CHAPTER 5 - FOLK LANGUAGE AS A SUBVERSIVE TOOL: ETHNOGRAPHIC AND ETHNOLINGUISTIC STUDY OF *Kajarī* FOLKSONGS

In North India, gendered power structures regulate women's speech, often restricting them from speaking openly in public or in the presence of senior family members (Dube, 2001; Wadley, 1994). However, if we focus solely on their public compliance with norms of silence and submission in everyday speech, we risk overlooking their ability to use verbal strategies to challenge the dominant ideology (Raheja & Gold, 1994). In this case, one has to agree with Spivak's (2023) pronouncement that subalterns (women) cannot speak in ordinary speech. While patriarchal structures often constrain their public discourse, folk performances provide an alternative space to articulate resistance, negotiate kinship roles, and reinterpret societal expectations. James Scott called them 'hidden transcripts' (Scott, 1990, p. xii) embedded in women's speech and song—the subtle yet occasionally explicit and public expressions through which women resist dominant North Indian stereotypes of women's nature. Veena Das proposes a subtly analogous idea in her thought-provoking chapter on 'Femininity and Orientations to the Body.' She explains (1988, p. 201): 'Women seem to live their lives on the double register of law and language, which emphasise their roles as wives, and poetry and metalanguage, which emphasise their roles as standing outside of language and law. . . .' She further suggests that while women, as the lawful wives of men, subscribe to the 'entire male discourse on female sexuality,' as 'outsiders' they are entirely willing to subvert it. This chapter explores those alternative outlooks by analysing women's *Kajarī* folksongs, dramatic performances, and verbal and non-verbal language used during their performances. It further examines how women's folksongs and proverbial speeches highlight the contradictions within dominant North Indian

discourse concerning gender constructions, sexuality, and creativity. James Scott argued that these verbal strategies can be seen as a condition of practical resistance rather than substitution (Scott, 1985, 1990). Therefore, investigating women's folk culture and folk speech is necessary because 'linguistic forms are strategic actions, and verbal interactions are often sites of struggle about gender, kinship, and power' (Gal, 1991, p. 176). Based on the ethnographic fieldwork, the chapter aims to uncover the subversive linguistic elements, such as imagery, metaphor, and gestures, that shape women's folk expressions. This chapter addresses prominent questions of how illiterate women's folk performances create a discourse of power and defiance of feminine virtues by dismantling the notion of gendered female speech and challenging the authoritative masculine language. How do these perspectives on the creativity of verbal play in everyday social life help us to understand women's relationship to language in Northern India? The terms 'folk speech' and 'folk language' have been used interchangeably for rural women's language in their folksongs, commentaries and dialogues.

Scholarly inquiries into women's folk speech have long examined its role in reflecting and resisting gendered power structures. Early linguistic studies, such as Robin Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place* (1975), argue that women's language is marked by politeness, hedging, and indirectness, reinforcing their subordinate status. Lakoff also suggests that folk speech allows women to challenge these constraints, allowing for covert resistance subtly. Deborah Tannen's (1990) theory of genderlects further highlights how women's speech, characterised by relational and cooperative discourse (rapport talk), contrasts with men's competitive and status-driven communication (report talk). Women's folk speech, particularly in storytelling and song, fosters solidarity and subtly undermines dominant discourses. While these foundational studies provide insight into gendered speech patterns, they do not fully account for

how rural women's folk performances explicitly challenge patriarchal norms. Scholars such as Abu-Lughod and Lutz (1990) argue that deviations from social and grammatical conventions in women's folk speech serve as a deliberate resistance strategy. Raheja and Gold (1994) argue that Rajasthani women's genres were highly effective at momentarily subverting patriarchal ideology, even if what constituted this subversion or resistance remained unexplored. This chapter goes beyond Raheja and Gold's theorisation of the management of women's kinship bonds and the negotiations between conjugal and kinship networks to index, instead, the diversity and multivocality of women's voices, highlight the creative language reflected in rural women's folksongs, emphasising their improvisational techniques, playful exchanges, and evocative expressions of desire. The analysis moves beyond traditional notions of subversion and resistance by focusing on these linguistic elements. It illustrates how folk performances become fluid spaces of expression where women strategically use language to assert agency, challenge social norms, and navigate the complexities of their lived experiences beyond kinship structures. Similarly, her later work (1996) explores the contradictory voices within women's ritual songs and proverbs, demonstrating how they articulate tensions surrounding kinship, marriage, and female identity.

Despite growing recognition of women's folk traditions as spaces of creativity and improvisation (Jassal, 2012), the linguistic intricacies of these performances remain insufficiently examined. This study addresses this gap by analysing *Kajarī* folksongs, dramatic enactments, and symbolic expressions within women's rituals, exploring how these oral forms articulate gendered experiences and social critique. Women's performative culture, particularly in folksongs and commentaries during the performance, reflects a distinct linguistic dimension that contrasts with their everyday speech. Considering women's speech genres speaks to broader

issues of the relationship between language and gender, particularly those connected with the pragmatic aspects of language use, with speech play and verbal art as forms of discourse (Sherzer, 1987a) and with women's communicative devices as loci of potentially subversive speech. This chapter investigates how deviations from the structured male-centric language and grammar are subversive tools to challenge male-controlled speech. It also debates the traditional notion of language as a structured grammar, formal, and semantic system by highlighting its features, such as de-centred, heterogeneous meanings negotiated and contested in social praxis.

I heard most of the songs while doing fieldwork in Gaura village. In this village, women labour inside and outside the house, and in their free time, they sit with women of the same age or elderly women. However, young and older women constitute the performers and audience of the singing sessions. I rarely saw young girls singing in this village, as the senior women sang these songs. Meera Devi's reluctance to sing a complaining song loudly in a non-performative context (inside her house) and her speech during the performance on *caughaṭ* display a clear difference between the voice in the song and her ordinary speech. Pati Devi, aged 70, belonged to the same village. During the singing sessions and interviews, she is vocal about the implicit sexual symbols in the songs. To explain how these songs constitute reality, she gave examples of real-life incidents of extra-marital affairs and stories of elopement. In this village, men also sing the same songs, such as Kavi Chauhan and Narendra Vishwakarma, who assumed the voice of first-person feminine, an issue of voice appropriation, which has been taken up in the next section of this thesis. In relation to questions of language and gender, Susan Gal (1991) has also pointed out that we need to 'focus not only on women's powerlessness and their muteness but on the processes by which women are rendered 'mute' or manage to construct dissenting genres and resisting discourses' (190). I broadly categorised the source material into verbal and non-verbal

language. Women's folksongs, narratives and rhetorical speech constitute the verbal material, whereas their gestures, body movements and voice modulation during the performance fall into the category of non-verbal language. To understand the language in context, I asked women and men familiar with the culture about the meaning of songs and symbols, resulting in exegetic materials.

This study adopts ethnolinguistics as a key analytical tool alongside ethnography to investigate the *Kajarī* singing practices of rural women in Mirzapur. Ethnolinguistics defines how language reflects and shapes cultural realities, and allows for a nuanced exploration of the songs' linguistic forms, social functions, and embedded meanings. Through participant observation, recorded performances, and informal interviews, the research collected a corpus of *Kajarī* songs, which were then analysed for recurring themes, linguistic strategies, and symbolic expressions. The analysis revealed several notable patterns: the presence of abusive and obscene language, often used to invert or challenge conventional moral codes; impromptu improvisation and spontaneous additions that reflect performers' agency and creativity; the insertion of humorous digressions, showcasing verbal wit and repartee; and the use of subversive symbols and metaphors to comment on gender roles, authority figures, and societal norms. Ethnolinguistic methods enabled a deeper understanding of how such linguistic choices are culturally sanctioned, negotiated, and strategically employed during performances. By attending to both the structural features and the socio-cultural resonances of the language used, the methodology highlights how *Kajarī* songs operate as spaces of resistance, humour, and subtle social critique within the lived realities of rural women.

5.1 Obscenity and Abuse in Women's Folk Speech

Rural women's folk tradition disregards gendered language prevalent in all aspects of life, particularly in rural settings. 'Women's songs and stories consistently compose ironic and subversive commentaries on the representation of gender and kinship roles found in the epic texts, male folklore genres and a great deal of everyday talk' (Raheja & Gold, 1994, pp. 12-13). They typically self-censor their language due to gender expectations, cultural values and social norms. However, folk speech often defies this control over women's verbal expression. Similarly, Susan Gal (1995) noted that marginalised linguistic forms like slang, women's interactional styles, and poetry challenge the dominant cultural order. James Scott (1985) refers to this as 'everyday forms of resistance' against ideological or material dominance systems. In Mirzapur, women break free from linguistic constraints and challenge everyday language norms by incorporating *'abuses as a part of language,'* as highlighted by Lalmani Devi.

Women counter societal impositions through the bold and vulgar use of language, as they cannot use such language within the structural boundaries of society. Similar expressive arts exist in the Indian context, resembling women's use of abusive content during *Kajarī* singing. When I asked Manta Devi, *'Why do women abuse during their performance?'* she referred to women's wedding songs, *gārī* (a wedding song characterised by abusive content), where the bride's party insults the groom's party (Gupta, 2001). I heard these songs while attending various Indian weddings. The songs are filled with obscenity and vulgarity, reflecting resistance to giving their daughters away. A *gālī* song has been sung by women in Indian weddings, where the meaning is twofold, mocking the bride-taker and his masculinity by commenting on his penis. This temporary inversion of hierarchy aligns with James Scott's concept of hidden transcripts, where

subordinate groups use humour and coded language to challenge dominant social structures. Below is one of the many songs sung by Pushpa Devi during the fieldwork in Varanasi in 2022.

Saba tā baiṭhe aḍavē-māḍhavē, dulahā kahe orī ho.
Kohlī mẽ se āyala chacuṇḍara, le gayala dulahā kā pelhaṛa chorī ho.

Everybody is sitting here and there; why is the groom sitting in the corner?
Shrewmouse came from a narrow passage and stole the groom's penis.

The song is a humorous yet symbolically layered folk verse that uses animal imagery to convey deeper social themes. As part of the wedding folksong tradition, it employs satire, irony, and playful teasing to comment on marriage, masculinity, and societal expectations. The groom's passive stance suggests nervousness, while the intrusion of the chachuṇḍar (shrewmouse) stealing his pelhār (penis) serves as a metaphor for emasculation or a challenge to traditional masculinity. Common in North Indian wedding songs, such teasing elements lighten the mood, reinforce gender roles, and use the shrewmouse's mischievous nature to enhance the comic effect. Similarly, the opening stanza of a *nakkal* song, which details carpet weaving (a significant industry in the region), begins with vulgarity and gradually shifts to abuses directed at men. This excerpt further highlights the potential of oral tradition to present the contemporary realities of the region because Mirzapur is known for its carpet industry. However, the noticeable part was the women's laughter before using an unusual term, 'cross-eyed buttocks,' which defies the linguistic standards set for women.

Ānā nāce, tānā nāce, nāce sup purānā re,
Parāge-parāge jolāhīn nāce, ādhā cuṭar kānā re.

Group Performance, Shivpur, 2022

Warp dances, weft dances, even the old yarn dances,
A female weaver dances stepwise with cross-eyed buttocks.

As part of a group performance, this song presents a dynamic and rhythmic representation of dance, weaving, and bodily movement. This song uses weaving as a metaphor for movement and bodily expression. The reference to the warp (*aana*) and weft (*tana*), the two fundamental components of weaving, suggests a deep connection between labour, rhythm, and performance. The imagery of the old yarn (*sup purana*) dancing indicates that even worn-out materials or traditions retain vitality and movement. The second line introduces the *jolahin* (female weaver) and humorously describes her dance, highlighting her physical characteristics, e.g., cross-eyed buttocks (*aadha chutar kana*). This phrase, while playful, may symbolise the irregular or awkward movements of a person engaged in intense physical labour or dance. The use of bodily humour aligns with the tradition of folksongs that mix work, play, and social commentary.

In public spaces, women's speech is often limited by norms of decency and modesty, but they share a collective knowledge of obscenity, abusive language, and innovative speech. I observed them improvising their dialogues and comments to include more abusive words, as Rajkumari Devi suggested terms like 'motherf---er, sisterf---er, and *bhosadiwala'* (an abusive term meaning 'one born from a vagina'). In one song, they replaced the word *kasabin* (a socially acceptable word meaning prostitute) with *randi* (slang and abuse used for prostitute). They use these spaces and their creative energy to transgress the expected features of feminine speech, such as politeness, submissiveness, and apologetic tones. In *Kajarī* songs, various jewellery pieces traditionally symbolise marital status. However, the improvised substitution of a skirt for jewellery serves as a metaphor for womanhood, subtly highlighting the husband's immoral and irresponsible behaviour. Moreover, it shows the language's innovative and improvising use in folk performances.

Tohara biciyā utar juwānā khelata bā, tohara lehengā utar juwānā khelata bā,
Khelata bā ho, khelāvata bā, dhūa̐ kasavā para kasabīn nācāvata bā.

Group Performance, Shivpur, 2022

He bets on your toe ring and skirt. He is playing and making others play.
He smokes and makes prostitutes (*kasabin* or *Randi*) dance.

This song, performed collectively, uses playful satire to critique male indulgence, gambling, and the commodification of women. The reference to betting a woman's *bichiya* (toe ring) and *lehenga* (skirt) symbolises her loss of dignity and bodily autonomy. At the same time, imagery of smoking and dancing prostitutes reinforces themes of vice and gendered power dynamics. Depending on the performance context, it can serve as women's resistance through satire or a lighthearted take on male risk-taking. The song raises questions about whether such narratives challenge or reinforce social norms within Bhojpuri folk culture.

In another *nakkal*, two women play the roles of mother and son, with the mother asking about her daughter-in-law's jewellery. The son names the village men, prompting his mother to abuse them verbally. They use spontaneous verbal abuse to channel their frustrations through songs and sayings. Expressions like *pelharave retaye gaye* (cutting the penis) and *dahizara ke nati* (a local term for a man with a burned beard, mocking his manliness) are vulgar and ridicule the features of masculinity. Abuse and slang are distinct features of linguistic communities across cultures. They occasionally insulted me during performances, highlighting my outsider status as a male observer. My presence and the act of recording their private performances were met with criticism. Though not intended to cause harm, the use of abusive language and obscene expressions is deeply embedded in their oral traditions. They use language not just as a vehicle for implicit issues but as a tool to reflect social realities, such as the flaws in men's characters.

Are, hayī tā Karan ke bā, ū jawān Banāras se āyala bāṫen.
Ū bahinchoḍavā, tu Banāras se āyala haye rikārḍiṅga kare, are bappā re bappā.

Group Performance, Shivpur, 2022

It is a carpet of Karan, who has come from Banaras.
You sisterf---er, you have come from Banaras to record and, oh my god.

This song reflects the raw, unfiltered, and often humorous nature of the Bhojpuri folk expressions. The lyrics suggest an interaction where someone, possibly an outsider, has arrived from Banaras for recording (likely referring to the fieldwork). The phrase *'Are hai tā Kāraṇ ke bā?'* could indicate surprise or curiosity about the situation, while the line *'U javān Banāras se āyal bāṭēṅ'* acknowledges the arrival of a young person from Banaras. The use of expletives (*bahinchodava*), although crude, is common in informal folk settings where performances often involve playful teasing, banter, and exaggerated reactions. The phrase *'Are bappā re bappā!'* further emphasises shock or amusement, possibly reflecting the singers' reaction to being recorded. This song might serve as a spontaneous, self-referential performance, where performers comment on the presence of an outsider documenting their traditions, blending humour, irreverence, and local linguistic flavour. It also underscores the meta-narrative aspect of oral traditions, where recording becomes part of the performance. It raises interesting questions about self-awareness, performance authenticity, and community reception of ethnographic research.

This section explores the distinctive features of women's folk speech, emphasising its use of obscenity and abusive language, elements typically absent from everyday discourse. It examines women's creative improvisations, including spontaneous wordplay, impromptu abuses, and the invention of new expressions, which add layers of meaning to their performances. Additionally, it highlights how women subvert conventional expectations of feminine speech, often associated with submissiveness, an apologetic tone, and repetition, by embracing linguistic

defiance. Through these transgressive expressions, women's folk speech disrupts normative gendered communication and subtly challenges male-dominated ideologies, a theme the following section will explore further.

5.2 The Art of Verbal Duel: Wit and Repartee in Women's Speech

The control of rural women's folk language in North India is deeply rooted in historical transformations shaped by colonialism, nationalism, caste hierarchies, and socio-economic shifts. British colonial rule reinforced Victorian moral standards, which imposed restrictive ideals of femininity associated with domesticity, chastity, and obedience (Chatterjee, 1993). These ideals were later selectively integrated into nationalist discourses, portraying women as the guardians of cultural purity and tradition (Menon, 2011). However, this construction of the 'ideal woman' primarily reflected upper-caste, middle-class norms, further marginalising lower-caste and working-class women from dominant narratives of womanhood (Rege, 1998). Within this constrained framework, folk speech emerged as a site of symbolic resistance, allowing marginalised women to articulate their realities through coded expressions, subversive metaphors, and veiled critiques of patriarchal structures (Raheja & Gold, 1994). Similarly, caste and class have historically dictated women's access to oral traditions and shaped their linguistic creativity. Elite women, often confined to purdah, engaged in more refined and controlled poetic traditions, whereas lower-caste and tribal women preserved and innovated folk forms that directly challenged gendered oppression (Sangari & Vaid, 1989). These oral traditions became intellectual spaces where women redefined their identities beyond the constraints of domesticity. Bhakti and Sufi poetic traditions provided early blueprints for this defiance, exemplified by figures such as Mirabai and Lal Ded, whose verses rejected societal limitations through spiritual

rebellion (Tharu & Lalita, 1991). Despite structural attempts to regulate women's voices, folk speech remains a dynamic site of constraint and resistance. The performative nature of these oral traditions allows women to subtly challenge hegemonic ideologies while negotiating their roles within domestic and public spheres. Women's folk speech continues to evolve as a medium of cultural resistance, highlighting their intellectual prowess, creative potential and dominant patriarchal ideals in North India.

In rural Mirzapur, women strategically employ folk speech during traditional performances to subtly contest prevailing biases. Their wit and repartee, evident in folksongs performed during *Kajarī* and *Tīj* festivals, challenge deeply ingrained social constructs that question their intellectual capabilities. Women's folksongs challenge the notion that women are driven solely by emotion rather than reason. In rural settings, women avoid direct verbal confrontations with male family members, including their husbands. However, folk performances provide them with an unrestricted space to engage in sharp-witted dialogue, allowing them not only to converse with men but also to outsmart them and critique their stereotypical perceptions. This verbal dexterity is exemplified in a song where a wife expresses her desire to visit her natal home, only for her husband to demand repayment for the expenses incurred on her. In response, she cleverly shifts the argument to the issue of purity and virginity, asking, *'Can you restore me to how I once was? Can you return my virginity? If so, then I will repay the money.'* Through such rhetorical strategies, women use folk speech to challenge patriarchal assumptions and assert their agency.

Jo tuhū dhaniyā jabu nahiravā nā,
Jetanā lagala baha o lagatiyā, otanā daī ke jāye nā.
Jo tuhū rājau lebā lagatiyā nā,
Vaise karake deu jaise rahalī bābā ke gharavā nā.

Malti Devi and Group, Gaura, 2022

Oh, dear wife, if you want to go home,
Return the money that I have spent on you.
Oh, my husband, if you want your money back,
Make me (a virgin) as I was at my father's home.

This song, performed by Malti Devi and her group, critiques gender, marriage, and economic exchange within the Bhojpuri folk tradition. A dialogue between husband and wife highlights the transactional nature of marriage, where the husband demands repayment for his financial investment in his wife. However, the wife's sharp response, challenging him to restore her virginity, subverts patriarchal logic, exposing the hypocrisy surrounding female sexuality and economic dependence. While seemingly humorous, the song serves as a hidden transcript of resistance, critiquing dowry, the commodification of women, and societal expectations. Performed collectively, it allows women to express grievances, fostering solidarity and subtle defiance through folk traditions. I documented a similar performance exchange in which women from the bride's family engaged in lively verbal banter with the groom's relatives. This playful yet structured exchange of dialogues served as both a social ritual and a performative act, reflecting negotiations of power, kinship dynamics, and gender roles.

The *Tīj* is celebrated in rural areas in the *Sāvana* month. On this day, the groom's male relatives bring edible stuff, items of adornment and sweets to the bride's home after the marriage. Village women on the bride's side perform a customary practice of mocking and insulting the male relatives by asking them to sing *Kajarī* songs or carry the pot (*ghada*) on their heads. The pot is decorated with beautiful artwork and ribbons, but is filled with mud, cow dung, and dust. When he starts walking while carrying the pot on his head, women smash the pot with *lāṭhī* and break it, making him entirely soaked with dirt and dust. Women engaged in these activities

during the night of the *Tīj* festival. However, Jatashanka Sharma and I were present on a different date, so we requested to reenact the performance. Women of Madguda village readily accepted our request and enacted the entire performance. Jata Shankar Sharma and Jagdish Sonkar played the roles of the groom's relatives. A significant moment occurred when village women challenged the men to sing, demonstrating how they used their intellect to contest the notion of male superiority as sole providers while rejecting the perception of women as inferior beings.

In Madguda village, Heeravati Devi's confident attitude and exceptional singing skills enabled her to challenge a performer of high repute (Jata Shankar Sharma, who received the President's Award). This scenario resembles a singing competition (dangal) between men and women. The women's group initiates a song or poses a question through song, requiring the men to respond with songs related to women's themes or questions. If the men fail, the women mock, abuse, and demean them. This dialogic interaction puts women in a competitive position, challenging the notion that men can fulfil all their needs. Women outwit the men by explicitly stating their demands through song. For instance, even when Jata Sharma attempts to respond, he fails because his song addresses only materialistic needs. In contrast, the women's demands, such as a 'skirt made of the earth', 'scarf made of the sky' and a 'bodice of smoke', go beyond what men can provide. These demands are expressed in the following lines:

Tīna bacana mora manā, tabhē tā tose rājī bālamuā. (x2)
Dhartī kā lahengā re, badarī kā cunarī, tabhē tā tose rājī bālamuā.
Dhūā̃ kā colī siyāvai dā, tabhē tā tose rājī bālamuā.
Cakarī se candana pisāvai dā, tabhē tā tose rājī bālamuā.

Heeravati Devi and Group, Madguda, 2022

You promise me three things, husband; only then I will be ready with you.
I like skirts made of earth and scarves made of sky. Only then will I be ready
Stitch a blouse made of smoke. Only then will I be ready with you
Bring sandalwood ground into the grinding mill. Only then will I be ready with you.

This song, performed by Heeravati Devi and Group in Madguda (2022), demonstrates how Bhojpuri women's folk traditions use eco-metaphors to navigate power, desire, and autonomy within patriarchal structures. The woman's surreal demands, such as a fabric made from earth, sky, smoke, and sandalwood, symbolise an impossible yet poetic assertion of agency, shifting control in her favour. By intertwining nature with gender resistance, the song reflects an eco-feminist critique of patriarchal and ecological exploitation. Like other Bhojpuri folksongs, it transforms metaphor and performance into subtle resistance, creating a space where women challenge societal constraints through poetic and ecological imagery.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, women put forward their materialistic demands by asking for jewellery items, displaying their passion to possess or collect wealth. However, Hari Ram Dwivedi (renowned writer and scholar in folk literature) said, *'Women ask for these materialistic things because they comprehend the tough times in future; therefore, they collect this valuable stuff for that phase'* (H. R. Dwivedi, Personal Communication, 18 August 2023). Moreover, women's physical labour in agriculture is significant in rural areas. They become unpaid labourers because their agricultural work extends to their household work (Kelkar, 2013). In a *Kajarī* song, the wife demands a nose ring for her agricultural work, but the husband makes excuses. This song is sung by a man who assumes the feminine voice in the song, bringing up the issue of men appropriating female voices and emotions, which I will discuss in the next chapter. The wife said If you cannot provide a nose ring, then I will neither work in the field nor let you come close to enjoying the pleasure of my physical body. Here, she is raising her voice against unrecognised and unpaid labour by using her body to bargain. The song hints at women's witty dialogue and negotiation skills, which they usually avoid outside this performative sphere.

Patnī - Hamake sone kā gaḍhāī dā jhulanīyā, piya, tab karaba kisānīyā, piya nā.

Patī - Nahī barkhā bhaīla, nahī bhaīla pānīyā, piya, tab karaba kisānīyā, piya nā.
Patnī - Hamake jhulanī nā gaḍhāibā, maza husna ke nā pāibā,
Pās āibā nahī, bīta jāī jawānīyā, piya, tab karaba kisānīyā, piya nā. (x2)

Rajendra Vishwakarma, Gaura, Mirzapur 2021

Wife- Make me a gold nose ring; otherwise, I will not do agricultural work.
Husband- There is no rain and no water for irrigation; I will not do agricultural work.
If you do not give a nose ring, then you will not be able to have pleasure.
I will not let you come close to me; your youth will be wasted in hope.

Jewellery and bridal adornments hold an essential place in a woman's life, and this image of a woman as a materialistic being is also stereotyped in the minds of ordinary people. They preserve valuable stuff for future crises, thus breaking the stereotype of women as materialistic beings. These items are conceptualised as examples of marital responsibility and loyalty. Moreover, jewellery loss is symbolised as losing virginity or purity. However, the main issue addressed here is women's bargaining skills and raising the issue of their labour in the field, which goes unnoticed in the Indian rural context.

In brief, folk language is a powerful medium through which rural women challenge long-standing stereotypes that portray them as domestic, irrational, and materialistic. These songs, performed in group settings, serve as socially accepted spaces for women to express defiance, critique marital norms, and display verbal dexterity. Their use of irony, poetic exaggeration, and humour turns everyday struggles into performative acts of resistance, reinforcing the significance of wit in Bhojpuri women's speech traditions. This section has demonstrated how women's folk speech, through its performative and subversive elements, actively contests these assumptions by portraying women as rational, witty, and intellectually agile. Rural women construct arguments, pose counter-questions, and trap men in rhetorical exchanges, exposing the fallacies within dominant gender ideologies. Their ability to outwit men

through verbal play reclaims their agency and disrupts male-centric notions of knowledge and reason. By incorporating metaphors, double entendres, and satirical jabs, such as using *'kheera'* (cucumber) and *'kakadi'* (ridge gourd) as euphemisms for male genitalia, women cleverly undermine masculine authority. Such linguistic strategies dismantle the belief that women's speech should be modest, submissive, and confined to the private sphere. Ultimately, folk speech emerges as a critical site of resistance, demonstrating that rural women are not passive recipients of social norms but active agents of cultural negotiation. Their folk expressions refute restrictive narratives of femininity, positioning them as independent thinkers who reshape their socio-cultural realities through humour, intellect, and linguistic defiance.

The next section of this chapter explains the sexual imagery and hidden desires manifested in the form of folk voices, which women usually repress due to multiple social factors.

5.3 Sexuality Unravelled in Folk Speech

This section discusses the *Kajarī* folksong and the symbolic language used to highlight the private erotic emotions in the confines of the performative world. Rural women's sexuality in North India has been historically shaped by patriarchal structures that frame female desire through male control, reinforcing societal norms that regulate women's bodies and autonomy. Feminist scholars have argued that sexuality is not an innate, autonomous trait but a socially and historically constructed category deeply embedded in power relations (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1990). These binaries serve to maintain male dominance by restricting women's sexual agency. Thus, analysing folksongs closely provides insights into people's private lives since songs 'provide a medium for expressing emotions that are taboo topics in everyday conversations'

(Narayan, 1986, p. 56). Songs function as a collective tradition for expressing emotions in societies where it is not customary to discuss inner emotional states openly, allowing songs to serve as a vehicle for communicating topics that may be forbidden in everyday encounters (ibid). The folk genre has images and symbols that hint at women's sexual frustrations and unfulfilled desires, but androcentric society does not allow them to display such private emotions openly. Prem Chowdhry (2015), while making a distinction between sexuality for procreation and pleasure-seeking sexuality, stated that the latter is considered to be dangerous and threatening to society, further highlighting the tension and male anxiety. Therefore, the patriarchal structure wants constant surveillance inside and outside the house. Since their husbands are away from their homes, sexual urges and desires become prevalent emotions in women's subcultures.

These songs use the symbols of jewellery, food items and the act of swinging to express their sexual longing. Smita Tewari Jassal's (2012) analysis supported this claim when she wrote that in countless such women's songs, the imagery of water and elegantly presented food is always succeeded by the offering of a fragrant *pan* and an inviting conjugal bed adorned with petals, forming a recurring motif. This song abounds with cultural and natural symbols that refer to the imagery of cooking and serving food on a golden plate, which signifies a symbolic act of consummation, where the golden plate or vessel refers to the female body and the act of eating is almost synonymous with sex (Yalman, 1973, pp. 298-299). Additionally, it relates to the younger brother-in-law's extramarital affair with his sister-in-law, a common motif in folklore. This portion develops the motif further as women discuss the topic in a different song.

Harī-harī belā khile ādhī ratī, camelā bhinusarī re harī. (x2)
Sone kī ṭhālī mẽ jevanā banāe ho Rāmā,
Harī-harī saīyā jeve ādhī ratī, devar bhinusarī re harī.

Harī-harī belā khile ādhī ratī, camelā bhinusarī re harī. (x2)
Jhañjhare geḍuavā, Gaṅgājala pānī Rāmā,
Harī-harī saīyā ghoṭe ādhī ratī, devar bhinusarī re harī.
Harī-harī belā khile ādhī ratī, camelā bhinusarī re harī. (x2)
Khaḍā suparī, lacchī bidāwā jodae ho Rāmā,
Harī-harī saīyā kūce ādhī ratī, devar bhinusarī re harī.
Harī-harī belā khile ādhī ratī, camelā bhinusarī re harī. (x2)
Phulavā cunī, cinī sejiyā sajāe ho Rāmā,
Harī-harī saīyā sowai ādhī ratī, devar bhinusarī re harī.

Malti Devi & Group, Gaura, 2021

Oh, God! Arabi jasmine (*Bela*) blooms at midnight, and jasmine (*Chamela*) blooms at dawn.
Oh, Rama! I prepared food in a golden pot,
Oh, Hari! My husband eats at night, and my brother-in-law at dawn.
Oh, God! Arabian jasmine blooms at midnight, and jasmine blooms at dawn.
I brought water in a pitcher,
Oh, Hari! My husband drinks at night, and my brother-in-law at dawn.
Oh, God! Arabian jasmine blooms at midnight, and jasmine blooms at dawn.
I prepared the pan with betelnut and cardamom,
Oh, Hari! My husband chews in the night, and my brother-in-law at dawn.
I prepared the bed with different flowers, but
Oh, Rama! My husband sleeps at night, and my brother-in-law at dawn.

This song, performed by Malti Devi & Group in Gaura (2021), offers a fascinating glimpse into how folk speech encodes sexuality through layered metaphors and suggestive humour. The recurring imagery of *Bela blooming at midnight and Chamela at dawn* establishes a contrast between two temporalities, subtly referencing the presence of both the husband and the brother-in-law in the woman's intimate space. Each verse follows a structured pattern where acts of cooking food, fetching water, preparing betel leaves, and decorating the bed are intertwined with erotic undertones, hinting at the woman's dual engagements. The refrain, *'My husband does this at night, and my brother-in-law at dawn,'* plays on the ambiguity of relationships within the household, suggesting not only the woman's agency in navigating intimacy but also the playful subversion of marital fidelity in a setting where extended family members live nearby. The song

thrives on double entendre, allowing women to articulate desire, transgressions, and sexual negotiations under the guise of everyday domestic duties. Such compositions reflect folk performance as a space where women can explore and voice their sexuality, challenging rigid social norms while maintaining plausible deniability through wit and poetic subtlety.

In songs with amorous themes, 'swinging' symbolises sexual play, and women express their sexual frustration when their advances are intentionally rejected. Here, *Madan* symbolises *Kamdev*, the God of love and desire; nature, usually benevolent, becomes a tormentor, and images like an abandoned bed indicate sexual and erotic sensations in her husband's absence. Tender age is again a symbol of youthfulness and full of desire. The song below highlights the mental and physical problems resulting from the separation, which hints at the sexual frustration of women. The song underlines how the natural imagery of thunder and lightning, along with the symbols of an 'empty bed' and the unknown fear of her husband having another wife, forced her to the extent of committing suicide by drinking poison. These elements explain left-behind women's immediate sexual longing and need for reconciliation and intensify their anxiety and fear.

Nita uṭhe citāwe ho bāṛī dhaniyā, piya ghar nahĩ āye nā. (x2)
Āṣāḍha māsa ghaṅghora badariyā, buṇḍiyā barase nā, samāliyā, buṇiyā barase nā,
Sāwalī sūrat mora bisarāile, piya ghar nahĩ āye nā. (x2)
Nita uṭhe citāwe ho bāṛī dhaniyā, piya ghar nahĩ āye nā. (x2)
Sāwana aiso masta mahīnā, sohe Kajariyā nā, kavaṇe savatiṃ saṅghe lobhāile,
Piya ghar nahĩ āile nā. (x2)
Bhādava bhavana hame nahĩ bhāve, sunī sejariyā nā, Rāmā, sunī sejariyā nā,
Bijurī camake, hiyā ḍerāvave, piya ghar nahĩ āye nā. (x2)
Kūwāra māhīnā, roī kahũ, maĩ marũ, zahara ke khāī, samāliyā, marũ zahara ke khāī. (x2)
Taba se pañcama, piya mila gaile, piya ghar nahĩ āile nā.
Nita uṭhe citāwe ho bāṛī dhaniyā, piya ghar nahĩ āye nā. (x2)

Group performance, Gaura, 2022

Every morning, she worries about whether her husband will come.
It is cloudy and drizzling in the month of *Āsāṛh*,
He forgets my charming face and does not come home. (x 2)
Every morning, she worried that her husband had not come.
Sāvana is a delightful month suitable for *Kajarī* singing, but with whose (co-wife's) beauty are you mesmerised?
I do not like my house in the month of *bhādrapad* because my bed is empty; lightning and thunder terrify my heart. And he does not come home.
In the *kwar* month, I said while weeping that I would eat poison,
But my husband did not come home.
Every morning, she worries that her husband has not come.

This folksong from Gaura (2022) vividly expresses a woman's emotional and sexual longing for her absent husband, using poetic lament to convey the pain of separation. The refrain, *'Every morning, she worries that her husband did not come home,'* reinforces her cyclical despair, deepened by seasonal imagery. Each monsoon month intensifies her emotions; Asarh's heavy rains mirror her despondency, *Sāvan*, typically romantic, torments her with suspicions of infidelity, *Bhādrapada* amplifies her loneliness, and *Kwār* culminates in a desperate plea for death. The song subtly conveys erotic yearning, using nature's shifting moods as metaphors for bodily solitude and unfulfilled desires, transforming folk performance into a space for women's hidden expressions of longing and resistance.

The joking relationship between a woman and her brother-in-law is a known phenomenon in the world and folksongs. A woman and her bond with her brother-in-law are one of the relationships through which erotic themes recur in folksongs. These songs often hint towards this relationship, which has some sexual undercurrents. In the following piece, setting up a garden by the brother-in-law or watering the plants suggests impregnating the woman or nourishing the child, which becomes evident when she says it washes away her vermilion (symbols of matrimony) as the loss of ornaments and adornments signifies the loss of

chastity (Jassal, 2007, p. 28). In addition, when I asked about the song's meaning, Pati Devi (a woman in her late sixties in Gaura village) said, *'Means what? Her brother-in-law wants a relationship with her sister-in-law. When we sing these songs, we are not just talking about love and longing, we are showing how women know everything, even what is not said aloud'* (P. Devi, Personal communication, July 29 2023). She continuously resists further, hinting at her loyalty and courage to address such issues. Her constant refusal to submit to the demands of her brother-in-law subverts the notion of women being seductresses or lustful beings.

Yahī para Gaṅgā, vahī para Jamunā, bīcē ho reṭā nā.
Devarā lagāwe phulavariyā, bīcē ho reṭā nā.
Lāī letū bhaujī re, sone kā ghaḍilavā ke, sichī ho detū nā,
Morī bāṛī phulavariyā ke, sichī ho detū nā.
Kaise ke sichī, devarā, bāṛī phulavariyā ke, chuṭī ho jāihe nā,
More māṭhe kā sīnūravā ke, chuṭī ho jāihe nā.

Group Performance, Gaura, Mirzapur 2021

On this side is the river Ganga, and on the other side is the river Yamuna,
Furthermore, there is sand in the middle of them.
My brother-in-law sets up a garden in the sand.
Dear sister-in-law! Take this golden pitcher and water the garden,
Oh, dear brother-in-law! How can I water this garden?
Because if I do so, my vermilion washes away.

Similarly, one song uses the metaphor of gawana. *Gawana* is a post-marriage ritual where the woman is brought from her natal home to her marital home after three, five or seven years. This ritual marks her puberty and is symptomatic of the consummation of marriage (Singh, 2015, p. 190). It is a cultural symbol of unconsummated marriage and unfulfilled desires, but sometimes, they contradict the idea of sexual fulfilment. Women use this symbol to both display their sexual urge and reluctance to support mismatched or child marriage. They refute it by criticising the practices of mismatched marriage or marriage at an early age.

Abahī bāṛī baho umariyā, piya mora lawāī gawanā. (x2)

Kahe-kahe more bāṛe sasura jī, jhaṭapaṭ laī cala tu ho gawanavā,
Onake pagāṛī kā ho, bandhābavā, debe bhulāwaī ho saīyā.

Group Performance, Shivpur, Mirzapur, 2022

I am at a very tender age, and my husband asks for *gavana* (x 2)
My father-in-law said to bring the *gavana* as soon as possible,
Oh, husband, I will make him forget how to tie the turban.

This folksong from Shivpur, Mirzapur (2022) captures a young bride's anxieties and resistance as she faces gavana, the ritual marking her departure to her husband's home. The repeated phrase *abahi bari baho umiriya* (I am at a very tender age) highlights her unpreparedness, emphasising how she is prematurely pushed into adulthood and marital duties. Her father-in-law's urgency reflects patriarchal control over a woman's transition from her natal to the marital home. Yet, she resists cleverly, distracting him by feigning confusion over his turban. The song subtly critiques marital expectations and the loss of agency, showcasing how verbal dexterity becomes a tool of defiance by using humour and wordplay.

Rural women might not be familiar with the discourse of sexuality as an agency. Still, they are familiar with the use of beauty, body, and virginity as sexual prowess to negotiate and bargain with the patriarchy (Dlamini, 2009, p. 140). Folksongs frequently defy typical power dynamics by depicting women using their sexual prowess to manipulate men. In several of these songs, women are portrayed as having a robust and seductive sensuality that attracts and controls men. Women are shown to be able to control men's behaviours and wants by highlighting their appeal and the attraction of personal interactions. This image creates a complex representation of female agency within the cultural narratives by highlighting how women can use their sexual appeal to negotiate power, assert their will, and challenge male domination. Women use these poetic expressions to challenge the imposed conceptualisation of '*Bhadra Mahila*' and declare their identities, giving their voices and experiences a platform inside a conventional cultural

framework. The below-mentioned song narrates the incident of a wife whose husband has migrated. She sets up a shop to lure him whenever he returns from abroad. Women use fruits and edible stuff such as '*Navrangi Nebula'* (symbol of youth) to express their erotic desires and lure men.

Detū nā sāsū more bānse kā dehaliyā,
Saḍaka bīca dharī ho dukaniyā nā. (x2)
Eka orī dharab sāsū peḍā aura mithaiyā ke, eka orī nā,
Dharab nebulā navraṅgiyā ke, eka orī nā.
Yahī bāṭe āihe sāsū jī ke puṭavā, lobhāī ho jāihe nā,
Lobhāī ho jāihe nā, morā nebulā navraṅgiyā para lobhāī ho jāihe nā.
Ketane śera becū bhātini, peḍā aura mithaiyā ketane śera nā?
Tora nebulā navraṅgiyā, ketane śera nā?
Mola jina karā Rājā, peḍā aura mithaiyā ke, lākha takā nā,
Morā nebulā navraṅgiyā ke, lākha takē nā.

Group Performance, Madguda, 2023

Oh, mother-in-law! Give me a bamboo basket to open a shop in the middle of the road.
I will keep *peda* and sweets on one side and lime/orange on the other.
My mother-in-law's son will come down the same road and will be enamoured,
He will be enamoured with my lime/orange.
What is the price of your *peda,* sweets, and lime/orange?
Do not ask the price of *peda or* sweets, oh sweetheart, as my lime/orange is one lakh.

This folksong from Madguda (2023) is a playful yet layered expression of desire, bargaining, and feminine agency embedded in the witty repartee between a daughter-in-law and her mother-in-law. The woman expresses her wish to set up a shop in the middle of the road, symbolically placing herself in a liminal space where she can attract attention and assert control over exchanges. The *peda* (sweet) and *nebula navrangiya* (lime/orange) serve as metaphors, while the former signifies traditional offerings and expectations, the latter represents something more personal, sensual, and unattainable. The clever interplay of market imagery and intimacy transforms this into a song about seduction and value, where the woman asserts her desirability by placing an extravagant price on her *nebula navrangiya*, making it clear that it cannot be easily

possessed. The mother-in-law's son, her husband, becomes the passive recipient of this allure, reversing the typical gendered power dynamics of transactional relationships in marriage. Like many other Bhojpuri women's folksongs, this one uses humour and economic metaphors to subtly navigate female desire, autonomy, and attraction within patriarchal constraints. I recorded rural women's hand gestures, body movements, and clapping during performances to deepen this analysis. I examined their non-verbal language and symbolic expressions to uncover culturally specific meanings embedded in the performance.

Non-verbal communication, such as body movements, gestures, and expressions, helps them express their private thoughts. They express erotic intentions and desires through bodily movements and gestures in *nakkals*. In the presence of senior male affines, women inevitably come to recognise that they must, as Das puts it, 'learn to communicate . . . by non-verbal gestures, intonation of speech, and reading meta-messages in ordinary language' (1988, p. 198); such communication often subverts the official language of the dominant discourse and subtly articulates a contrapuntal reading of gender and kinship relations. Usually, such songs provide a dialogic structure that enables women to comment on the discriminatory behaviour and social constraints imposed on them. In a *nakkal*, women reply to another group with veils over their faces while talking about their father-in-law and husband's elder brother, but they remove them while addressing their husband and brother-in-law. *Ghūṅghaṭa* signifies rural patriarchy (Chowdhry, 1994, p. 405), and removal of it is an act of denial of patriarchal control. This song's unique feature, which corroborates the idea of an open display of sexuality, is their gestures of serving and letting them eat the rice. Moreover, their hip movements and physical intimacy hint at their physical needs and desires.

Dhanā devarā ke kaise bolāwalu, dhanā devarā ke kaise bolāwalu?
Dhanā devarā ke aise bolāilā, dhanā devarā ke aise bolāilā.
Dhanā devarā ke kaise khiyāwalu, dhanā devarā ke kaise khiyāwalu?
Dhanā devarā ke aise khiyāilā, dhanā devarā ke aise khiyāilā.
Dhanā saīyā ke kaise bolāwalu, dhanā saīyā ke kaise bolāwalu?
Dhanā saīyā ke aise bolāilā, dhanā saīyā ke aise bolāilā.
Dhanā saīyā ke kaise khiyāwalu, dhanā saīyā ke kaise khiyāwalu?
Dhanā saīyā ke aise khiyāilā, dhanā saīyā ke aise khiyāilā.

Group Performance, Shivpur, Mirzapur, 2022

How do you call your brother-in-law? How do you call your brother-in-law?
This is how I call my brother-in-law. This is how I call my brother-in-law.
How do you feed him? How do you feed him?
This is how I feed him. This is how I feed him.
How do you call your husband? How do you call your husband?
This is how I call my husband. This is how I call my husband.
How do you feed your husband? How do you feed your husband?
This is how I feed my husband. This is how I feed my husband.

This folksong from Shivpur, Mirzapur (2022), is an evocative play on repetition, rhythm, and relational dynamics, where a woman playfully negotiates her interactions with her husband and brother-in-law. The song's structure, built on a call-and-response pattern, mirrors the teasing verbal duels characteristic of women's folk speech in Bhojpuri culture. The subtle variations in tone and delivery of how she calls and feeds each male figure in her household hint at the layered, often ambiguous, relationships women navigate within the domestic sphere. The song's charm lies in its suggestiveness—on the surface, it appears to be a simple exchange. Yet, the rhythmic emphasis and repetition create a space for double entendre, where everyday gestures of care and duty become playful and flirtatious. The contrast between addressing the husband (*saiya*) and the brother-in-law (*devara*) reflects the nuanced social codes governing speech and behaviour, particularly the leeway that folk traditions provide for women to express desire, tease boundaries, and subvert rigid hierarchies through humour and wit.

During their performance, women rejoice in their bodies and use their movements and gestures to communicate their internal thoughts and desires. Here, words and actions function as symbols, and the body becomes a communicative tool. Their songs, with their body movement, transformed into a bawdy and suggestive piece with the advancement of their performance in the night, and they took the opportunity to express their anguish, animosities and frustration resulting from the imposed order and constraints of the social system. It is evident from their performative language and singing tradition that they function as a means of communication in a non-violent way to convey their repressed thoughts and desires and challenge the male-authored discourses of gendered language. Moreover, symbolic and metaphorical agents help them express their unarticulated emotions implicitly and explicitly in their speech, which we will discuss in the next section. Here, the performers are not licensed, but the performance is licensed. Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger states, 'Although songs may not directly challenge existing social and cultural structures, the very performance of an alternative may become subversive' (Flueckiger, 1996, p. 113).

This section highlighted the ideological powers that shaped the discourse of female sexuality and how dominant ideologies have controlled it. However, folksong provides women with an avenue to use language and culture-specific symbols to dismantle the idea of female sexuality constructed by historical and nationalistic forces. Folksongs use metaphorical language, often referencing food items and fruits to humorously and satirically allude to sexual desire. The performative aspect of folk speech, including gestures and laughter, further disrupts the rigid frameworks that seek to confine women's bodies and desires. By engaging in witty, playful, and often bawdy expressions of sexuality, rural women reclaim their agency, using folk traditions as a means to challenge and redefine patriarchal narratives surrounding their bodies and desires.

5.4 Conclusion

The careful observation and analysis of women's *Kajarī* songs and folk speech by employing an ethnolinguistics lens contradict the visual image of Mirzapur's veiled women and their muffled voices in public and private settings. All is accomplished as women's subcultures are instrumental in providing a safe release of resistant energy through which they can express their multifaceted emotions and comment on the social issues prevalent in society. Here, folk speech and tropes such as symbols and metaphors, which they derive from their immediate surroundings, help convey their internal thoughts, which supports Sherzer's (1987) claim that society stigmatises women, women's linguistic behaviour, with other communicative verbal behaviour, will be read as indicative of their place in society, an overt mark of their nonnormal and nonnormative behaviour status.

One can thus read the importance of women's assertive speech in North Indian oral performances, and the *Kajarī* folksong becomes a significant example. However, to subvert the language controlled by men, women adopt the same masculine language and abusive slang targeting women. Thus, they knowingly or unknowingly subscribe to gendered language. It examines how this expressed meaning influences and shapes the construction and negotiation of gender in everyday life. The themes in these songs range from abusive content to using culturally specific expressions (symbols and metaphors) to present an alternative image of rural women. In addition, suggestive language transforms this genre into a tool in the hands of female performers, where they question and challenge patriarchal ideas contributing to the subjugation of women, such as women being irrational, tied to the domestic arena. Moreover, folkloric language assists them in establishing female subjectivity by challenging gender stereotypes and expectations. It also addresses the question of the agency of folksongs and the issues of representation and

improvisation in rural contexts. Women's frank expressions in folksongs, overtly showcasing their sexual desires, display that in these traditions, we encounter neither the modesty and 'embarrassment' deemed appropriate for women in the culture nor the voicelessness and submissiveness often portrayed by external perspectives of South Asian women. However, it is also true that the 'relationship between women's vocality in their daily intercourse and how oral traditions portray this vocality is a complex one, neither pure reflection nor fantasy reversal' (Gold, 1997, p. 104). Sometimes, folk speech presents a stereotypical image of women with the imagery referring to household chores, a submissive attitude and a narrative revolving around domestic issues. The issue of laughter and jokes can be treated as an extension of women's verbal strategies, which enables the researchers to investigate a pertinent question raised by Smita Tewari Jassal, 'Do laughter, play, jokes, and humor-themes associated with the *kajlı* genre in particular, help us to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of women's agency (Jassal, 2012, p. 75)?'

The next chapter of the thesis deals with the concept of appropriation, which has been hinted at here and there in this chapter. It will try to investigate what the variables are associated with gender, class, and caste, helping the appropriators to adopt and commercialise rural women's traditional liminal place, meant for their creative and innovative outlook and genre, rendering them voiceless and marginalised.