

Preserving traditional Chandinach

Basanta Rai

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The nature worshipping Kirat have been able to protect their culture in the course of time, although there've been some influences.

Kirat are divided into Rai, Limbu, Yakkha and Sunuwar. The settlement of the Rai Kirat along the Dudh Koshi and Arun rivers and their tributaries in the districts of Solukhumbu, Okhaldhunga, Khotang, Bhojpur and Udayapur is called Manjh or middle Kirat. Pallo or far Kirat is Limbu dominated territory.

Old records indicate that Rai Kirat formerly occupied a much larger area than that they dominate today. A legal ratification affixed with the red seal during the reign of King Rajendra Bir Bikram Shah (1816-1847 BS) reads that parts of Solukhumbu district and its pasture land, presently inhabited by Sherpa, was inhabited by Rai Kirat.

The tenth convention of Kirat held two years ago resolved that the population of Rai Kirat is 635,000. They even have many more subcastes.

Rai Kirat is listed as an indigenous ethnic group. They make up three per cent of the 22 million Nepalis. Their culture, tradition and religious performances are based on the Kirat philosophy, which binds all Rai Kirat clans and sub-clans.

Kirat observe a number of religious ceremonies throughout the year. The harvest ceremony, praying the earth, called 'Bhumi-Puja', is observed in September and April. They perform hom, a sacrificial rite, to acquire merit. The festival is also known as Chandinach or Sakewa Sili or Sakewa.

Sakewa is divided into two phase: Udhauli (Going down) and Ubhauli (Going up).

Rai celebrate Ubhauli in spring season for 15 days that starts on Baishakh Purnima. In the autumn season or on Mangsir Purnima, they celebrate Udhauli. But Ubhauli or Chandinach is celebrated importantly than Udhauli.

During April and May, rain starts and the earth gets virginity and fertility. Rai worship the earth in a belief that she would become happy and cropping would be envisaged.

The dance is also performed at Tundikhel, Tikhedewal, Jawalakhel, Hatiban on Buddha Jayanti and Mangsir Purnima in the Kathmandu Valley. But, the real flavour of the dance can only be seen in eastern hills. The Kirat there celebrate it with priests who perform rituals to worship their ancestors.

Everybody participate in the dance forming a circle by holding each other's hands. With drumbeats, they begin dancing at a slow pace but moves faster later with the drumbeats. The festival provides an opportunity for Rai to know each other.

The celebration is connected to many myths. It is also said that before the marriage of god Paruhang and goddess Sumnima, Paruhang used to live in the heaven. One day, he saw beautiful Sumnima on the earth and fell in love. He made a beautiful comb, sent it to Sumnima who wished wed him.

Four children were born of them after marriage. But Paruhang left Sumnima in a hut on the bank of Dudhkoshi River and did not return for long time. One day, she saw a creeper on a stone while she was in search of food for her children. She tasted the creeper and it was full of power and happiness. She brought the creeper and made Buti, an intoxicating religious garland, and kept it safe. The Buti inspired everybody who saw it to tell the truth of her/his life.

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Paruhang returned suddenly. He tried to counsel angry Sumnima. She gave the Buti to Paruhang. This immediately made him glad and he started to tell what he had done. He had spent the time looking at the heaven and the earth from the top of Chomolongma (Mt. Everest). He also said her that he had meditated, and visited the whole universe. Paruhang promised not to leave her, which made Sumnima dance with joy. It is believed the dance is the 'Sakela dance'.

Generally, there are male and female leaders during the dance known as 'Silimangpa' and 'Silimangma' respectively.

They wear traditional dress. These two people act as the other dancers are imitating them.

Dr. Jean Robert, from Leiden University Netherlands, who has done Ph.D. on Wambule Rai language said, 'I prefer Rai language and culture because I found their life peculiar than any others castes I have met in Nepal.'

Kul Bahadur Rai, president of Kirata Rai Yayokkha believes if Chandinach and other religious ceremonies can be publicised, it can promote our internal and external tourism, along with preserving culture and tradition.

Man Bahadur Rai, 32, from Khotang has been performing Chandinach for years in Kathmandu valley. Man Bahadur, a teacher by profession, says, 'Kirat's culture and tradition give entertainment and self satisfaction.'