

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 both. 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, known for its glass and bangle factories and therefore the film begins with images of smelting glass in the furnaces of these factories, borrowing them as metaphors for creation and 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 Leela - the divine play - cosmic and on stage. On the one hand is the grit and grime of life as lived, and on the other hand is this ceaseless quest for the sublime.

Each character in the film has a personal history, which he/ she speaks about in interviews and monologues. Each one's life is full 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 Ramlila stage. Ramlila is in fact a redeeming point for each. Participation in the Leela itself is redemption. Ramlila brings the micro and macro cosms together on a singular platform, while the stage becomes the meso space.

The journey is to transcend each of these realms to reach the sublime within. Leela in Kheriya not only defines this journey but is also the journey itself; of individual lives; and of eternity of life. It is that constant turning of the cosmic wheel - eternal, ceaseless, relentless; and sublime. Kheriya is not a mere physical entity, a geographic dot. It lies at the very heart of this journey; this quest. It resides within the deep recesses of each individual soul; recognizing it is liberation itself.

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 ordinary residents of the village Kheriya.

The climax of 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 and lead to self-realization. The film tries to bring this out by portraying this episode as it is played on stage and through a specially choreographed sequence outside the stage. Finally the film moves back into the glass factories where remainder of molten glass forms a Shiva-Linga symbolizing the eternal flow of this Leela; here in this world, and in the cosmic realm.