviour. Pursuant to this conceptual framework, the paper argues that Rai youths' *Sakela* demonstrates the signs of restored behaviour, a symbolic and coded aspects of their culture. It also posits that embodied ethnic traits evident in the performance ensure the persistence of membership in their community. Whatever the extrinsic qualities of its performance are, *Sakela* continues to be the signature of ethnic belief system and unique identity in the lives of Rai youths. In all its aspects of the repetition of never the same, embodiment of ethnic identity keeps on sticking to *Sakela*. The study acknowledges the fact that there are a number of Rai cultural performances, which might be useful for pursuing the objective of this research. However, it only analyses the chosen YouTube videos. Since it shies away from other ethnic discourses since by and large, this study does not claim that findings are exactly similar or dissimilar in social and cultural conditionings of other ethnic communities of Nepal.

### Performance Theory: A Theoretical Perspective

#### *The Myth of Sakela*

Rai ethnic community by virtue of their diversity in clans and language has various words to refer to *Sakela*. However, they have homogeneous cultural trait of the folkloristic performance that adheres to the popular myth of *Sumnima* and *Paruhang* whom Arun Gupto considers, "the divine couples, names that is overwhelmingly linked with Kirat identity" (qtd. in Dik B. Rai 31). The mythological corpus of *Sumnima* and *Paruhang* bind the Rai people together. The group's *Mundum*, "a sacred narrative of cosmological, spiritual, genealogical, philosophical and sociological basics of Kirat people" (Mukarung 117), holds different myths associated with the origin of *Sakela*. One myth narrates *Sakela* as a couple's reunion dance after *Sumnima*'s hard austerity for the descending of heaven dwelling *Paruhang* to the earth. Professor Bishnu Rai narrates another myth where *Paruhang* informs *Sumnima* about the arrival of the time for leaving the earth for heaven. She feels heavyhearted leaving her youngest child *Hongchha* behind. *Hongchha* also pleads to go along his parents. Instead, she convinces him that he must remain on earth to preserve and continue the human existence. Before their disappearance, she also reminds him to worship them establishing three stones in a pristine place, offering alcohol and performing *Sili* (the dance) around so that they can protect and remember him from the heaven. *Sakelalung* (a glittering stone) appeared at the place of their disappearance where *Hongchha* established the *Sakelathan* (shrine) and began the rituals as told by his mother every year. This is how *Sakela* was emerged (69-70). Several mythical stories regarding *Sakela* are popular among Rai community, but *Sumnima* and *Paruhang* remains archetypal in all. In many respects, the dance primarily

had the sacred significance. It shifted into festive folk performance and simultaneously cultivated in a process revolving around the definition of ethnic identity.

Since the Rai people are animists and worshippers of nature, it is more convincing to argue that *Sakela* emerged as inherent part of nature bonded agrarian lifestyle. For Chandra Hatuwali, the use of traditional instruments like bow, arrow, cymbals, drums and weapons, imitative gestures of agrarian activities, and natural agencies in the performance are signifiers of *Sakela*'s connection with agricultural and nature-based life of Rai people (12). Hatuwali's anthropological observation reads *Sakela* as the epitome of synergy between human, nature, and culture. It is very difficult to assess when *Sakela* began but it can be believed that it began with the advent of the agricultural age. *Sakela* blends the cultural belief system with art, the divine with human. In Martin Gaenszle's observation, "all the dances are an embodied practice intrinsically linked to the ancestral mythology and the stories recounting the origins of natural species and cultural practices, in one word: to the *Mundum*" (10). The dance embodies the connectivity between terrestrial and celestial forces, between the humanity and the divinity as the part of an extended ecological family that shares embedded ancestry and origins.

This animistic spiritualism bridges the distinction between animate and inanimate entities. Rai's animistic belief endows natural beings with human dispositions and social attributes, a symmetrical relation between natural species and social life. The agrarian theme of expressing gratitude to nature, ancestors and the divine forces is manifested in *Sakela* performed twice a year—*Ubhauri* (ascending time of the cattle herds to the uphill), the first event which occurs in April and the second event *Udhauri* (descending time of the cattle herds to the downhill) falls in December. These two performative occasions also articulate the seasons for sowing and harvesting of crops, the rituals that are linked to primitive agricultural cycle. Marion Wettstein categorizes, following themes enacted in bodily gestures of the performers:

Agricultural work involved in planting and harvesting (such as scattering the seeds, binding the seedlings, weeding, hoeing, planting the paddy, cutting the ripe crops, drying the crops, threshing, collecting, carrying them in a basket, putting them in storage, cooking, and eating); . . . imitations of animals, many of which have mythological significance (such as the tiger, monkey, frog, lizard, flea, tortoise, butterfly, fly, and a whole set of different birds); pure 'foot' movements; and framing gestures of greeting, respect and farewell. (273-74).

Wettstein's observation of the performance unravels animistic culture in the Rai people treating natural phenomena endowed with life and revering fellow entities with interdependent affinity. The contemporary performance of *Sakela* departs from its ancient traditions. In revitalizing context at present, the ritual event is much more changed by modern cultural influences. However, this does not necessarily mean that the dances' originality is entirely lost since it has been revitalizing as ethnic identity marker. In the modern context, the performance emerging in the acts of transgression in terms of time and space reinforces the essence of group's ethnic heritage. The YouTube videos discussed in the paper demonstrate how Rai youths have been transforming cultural essence of *Sakela* into a new form.

### ***Theory of Restored Behaviour***

A strong conceptual constellation centred on the idea of performance propelled a significant paradigm shift in the academic subject of Theatre Studies in the second half of the twentieth century. In addition to conventional methods based on widely accepted Western concepts like theatre and drama, performance studies—an alternative

multidisciplinary and multicultural viewpoint—emerged. Among all the academics involved in this endeavour, Richard Schechner had the largest influence on the paradigm of performance studies. His work is influenced by a broad but intensely concentrated interest in social science, particularly cultural anthropology. The fundamental premise of his theoretical perspective is that theatre is but one node on a continuum of human activities, which are best defined and comprehended as performances. He posits that performances occur in many different instances and kinds in human social life. Schechner called this expansion of the field a broad spectrum approach and the concept itself can therefore span human actions ranging from ritual, play, sports, popular entertainment, the performing arts (theatre, dance, music), and everyday life performances, to the enactment of social, professional, gendered, racial, and class roles, and on to healing (from shamanism to surgery), the media, and the Internet (2-4). His performance discourse and its close theoretical concept called ‘performativity’ influence critical discourse not only in all manner of cultural studies, but also in the field of social sciences, humanities, and arts. Schechner's intense theoretical effort led to the conception of the idea of "restoration of behaviour," which is still regarded as the foundation for every definition of performance as he avers,

Restored behaviour is living behaviour treated as a film director treats a strip of film. These strips of behaviour can be rearranged or reconstructed; they are independent of the causal systems (personal, social, political, technological, etc.) that brought them into existence. They have a life of their own. The original ‘truth’ or ‘source’ of the behaviour may not be known, or may be lost, ignored, or contradicted – even while that truth or source is being honoured. How the strips of behaviour were made, found, or developed may be unknown or concealed; elaborated; distorted by myth and tradition. Restored behaviour can be of long duration as in ritual performances or of short duration as in fleeting gestures. (34)

Schechner’s definition qualifies restored behavior to any collection of life habits, rituals, and routines that are "marked, framed, or heightened" (36). Put differently, restored behavior refers to the behaviors ranging from small gestures to ritualistic performances that have become part of our lives but are no longer dependent on the original source. However, Schechner observes that restored behaviors differ greatly between cultures. Even so, it is critical to address this phenomenon because, as restored behaviors are frequently determined by social conventions and cultural norms and contexts. Schechner provides a succinct response to this query by pointing out that restored behavior is occasionally obscure and only available to those who have had the experience. There are various ways to read this statement, and one of them suggests that restored behavior is not consistent across time.

Schechner continues by explaining that, despite the fact that all behaviors have a tendency to reuse components of previously displayed behavior, all behaviors are actually manifestations of restored behavior; however, performance behaviors are always distinguished from one another by a unique quality. He notes that these variations take the shape of cultural components and the personal influences of the artists. This holds true for any kind of performance, even if narrowing it down to the current topic of discussion. Thus, *Sakela's* modified performance in the case of new generation is "the restored behaviour. . . never for the first time, always for the second to nth time twice-behaved behaviour" (Schechner 36). The ritual convention of *Sakela*, hence, is deconstructed with modified intervention of Rai youths' mode of reiterating previous manners of actions. Schechner's definition of performance emphasizes in almost anything in the world that is done more than once is thus influenced by the aesthetics of

repetition. Whatever repetitive pattern Rai youths follow in the case of *Sakela*, they have become able to maintain their unique ethnic identity intact. This occurrence of shifts and deviation in youth's performance of *Sakela* stems from their manners of bringing back the past in their own way.

Schechner's principle of restored behaviour of the performance denotes the repeated habits, rituals and routines of life in new context. He further avers, "performances are made from bits of restored behaviour, but every performance is different from every other. First, fixed bits of behaviour can be recombined in endless variations. Second, no event can exactly copy another event" (30). Restored behaviour thus includes a vast range of action. It follows repetitive action of behaviour in new setting. Schechner's implication is that we are always performing anew out of old in a continual rehearsal. It is like the building blocks out of which the behaviour is replicated and thus performances gradually emerge. How redundancy of such performances is taking place in Rai youths and how they have embodied their ethnic identity intact at present can be well observed in YouTube videos vividly displaying this endeavour.

### Restoring Behaviour in *Sakela*: Critical Analysis

*Sakela* dance is characterized by a repertory of expressive movements that are infused with allusions to ordinary farming and secured human health as well as mythological connotations. However, YouTube clips displaying the participation of Rai youths in *Sakela* can be considered as popular example of performances based on restored behaviour. In the contents of Rai youths' *Sakela*, performances diverge from the original but the implications of the ritual significance remain integral. The restored behaviour in their performances constitutes a symbolic reintegration with their ethnic identity. In other words, the unique way of performance detached from the original form expresses the sense of cultural identity in different ways. Additionally, the interfaces of video sharing portals visually convey the discourse of Rai ethnic identity.

### *Sakela in Movement Tube*

Movement Tube displays the footage of *Udhauli* festival celebrated in Tudhikhel Kathmandu, Nepal in 2019. Two energetic boys outfitted in *Daura Suruwal* (traditional attire) and one with *Pheta* (white cloth covering the head) and another wearing *Dhaka Topi* and sunglasses, play *Dhol* (cylindrical wooden drum) in their own beat. Another boy casually dressed with jeans pant, leather jacket, and sunglasses, accompanies them with synchronizing play of *Jhyamta* (cymbal). Some girls dressed in a traditional red velvet top and a black wrap skirt with white dots, hair adorned with a gold-colored, ornamented disc, and the face painted with cultural symbols accompany the group. More interesting is the voluntary assembling of other youths in the event fully clad with modern attires (0:17:0:56). It shows drastic shift in *Sakela* performance taking place in modern times. Together they dance with synchronic gestures and body movements. In jolly mood, they chorally express, "soi dhole soi, soi dhole soi" (0:57:3:11). For most of the present youths, the use of mother tongue and cultural attire is not primary choice. They blend old values with the new and everything looks hybridized in their performance. Causality and recreational mood dominate over the spiritual and ritualistic significance. Despite these evolutions, they have still maintained their attachment to the spirit of festival of their own. Ethnic identity is intact in their performance.

Interestingly, four young boys undisturbed at another corner are involuntarily celebrating the festival in their own way. They are playing *Dhol* and *Jhyamta* and dancing in a circle around an installed trunk assumed as *Sakelathan* (9:53:10:51). It is notable that the way sacred ritual of *Sakela* is converted into popular performance;

*Sakelathan* also has evolved from its stagnant serenity. In Professor Chaturbhakta Rai's words, *Sakelathan* is "the three stone assigned to Sumnima and Paruhang, the supreme god and goddess of Rai community" (10). Sumnima and Paruhang, ancestral divine couples overwhelmingly linked with Rai identity, have their sacred space in *Teen Chulha* (three stone) where *Sakelathan* is established. However, no such sacred significance is seen in the present youth's celebration of *Sakela*. They have thus become "synthesizers, recombiners, compilers" (Schechner 35). Their performance is characterized by detachment from the usual mode of *Sakela* yet they have maintained its spirit in different ways. The cymbal players on the other side of the dancers' circle, which had expanded significantly in just a few seconds, now set the pace. The singers, filled with excitement, shout "soi-soi-soi!" (jolly expression) in response to the heavy rainfall that has just begun on the grounds. The dancers circle the leafy branch that was embedded in the ground. Undisturbed by the rain, the announcer shouts over the loudspeaker, trying to persuade the audience on the value of maintaining one's own culture, language, and religion. The circles of dancers are not interested in listening to the speech of the political leader who keeps on emphasising *Sakela* as a significant part of Rai identity and culture. They look as if they know what *Sakela* is and they have always danced it the way their ancestors danced it. The difference is that their ancestors might have danced in their bare feet in contrast to the modern shoes and heels synchronized in the beat of mobile phone *Sakela*.

#### ***Sakela in MJ Dance Studio***

In their re-enactment of past attributes, Rai youths have brought *Sakela* from its ritual enclosure into broader theatrical space of performance. As a form of restored behaviour, "recombining bits of previously behaved behaviour" (Schechner 35), the *Sakela* dance competition has emerged as a new performative category as it shifts *Sakela Sili* from *Sakelathan* to the stage. MJ Dance Studio uploading footage shows *Sakela* dance performed in an inter-school dance competition. Make belief *Sakelathan* is set up at the centre of the stage. Imitating the shamanic ritual of *Nakchhong*, the priest with shamanic power, who mediates in-between the transcendent forces and the human being at the beginning of the ritual, a boy acts trembling his body throughout the performance. A leader playing *Dhol* on the stage is accompanied by four couple; boys in *Daura Suruwal*, traditional waistcoat, *Pheta* and hand knitted bag and girls in red velvet top and a black wrap short skirt with white dots, traditional garland of coins. Soundtrack plays the song and synchronic dance begins (00:01:01:13). Given that modern culture has left great influences upon their mindsets and behaviour patterns, the new type of *Sakela* is not a strange phenomenon among the youths. For this new generation, "the original truth or source of the behaviour may not be known, or may be lost, ignored, or contradicted – even while that truth or source is being honored" (Schechner 34). Nevertheless, the repeated pattern of behaviour as exhibited in their adaptation and transformation of cultural practice has contributed Rai youths to embody their communal identity. In several dance competitions, experiments with recently created *Sili* and innovative ways to perform previously established *Sili* are visible. Most significantly, competitions like these commodify the traditional aspects of *Sakela*. The people who put on the dancing shows and competitions still approve these inventions. The groups innovate new experimentations in the venture of winning the prize and medals. Frequently, the original components of ritual are absent.

The performers' bodily gestures and movements are distinctly modern and much influenced by the aspects of popular culture as their props are. The audience could witness that their performance is anew. In Schechner's contention, it is restored behaviour which "can be worked on, stored and recalled, played with, made into

something else, transmitted, and transformed" (35). The soundtrack plays, "Kirati (Rai) has big heart" (02:58:03:02), "We dance remembering *Sumnima* and *Paruhang*" (03:15:03:39), "We recite Mundum keeping ancestors high" (03:40:03:49), "Worshipper of nature, identity of Kirats" (04:18: 04:24), and "We are Kirati, men of the soil" (04:58:05:08) confer ethnic significance and pride. The marriage between these lyrics and performers' cohesive bodily gestures and movements reinforce their attachment with ethnic identity and embodiment as members of the community. In many respects, *Sakela* as a prime example of folklore has been cultivated in Rai youths as a process revolving around their ethnic identity. Elizabeth Bell notes, "Performance is both process and product, performance is productive and purposeful, and performance is traditional and transformative" (qtd. in Limbu 33). To use Bell's words, *Sakela* as both traditional and transformative performance at present moves beyond its cultural significance as it is evolved into various forms of recreation, refreshment, popular activity among the Rai youths.

### ***Sakela in Naya Bulanda Online TV***

In the context of identity politics and indigenous movement in the country, *Sakela* has served as a metaphor of Rai's ethnic identification. Since the 1990s, Nepal has undergone a process of political restructuring and has been triggered by marginal discourses. A strong emphasis has been placed on the notion of cultural and ethnic identity. The ritual practice of *Sakela*, hence, has become a vehicle of resistance in the matter of transformation over time and space. Collective folk dances like the *Sakela* lasts for several hours and are filled with happy moments of unity and positive emotions. They provide the feelings of ethnic pride and identity, and experience of oneness among the youths. The video uploaded by Naya Bulanda Online TV shows the young participants carrying the placards reading different political slogans in their hands. It is a huge political rally organized by the Kirat Rai Association, the mother organization of Rai community. In the frontline of the rally emerges a small group of passionate boys and girls in their typical cultural attire. Some of them hold the banner that reads the slogan, "Long live Kirat unity," "Approve province number one as Kirat state." Two of them loudly play the *Sakela* beat in *Dhol* and *Jhyamta*. While many of them have held placards reading, "Let's all indigenous nationalities united" "Amend the constitution" (00:39:02:21). One of the youths iterates the slogan in a loud voice and the mass reiterates them. Since "performances mark identities" (Schechner 28), demonstration of Rai youths in the form of *Sakela* thus rehearses into the political metaphor, reinforcing the issues of marginality, inclusivity, and equal right. It helps them consolidate the unity necessary for communal rights and ethnic existence. This performance "may appear to be new" (29) but previously behaved behaviour of *Sakela* is rearranged and reshaped by youths with specific circumstances. The use of the *Sakela* dance to forward a national political agenda by creating an ethnic we-feeling is a relatively new development and the involvement of majority of youths in the campaign is interesting. The attachment to ethnic symbols to create emotional tempo in the movement reinforces collectivism among the youths. The dance has undergone changes and shifts but the significance of the physical experience connected to the emotional experience intensifies the common feeling of ethnic identity. This intensity is high in youths when the dance provides interconnectedness between body, emotion, and mind.

It is significant that performativity of *Sakela* is no more confined within a national boundary as it profoundly becomes a key marker of ethnic identification among the Rais in the diasporic setting. The Rai community residing in foreign country regards *Sakela* as the foundational factor of their identity link with a 'remembered homeland'



and “contemporary purposes and new generations” (Story and Walker 136). Many Rai youths living in the diaspora in urban centres only know the *Sakela* dance in its new transformed forms, which by and large have lost their link to the ritual context. Yet, these communities have been able to maintain embeddedness with their ancestral land and the idea of keeping ethnic identity intact and alive through the means of *Sakela*. The performance as such, as Peggy Phelan remarks, “disappears even as it is happening, and it happens differently each time” (qtd. in Bell 16). A considerable number of YouTube clips of *Sakela* of different events stemming from diaspora youths indicate this fact. As a form of restoration of behaviour, these youths tend to strongly emphasize their culture of back home or of origin and create their own versions of it.

### *Sakela in Bindash Rai*

A footage uploaded by Bindash Rai shows the members of the diaspora from the United Kingdom gathered in a specific location managed in such a way that it verisimilitudes the conventional context of *Sakela*. The festive occasion is *Ubhauri*, planting season where *Sakela* is to be performed. A huge circle is shaped as a place of performance and a tree branch voluntarily indicating *Sakelathan* is erected in the middle. A huge banner installed in a side reads, “Best wishes to all on the occasion of *Udhauri*” (00:13:00:18). Some are holding their cultural flags. A young boy in the typical shamanic outfit enters at the centre enacting the role of shaman. Some girls enter the scene carrying baskets with *jaad* (millet booze). Next, it follows the two young playing with drum and cymbals but their beat is outshined by enormous modern soundtrack. They jump around in well-rehearsed steps followed by four culturally outfitted couple of dancers. The boys with presumed yak tails and girls with leafy twigs in their hand slowly close to form a circle around the central tree branch and follow synchronized dancing steps. Throughout the moment, the shaman looks busy pretending chant while the millet booze is distributed among the participants. A woman commentator is busy explaining the background significance of each *Sili* (00:18: 10:08). By this time, many *Sakela* dances are performed. Adaptations of this type of *Sakela* performance by diasporic youths in new context and scenarios that transcend temporal and spatial boundaries represent their pertinent sense of restored behaviour, “a function of context, reception, and the countless ways bits of behaviour . . . organized, performed, and displayed” (Schechner 30). They are the communicative triggers that evoke the full spectrum of cognitive and emotional attachment to their cultural identity; something greatly longed for in the context of the diaspora. The performance theorist Deborah A. Kapchan claims that performances constitute culture. He asserts, “to perform is to carry something into effect. The notion of agency is implicit in performance” (479). Despite a diasporic setting, the Rai youths are subscribing their ethnic identity by performative means of *Sakela* that in large conveys a universal message for the unity of Rai community beyond the specific geographical borders.

The gestures of *Sakela* are mostly the inventory of the movements of agricultural techniques, knowledge of the biosphere, reverence to the celestial forces, associated with oral tradition and mythology, and subjects related to socially acceptable leisure activities. However, the Rai youths seem to be fascinated with the dance in terms of leisure activities than the rest of its significance. It is theoretically possible to argue that dancing can convey any kind of message to individuals associated with happy feelings, the Rai youths love dancing and actually engage in the activity, no matter how they dance. They consciously and unconsciously understand that their folk dances are communal in character, and as such, they are quite appropriate for enshrining ethnic identity since they are inherently associated with the ideas of unity and in-group affiliation. For youths,

*Sakela* has become the significant means of imparting and learning a pertinent cultural knowledge and values. It is still a strongly ingrained social custom but it is also revitalised, shifted, and deviated in the context of acquiring the new values among the youths. All that is visible to everyone are the variations and alterations in all of its facets, the restored behaviour as such.

### Conclusion

Every ritual performance of *Sakela* by the Rai youths is a new performance. It is always a doing and a thing done, a process, and a product. Originally begun from a sacred primitive ritual in communication with the transcendent forces for the wellbeing of human health and agriculture, *Sakela* in the process of evolution in the new generations has been redundant into different aesthetic manifestations comprising of a festive performance, ceremonial presentation, recreational act, political resistance, or diasporic discourse. Whatever the extrinsic qualities of its performance are, *Sakela* continues to be the signature of ethnic belief system and unique identity in the lives of Rai youths. Moreover, it happens to be a mode of communicative behaviour uniting them worldwide. The impact of modern culture in this endeavour is undeniable yet *Sakela* in the new context of Rai youths is a perennial process accomplishing certain social, cultural, and ethnic value systems reinforcing their belongingness to the community. *Sakela* keeps on constructing an ethnic 'we-feeling' in the Rai youths. The occasion is to show who they are. No matter how they perform, the embodiment of ethnic identity in their performance is obvious. Due to some influential forces, some phenomena are attached and some are detached to their performance; the changes and shifts take place. Yet, in all its aspects of the repetition of never the same, the embodiment of ethnic identity keeps on sticking to *Sakela*.

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