



Indira Gandhi
National Centre
for the Arts

presents

Leela ⁱⁿ Kheriya

Script & Dir: Molly Kaushal

Dur: 53 mins; Hindi with English subtitles

Design: Picture Street



Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts

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Leela in Kheriya is a feature length documentary film based on the Ramlila tradition in village Kheriya located in the Firozabad district of Uttar Pradesh. Ramlila in Kheriya is one of the finest examples of composite nature of Indian culture and society. Hindus and Muslims together constitute the Shri Ramlila Committee of Kheriya Patikara and roles are distributed among the actors based on talent; caste and religion are of no consequence here. Several major roles in the Ramlila are played by Muslims including that of Ram and Sita. Even the little *swarupas* are often chosen from among the Muslim children and it is they who are offered the daily *aarti* and *puja* on stage. This Hindu-Muslim camaraderie exists not only during the Ramlila but is reflected in their daily life as well. Kheriya village is a living example of peace, harmony, and co-existence among different caste groups and religious communities.

Kheriya is located in the vicinity of Firozabad town, which is known for its glass and bangle factories, and where many of the residents of the village seek employment. The film begins with images of smelting glass in the furnaces of these factories,

borrowing them as a metaphor for the relentlessly moving 'wheel of time'. The film then moves into the lanes and by-lanes of Kheriya where individual selves and life's daily grind are enmeshed in multiple ways with Ramlila. Each character



in the film has a personal history, which he/she speaks about in interviews and monologues. Each story narrates a life of sorrow, grief and dejection on the one hand and hope, courage, faith, and indomitable spirit on the other. Each of these lives converges on the Ramlila stage, which becomes a redeeming point, a moment of healing and self-recovery.

Another aspect that the film explores is the theatre of Ramlila as it is enacted in Kheriya based on the text of famous *katha-vachak* Radheshyam, and spontaneous dialogues and songs by amateur artists —the residents of the village Kheriya.

The climax of the Kheriya Ramlila is the killing of Ahi Ravan, who rules the nether world. Here, seemingly all meanings are subverted, and all rules are broken. Carnival and the carnivalesque erupt on the stage, breaking loose the chains of self-restraint and ushering in a sense of complete liberation.

Molly Kaushal