

## ABSTRACT

This study offers an ethnolinguistic and ethnographic exploration of *Kajarī*, a vibrant folk festival and oral tradition celebrated primarily by rural women in the North Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Observed during the month of *Bhādrapada* (August–September), *Kajarī* is marked by women’s fasting for the well-being of their husbands and a dynamic tradition of collective singing, dancing, and ritual enactment. The festival provides a critical framework for understanding the gendered performance culture of *Kajarī* songs (*kajarī gīt*), which are deeply embedded in women’s agrarian and ritual life, particularly among rural women in eastern Uttar Pradesh.

The location of research is situated in the Mirzapur district, a significant site of *Kajarī* performance, where women begin their preparations from *Nāga-Pañcamī*, a festival honouring serpent deities in the month of *Sāvan* (mid-July to mid-August). Over the thirteen days leading to the *Kajarī* festival, women gather at the *caughat* (a created performative space) for daily singing sessions and participate in night vigils known as *Ratjagā*, commemorating the birth of goddess *Vindhyāvasinī*, a regional deity closely associated with the origins of the *Kajarī* tradition. The songs themselves are distinct in their lyrical structure and performance style, often beginning with refrains such as *harī harī* or *are rāma* and ending with emotive phrases like *na, re samāliyā*, or *re harī*, which mark them within the folk sonic landscape.

This thesis emphasises the significance of *Kajarī* as more than a seasonal festival. It is a complex site of female agency and cultural expression, wherein rural women engage in ritualised performances, oral transmission, and collective identity formation. The performative practices of *nakkals* (role-reversals and cross-dressing enactments) and *khelā-tamāśā* (play-acts), performed

during *Ratjagā*, the *Kajarī* festival, and *Tīj* (a festival celebrating monsoon fertility and the union of Śiva and Pārvatī), are central to this expressive tradition. These playful yet subversive acts allow women to negotiate social norms and patriarchal constraints through humour, improvisation, and theatricality.

### **Theoretical Framework and Objectives**

This study critically engages with the theoretical frameworks of place-making, performance studies, and intersectionality to provide a deeper understanding of the *Kajarī* singing traditions and rituals practised by rural women in Mirzapur. The concept of place-making serves as a foundational lens to examine how specific sites of performance, such as the *caughat* (ritual space) and significant events like *Ratjagā* (night vigil), are not merely physical spaces but actively contribute to the construction of gendered, cultural, and spiritual identities. These spaces are sites of resistance, where women, through their embodied performances, assert their agency and negotiate power dynamics within the rural, patriarchal context. The performative aspects of *Kajarī* singing are thus not just acts of cultural expression. Still, they are embedded with subversive potential, transforming ordinary spaces into ritual arenas where gender roles and societal expectations are reinforced and contested. Performance studies provide an analytical lens to deconstruct these performances, especially through theatrical elements such as *nakkals* (role-reversals) and *khelā-tamāśā* (play-acts), which allow women to challenge normative gender expectations through humour, cross-dressing, and improvisation. These performances become sites of embodied resistance, where women use the performative mode to transgress and renegotiate the roles they are expected to play in the social order.

The framework of intersectionality, however, allows for a more complex understanding of these performances, examining how various axes of identity, such as caste, class, and regionality, interact with gender in shaping the meaning and practice of *Kajarī* songs. Focusing on these intersections, this research critically engages with how women's performances conform to and disrupt multiple forms of oppression and exclusion within the rural socio-cultural context. The study interrogates whether *Kajarī* folksongs merely reinforce traditional gender roles or whether they offer a space for resistance and transformation, where women can assert their subjectivity and reimagine their roles within the family, community, and broader society.

Through an ethnolinguistic lens, this study critically examines the distinctive linguistic features, metaphorical frameworks, and symbolic aspects embedded within *Kajarī* folksongs, which depart markedly from the structures and vocabulary of everyday speech. By analysing syntactic patterns, semantic fields, and culturally specific idiomatic expressions, the research reveals how *Kajarī* songs function as performative acts and as sophisticated forms of cultural critique. It assesses how the deliberate use of figurative language, narrative voice, and rhetorical strategies within these songs reflects and negotiates social realities, moral frameworks, and ritual practices, thereby offering a nuanced window into the lived experiences and emotional landscapes of rural women in Mirzapur. In this context, *Kajarī* singing is framed as a ritualised linguistic performance, deeply embedded in social structures, sustaining collective memory, and opening spaces for socio-cultural commentary and transformation.

Finally, this study traces the evolution of women's folksongs, positioning them as dynamic cultural artefacts that adapt to socioeconomic changes while retaining elements of resistance and resilience. Through a critical evaluation of the current status of *Kajarī* traditions, the research explores the extent to which these practices have maintained their relevance and the

impact of contemporary changes on their transmission and performance. By examining the continuity and transformation of these traditions, the study positions *Kajarī* singing as a complex site of cultural negotiation, where women actively engage with and shape the traditions they inherit, further challenging historical and contemporary norms. This critical perspective underscores the performative and transformative nature of folk traditions while also highlighting women's central role in preserving and reconfiguring cultural practices.

### **Structure of the Thesis**

This thesis comprises seven interrelated chapters, from conceptual groundwork to empirical investigation and critical synthesis. At its core, the study interrogates the *Kajarī* folk traditions of the Mirzapur district, focusing on their performative, ritualistic, and transgressive dimensions as they are enacted and negotiated by rural women. Rather than merely documenting folk practices, the thesis adopts a critical lens to explore how these traditions function as contested cultural sites, spaces where power, gender, identity, and resistance converge.

Chapter 1 lays the theoretical foundation by critically tracing the intellectual trajectory of folklore as a discipline. It interrogates how early folkloristics, rooted in 19th- and early 20th-century European epistemologies, often exoticised and essentialised oral traditions, privileging static, romanticised notions of the folk. By contrast, the chapter foregrounds more recent, postcolonial, and Indigenous interventions that reposition folklore within a contextual, performative, and politically engaged framework. It critiques the disciplinary marginalisation of Indian folk traditions within both colonial and nationalist knowledge systems and situates *Kajarī* within a broader reconsideration of what constitutes 'authentic' folk expression. The chapter further introduces the *Kajarī* festival, analysing its regional variants and ritual forms not merely

as cultural artefacts but as dynamic performances of identity, memory, and community. It re-reads ritual elements, such as the planting of barley, invocations, and submersion ceremonies, not as mere religious acts but as gendered performances embedded in symbolic economies of fertility, labour, and collective resilience. The literature review critically maps scholarly silences, particularly around caste, gender, and performativity, arguing for reframing *Kajarī* as a feminist archive in oral form. The chapter concludes by articulating the research questions and methodological commitments that underpin the study.

Chapter 2 consolidates the theoretical frameworks guiding the analysis, offering a critical engagement with performance studies, spatial theory, and intersectionality. Rather than treating these frameworks as add-ons, the chapter demonstrates their necessity for understanding the layered complexities of rural women's folk practices. Performance theory enables an exploration of how rituals are not passive transmissions of tradition but are performative acts that produce and contest meaning. Place-making theory illuminates how women reclaim marginal spaces, backyards, courtyards, and temple precincts as stages for cultural expression and resistance. Intersectionality is employed as a descriptive tool and a methodological imperative to examine how caste, class, and gender interlock to shape access, participation, and legitimacy within folk traditions. The chapter critiques the homogenisation of women's voices in folkloric studies and insists on a more nuanced analysis that attends to internal hierarchies and silences within women's communities. This theoretical triangulation allows for a more critical reading of *Kajarī* as both a site of agency and constraint.

Focusing on the ritual event of *Ratjagā*, chapter 3 presents an ethnographic account that critically unpacks how ritual spaces become arenas of subversive performance. Drawing from feminist spatial theory, the chapter differentiates between abstract spaces and lived places,

arguing that rural women transform the latter into sites of embodied resistance. The worship of *Vindhyāvasinī*, a goddess figure who defies the norms of Hindu domestic femininity, provides a radical counter-narrative to canonical figures like Sita or Sati. Through her, women find a mythic prototype for strength, agency, and moral ambiguity. The chapter also problematises the concept of ritual as inherently conservative, showing instead how rituals in the *Kajarī* festival function as coded expressions of dissent. Laughter, humour, mimicry, and collective singing are not merely festive expressions but complex semiotic tools that allow women to transgress social expectations without overt confrontation. These performances are analysed as instances of what Victor Turner terms *communitas*, moments of social inversion with the potential for critique and renewal.

In chapter 4, the focus shifts to explicitly transgressive acts, cross-dressing, obscene humour, and parody, which rural women use to contest patriarchal norms within the safety of ritual time. This chapter moves beyond celebratory accounts of women's agency to critically examine the ambivalence and limits of such transgression. While these performances temporarily invert power structures, they are still within the boundaries of festival and spectacle, raising questions about their transformative potential. Nevertheless, by assuming exaggerated masculine roles or mocking male behaviour, women momentarily escape the moral surveillance that typically governs their public conduct. These acts are read through the lens of the Bakhtinian carnival, suggesting that while the festival allows for the suspension of norms, it simultaneously reinforces them by relegating dissent to the realm of the ludic. The chapter critically explores whether such contained subversion reinforces the status quo or seeds longer-term shifts in gender consciousness.

Chapter 5 analyses the linguistic aspects of *Kajarī* songs, highlighting how rural women deploy language as a tool of subtle resistance. It critiques the reduction of folk speech to cultural ornamentation and instead foregrounds its strategic use of double entendre, satire, and erotic metaphor by applying a lens of ethnolinguistics. These linguistic devices are shown to destabilise dominant gender discourses that either silence women or cast them as passive moral anchors. Ethnolinguistic examples reveal how women's speech challenges both societal taboos around sexuality and restrictive ideals of modesty. Gestures, voice inflexions, and improvisational banter become critical elements in a repertoire that resists codification and male appropriation. The chapter suggests that folk language functions as a counter-public, a communicative sphere where alternative narratives of womanhood are articulated and sustained, often beneath the radar of formal discourse.

Chapter 6 critiques the commodification of *Kajarī* folk traditions and the systemic erasure of rural women from their cultural narratives. It explores how dominant caste and urban male performers have appropriated *Kajarī* songs, reconfiguring them into polished performances for mass consumption while severing them from their grassroots origins. The chapter argues that this professionalisation is not merely aesthetic but political, reflecting broader patterns of cultural dispossession. By analysing issues of authorship, naming, and aesthetic refinement, the chapter highlights how the appropriation process dilutes the radical potential of *Kajarī*, transforming it into a depoliticised form of entertainment. It also interrogates the role of state-sponsored folklore festivals and cultural institutions in legitimising this shift, often under the guise of preservation. The analysis reveals how the loss of women's performative spaces mirrors larger struggles over voice, visibility, and cultural ownership in a rapidly modernising rural India.

Chapter 7 synthesises the key findings, emphasising the central argument that *Kajarī* folk traditions are not passive residues of the past but living, contested, and gendered forms of cultural production. It reflects critically on the methodological and ethical challenges of researching oral traditions, especially in contexts of caste and gender inequality. Importantly, it incorporates the voices of women performers who express anxiety over the diminishing scope for authentic folk expression in a changing socio-economic landscape. The chapter calls for future research that addresses the impact of neoliberal development, media intrusion, and mechanisation on rural performative cultures. It argues that the survival of women's folk traditions requires documentation and a political commitment to preserving the spaces that sustain them.