CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In the intricate fabric of human culture, oral traditions, religious observances, and rituals serve as vital means of preserving identity and spirituality. Among these, *Kajarī* folksongs, sung by rural women in North India, hold a special place, reflecting a deep interconnection between faith, seasonal rhythms, and communal memory. Sung during the monsoon season, *Kajarī* songs express themes of fertility, longing, devotion, and nature's influence on human life. While often portraying a woman's yearning for her absent beloved, these songs also symbolise the devotee's spiritual longing for divine grace. Rooted in agrarian and religious life, *Kajarī* songs function as artistic expressions and sacred invocations, reinforcing the bond between worship, folklore, and lived reality. Within the religious and ritualistic framework, *Kajarī* songs assume profound significance, often sung during household ceremonies, temple gatherings, and seasonal observances. These songs invoke deities such as Lord Shiva, Goddess Parvati, and Krishna, weaving mythological storytelling into devotional practice. Through melodic verses, women engage in a participatory form of worship, using their voices to create a spiritual and cultural bridge between the past and present. Whether sung in courtyards, fields, or near water bodies, these songs foster community bonding, cultural pride, and spiritual resilience. Singing transforms into a devotion ritual, reinforcing the interplay between sound, prayer, and religious heritage.

Beyond their spiritual dimensions, *Kajarī* folksongs are narratives of rural women's emotions, aspirations, and struggles. Their lyrics articulate themes of love, marriage, social expectations, and agrarian hardships, making them devotional hymns and reflections of women's lived realities. Despite modernisation, these songs continue to thrive, preserving cultural wisdom, religious devotion, and oral heritage across generations. Passed down from mother to

daughter, *Kajarī* remains a testament to the resilience of folk traditions, ensuring that the spiritual and cultural consciousness of rural communities endures. Thus, *Kajarī* folksongs stand at the crossroads of oral tradition, religion, and ritual, embodying a sacred fusion of devotion, storytelling, and identity. More than just melodies, they are cultural legacies, sustaining the voices of rural women through time. As an evolving tradition, *Kajarī* continues to bridge the sacred and the secular, the individual and the communal, reinforcing the enduring harmony of faith, folklore, and feminine agency within India's spiritual landscape.

In North Indian states, such as eastern Uttar Pradesh and some parts of Bihar, women celebrate the *Kajarī* festival, observe fast and sing *Kajarī* folksong in their performative setting. This study examines the *Kajarī* folksong, festivals, and rituals of rural women within the socio-cultural context of the Mirzapur region (a district in Uttar Pradesh, India), focusing on their performative dimensions, rituals and folksongs. Through an ethnographic exploration of rural women's folk singing practices, the research investigates how these songs, traditionally associated with entertainment and communal solidarity, serve as subtle sites of resistance against established social hierarchies and power structures. The thesis interrogates explicitly how the *Kajarī* folk tradition provides women with an autonomous space to indulge in subtle transgression acts and reimagine conventional roles as daughters, wives, and mothers. Additionally, it critically examines the appropriation of rural women's folk traditions by upper-caste men/women (professional singers) in the region, a process that often diminishes their subversive essence and reconfigures the meanings of their folksongs. By analysing these dynamics, the research aims to illuminate broader issues of cultural dominance, gendered power relations, and the evolving significance of indigenous knowledge. This study is geographically

centred on select villages in the Mirzapur district and adopts historical and contemporary perspectives to understand these cultural phenomena comprehensively.

1.1 The Motivation Behind Pursuing the Rural Women's *Kajarī* Tradition

The research work's title is 'Echoes of Defiance: Subversive Language, Ritualised Transgression and Place-Making in Mirzapur's *Kajarī* Folksongs.' However, before probing deeper into the different concepts of folklore and oral tradition, this section discusses the motivation behind choosing this area for my research. The researcher has been listening to the folksong from his mother and grandmother since childhood; however, it became a part of his thesis work when he struggled to identify a research area after his post-graduation. The scholar wanted to explore the domain of folksongs but was unsure which one, as the state (Uttar Pradesh) is the fourth largest state in India in terms of area and has numerous folksongs on different occasions and seasons. One of my batchmates, Priyadarshini Mishra, who belongs to the Mirzapur region, suggested exploring the *Kajarī* folksong as she belongs to where this folksong originated. Her suggestion provides an impetus to examine rural women's singing tradition to understand the nuances of this folk genre and the social reality it depicts in their singing tradition. It is essential to understand the concept of folklore to understand the folk culture and folksongs.

1.2 Emergence of Folklore as a Discipline

Initially, folklore was defined as the oral tradition, beliefs, and practices of unlettered communities handed down from one generation to another, a definition that has evolved (Dorson, 1968; Jason, 1983). Herder introduced the terms *Volkslied* (folksong), *Volksseele* (folk soul), and *Volksglaube* (folk beliefs) in the 18th century (Wilson, 1976). The Grimm Brothers contributed to folklore studies by publishing *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* in 1812 (Zipes, 2002). The field of

folklore scholarship formally began with the introduction of the term by W. J. Thoms in 1846. Thoms referred to the manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, and proverbs of the olden times in his letter to *The Athenaeum* (Thoms, 1846). Characterised by romantic and nationalistic fervour, the discipline gained traction among scholars attempting to preserve national identity through folklore studies (Bendix, 1997). Various folklore societies emerged, such as the Finnish Literature Society (1831), the English Folklore Society (1878), and the American Folklore Society (1888) (Honko, 1979).

Historically, the word folk was used pejoratively, often in contrast to the elite or educated class, positioning them between the urban elite and primitive societies (Burke, 2009). In his essay 'The Method of Folklore,' published in *Custom and Myth* (1884), Andrew Lang defined folk in terms of class (lower), peasant, progressive, and education, indicating their role as a bridge between the civilised and the primitive (Lang, 1884). Alan Dundes later expanded the definition, describing folk as 'any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor' (Dundes, 1965, p. 22). Based on this, folk can range from small groups to entire nations sharing common characteristics. Marxist conceptualisations view folk as the oppressed class, with folklore serving as a form of resistance and a weapon of the weak (Hobsbawm, 1990). However, folksongs can reinforce orthodox and stereotypical constructions, complicating this perspective (Bauman, 1971).

However, Elli-Kaija Köngäs (1963) presents a different perspective on the origin and development of folklore. She references several early collections, including Henricus Florinus's *Wanhain Suomalaisten Tawaliset ja Suloiset Sanan-lascut* (1702), which translates to *The Common and Sweet Proverbs of the Old Finns*. Additionally, she cites various dissertations, such as *De Superstitione Veterum Fennorum Theoretica et Practica* by Christianus Erici Lencqvist

(1782), *De Fama Magiae Fennis Attributae* by F. J. Rosenbom (1789), *Aenigmata Fennica* by Kristfrid Ganander (1783), and *Mythologia Fennica* by Kristfrid Ganander (1789). Köngäs argues that merely applying a nomenclature to a phenomenon does not constitute the establishment of a scholarly field (pp. 70–71). Furthermore, she emphasises that each country has unique origins and historical trajectories in folklore studies, making it inappropriate to consider W. J. Thoms's label as a universally applicable term.

European scholars often viewed folklore as remnants of primitive cultures or expressions of national spirit. A romantic definition of folklore is characterised by the concept of 'popular antiquities, the antiquity of the material, anonymity, and collectiveness of the composition and simplicity of the folk (Ben-Amos, 1971, p. 4). Theories on folklore evolved from speculative approaches, such as mythological interpretations linking tales to natural phenomena, to more structured comparative and structural methodologies. Prominent scholars such as Sir James Frazer and Alfred Nutt focused on tracing the evolution of cultural narratives through a comparative lens, blending folklore with anthropology (Repciuc, 2016). In the 20th century, European folklorists adopted more systematic approaches, like the Motif-Index of Folk-Literature by Stith Thompson, which became crucial for categorising and analysing folk narratives. However, these approaches often overlook the complexities of folklore as a living tradition, focusing more on its preservation and categorisation (Dorson, 1963).

Dan Ben-Amos says, 'Folklore is artistic communication in small groups' (1971, p. 13), which implies the aesthetic qualities of folklore and the importance of group interaction in observing and defining it. Barre Toelken describes this process as the central defining feature of folklore: '[A]ll folklore participates in a distinctive, dynamic process' (1996, p. 7). Toelken says the process of folklore combines changing (dynamic) and static (conservative) elements that

connect with a group's past and present in ways that evolve and change through sharing, communication and performance.

Folklore is informally learned, unofficial knowledge about the world, ourselves, our communities, our beliefs, our cultures, and our traditions, which is expressed creatively through words, music, customs, actions, behaviours, and materials. It is also the interactive, dynamic process of creating, communicating, and performing as we share that knowledge with other people. Folklore serves to sanction and validate religious, social, political, and economic institutions and to play an essential role as an educative device in their transmission from one generation to another; there can be no thorough analysis of any of these other parts of culture which does not give serious consideration to folklore (Bascom 1953, p. 284).

1.3 Folklore as Cultural Identity: 19th-Century Nationalistic Roots

The 19th century marked a significant phase in the development of folklore as an academic discipline closely linked with nationalist movements across Europe. During this period, folklore was increasingly seen as a means to construct and affirm national identities. Scholars and cultural historians sought to collect, classify, and preserve folk traditions as markers of a shared heritage, often framing them as remnants of an ancient past that could unify emerging nation-states. This movement was driven by the belief that folklore, oral traditions, myths, folk poetry, and customs reflected the soul of a nation and could serve as a cultural foundation for national identity.

Folklore studies in the 19th century were shaped by two primary orientations: one that emphasised the artistic and literary dimensions of oral traditions and another that focused on social customs and the everyday lives of lower-class communities. These perspectives, outlined by Richard M. Dorson (1963), led to distinctions in how scholars approached folklore across

Europe. For example, in Germany, folklore studies were influenced by romantic nationalism, where *Volkskunde* (the study of the people's traditions) was institutionalised as an academic discipline. The Grimm Brothers, Jacob and Wilhelm, were instrumental in this process through their collection of fairy tales, which sought to preserve and celebrate German folk traditions as an essential part of national identity (Bendix, 1997). Their work exemplified how folklore established cultural continuity and authenticity in a rapidly modernising world.

Similarly, in Scandinavia and Eastern Europe, folklore was deeply integrated into nation-building. Finnish scholars, such as Elias Lönnrot, compiled the *Kalevala* (1835), a national epic based on Finnish oral traditions. This text played a crucial role in shaping Finland's national consciousness and was later employed as a cultural justification for political independence from Russia. In Slavic regions, figures like Vuk Karadžić in Serbia and Pavel Jozef Šafárik in Slovakia engaged in extensive collection efforts to document and standardise folk traditions, reinforcing cultural distinctiveness against dominant imperial forces (Giolláin, 2014).

In Britain and France, scholars viewed folklore initially through an antiquarian lens, with scholars emphasising its value in reconstructing the distant past. The English Folklore Society, established in 1878, was pivotal in institutionalising folklore studies. French scholars like Paul Sébillot examined folk beliefs as part of a broader ethnographic inquiry into regional identities (Dorson, 1963). In contrast, Russia saw the rise of folklore studies as a means to explore the cultural depth of its peasantry, with Aleksandr Afanasyev's collections of folk tales reinforcing Russian cultural exceptionalism.

Despite its contributions to cultural preservation, 19th-century folklore studies were not free from ideological biases. Many collections selectively emphasised traditions that aligned with nationalist narratives while ignoring or modifying elements that did not fit the constructed image of an idealised past. Additionally, the emphasis on folklore as an expression of 'authentic' national identity often marginalised internal diversity, particularly the traditions of ethnic minorities and lower social classes. By the late 19th century, folklore had firmly established itself as a critical component of national identity formation. While early scholars viewed folklore as a relic of the past, later approaches recognised its ongoing role in shaping collective memory and social cohesion. This period laid the foundation for modern folklore studies, transitioning from a romanticised preservationist endeavour to a more systematic and analytical discipline.

1.4 Shifting Theories: 20th-Century Developments

The 20th century marked a significant evolution in folklore studies, transitioning from nationalistic frameworks to more diverse and interdisciplinary approaches. Early folklorists moved away from speculative mythological interpretations and adopted empirical methods for collection and classification. Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk Literature contributed to this shift*, systematically cataloguing recurring themes in folklore worldwide, providing a structured approach to folk narratives (Dorson, 1963).

During this period, folklore also began to incorporate psychoanalytic and anthropological perspectives. Influenced by Freudian theory, psychoanalytic scholars analysed folklore as an expression of repressed desires and social anxieties, interpreting myths and tales as projections of collective unconscious fears (Davidson, 1976). At the same time, the anthropological approach, influenced by Bronisław Malinowski and Claude Lévi-Strauss, emphasised folklore's role within

cultural systems. Structuralist theorists, particularly Lévi-Strauss, argued that folklore functioned as a coded system of meaning, with myths and tales structured according to binary oppositions that shaped human thought (Lévi-Strauss, 1963).

The mid-20th century saw the emergence of performance-centred folklore studies. Scholars like Richard Bauman and Dell Hymes shifted attention from static text to folklore as a dynamic, context-driven performance, emphasising the role of storytelling, audience interaction, and social functions (Bauman, 1977). This approach recognised folklore as a living, adaptive tradition rather than a fixed relic of the past. Dan Ben-Amos further advanced this view by defining folklore as artistic communication in small groups, stressing its evolving and participatory nature (Ben-Amos, 1971).

In the latter half of the century, folklore studies expanded beyond Eurocentric models to include marginalised and subaltern voices. Scholars such as Sharmila Rege explored the intersections of folklore with caste and gender, highlighting how folklore functioned as a means of oppression and a tool for subversive expression (Rege, 2002). Additionally, postcolonial perspectives emerged, critiquing earlier folklore studies for their role in constructing exoticised representations of non-Western traditions. By the late 20th century, folklore had established itself as an interdisciplinary field, engaging with sociology, literary studies, and media studies. It evolved from a preservationist discipline into a critical inquiry into cultural expressions, identity formations, and power structures, setting the stage for contemporary folklore studies.

1.5 Contemporary Definitions and Interpretive Approaches

Modern folklore studies integrate interdisciplinary methodologies from sociology, anthropology, and literary studies, reflecting a shift from viewing folklore as the static tradition of rural or

marginalised communities to recognising it as a dynamic cultural process. Dan Ben-Amos (2020) defines folklore as a fluid and evolving cultural expression that includes verbal art, material culture, and performance. This perspective acknowledges folklore's ability to adapt to social transformations while maintaining its roots in collective identity.

In Eastern Europe, folklore plays a significant role in cultural education, reinforcing historical continuity and the capacity for adaptation (Lopatin, 1951). Folklore is now considered a living cultural heritage, encompassing various expressive forms—myths, legends, proverbs, crafts, and rituals. This approach challenges the earlier view of folklore as a relic of the past, highlighting its ongoing negotiation between tradition and modernity (Marrant, 1981).

Folklore studies have also expanded to analyse power structures, gender roles, and subaltern voices. Scholars like Sharmila Rege (2002) emphasise how folklore can serve as an instrument of social control and a site of resistance, particularly in caste and gender discourse. Similarly, Stefan Fiol (2017) explores the political dimensions of folklore, examining how state and commercial entities reinterpret and appropriate folk traditions. Anna Stirr's (2017) research on Nepali folk music highlights how folklore is entangled with nostalgia and contemporary social struggles. These perspectives reinforce the idea that folklore is not simply a passive inheritance but an active, evolving medium of cultural negotiation.

Today, folklore is studied as an artefact and an interactive process shaped and being shaped by its practitioners. Its contemporary relevance extends to digital folklore, urban narratives, and transnational cultural exchanges. This study follows the modern definition of folklore, acknowledging its fluid and evolving nature. Rather than mere echoes of the past,

folksongs continue to hold social significance by adapting to present contexts, reflecting shifts in identity, power dynamics, and cultural memory.

1.6 Introduction to Folklore Studies in the Indian Context

Folklore in India encompasses a vast and diverse array of oral traditions, performance arts, rituals, and material culture that vary across regions, languages, and communities. Unlike the European tradition, where folklore studies emerged as a nationalist pursuit, Indian folklore has been deeply intertwined with the country's pluralistic and stratified social structure. Folklore in India serves as a repository of myths and legends and a space where caste, gender, and resistance narratives are negotiated.

Early folklore studies in India were influenced by colonial ethnographic documentation, such as William Crooke's *The Popular Religion and Folklore of Northern India* (1896). However, post-independence scholarship shifted toward examining folklore as a living tradition shaped by historical and social contexts. Scholars like A. K. Ramanujan emphasised the dynamic nature of oral traditions, illustrating how folktales, songs, and performances adapt to local realities. Sharmila Rege (2002) further highlighted folklore's role in subaltern resistance, particularly in caste and gender politics.

Contemporary Indian folklore studies focus on the evolving nature of folk traditions in the digital age, their commodification in media, and their intersections with regional and national identities. By examining folksongs, oral narratives, and performance traditions, scholars continue to explore how folklore in India is both a means of cultural preservation and an active site of social transformation. This study situates itself within this evolving discourse, analysing how folklore remains a critical space for identity formation and contestation.

1.6.1 Concept of Folk and Lore in the Indian Context

India's cultural diversity is reflected in its rich traditions of folk and lore, which serve as vital carriers of history, values, and artistic expression. These traditions, passed down through generations, encompass oral narratives, music, dance, rituals, and community practices. Indian scholars such as A.K. Ramanujan and V. Dharwadker have highlighted the adaptability of these traditions, emphasising their ongoing relevance in contemporary society.

India's cultural heritage is deeply rooted in folk traditions and lore, vital carriers of collective memory, values, and artistic expression. Folk encompasses local communities' cultural and artistic traditions, often passed orally and performed during festivals, religious events, and social gatherings. Unlike classical forms, folk traditions are informal, community-driven, and region-specific, manifesting in narrative ballads, dance forms, and ritualistic performances. Examples include Therukoothu in Tamil Nadu, a street theatre dramatising Hindu epics, Pandavani in Chhattisgarh, which recounts *Mahabharata* tales, and musical traditions like Baul music in Bengal and Lavani in Maharashtra, which convey spiritual and social themes. These traditions provide marginalised communities a platform to voice their struggles and preserve indigenous histories (Dharwadker, 2003). Lore, conversely, refers to the body of myths, legends, and traditional wisdom that shape cultural identities and belief systems, encompassing oral histories, epics, proverbs, and indigenous knowledge. Ramanujan (1997) highlights the multiplicity of Indian lore, as seen in regional adaptations of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, which incorporate local beliefs and interpretations. Indian lore also includes didactic tales such as the *Panchatantra* and *Jataka Tales*, which impart moral lessons and oral traditions preserving agricultural, medicinal, and astrological knowledge, contributing to sustainable practices

(Sadhale, 2004). Together, folk and lore continue to evolve, ensuring the continuity of India's diverse cultural legacy.

In brief, folklore plays a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage, reinforcing community identities, and imparting ethical values. They continue to evolve, finding new expressions in contemporary literature, theatre, and digital media. With increasing interest in oral histories and indigenous knowledge systems, folk and lore remain essential to India's cultural continuity and identity. The interconnected nature of folk and lore highlights their importance in shaping social consciousness and cultural memory. As emphasised by Ramanujan and Dharwadker, these traditions are not static but evolve with changing socio-political contexts. By preserving and documenting them, India ensures its rich heritage remains relevant for future generations.

1.6.2 Folk and Folklore in the Hindi Literature

Folk, in the Indian tradition, has long been recognised as a vital and dynamic expression of cultural identity, deeply rooted in both ancient texts and lived experiences. In the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, folklife is intricately woven into the narrative fabric, reflected in ordinary people's songs, customs, rituals, and everyday life. These epics portray folk as the living soul of society, with characters often engaging in communal activities, festivals, and oral traditions that preserve and pass down collective wisdom. Saint Tulsidas stated, '*lokahu ved susāhib rīti, vinay sunat pahichānat prīti*', showing how folk knowledge (lok) and scriptural wisdom (ved) are not in conflict but are deeply intertwined in human values like love and humility (Tulsidas, 1810/2014, p. 59). Building on this understanding, Vasudev Sharan Agrawal described folk as 'the ocean of our life,' encompassing our past, present, and future, suggesting that it is not peripheral but

central to our cultural existence (Agrawal, n.d., p. 67). Hazari Prasad Dwivedi broadened this view by clarifying that ‘folk does not mean town or village but refers to the entire population distributed in both village and city, whose basis of knowledge is not the books’ (Dwivedi, n.d., p. 65), thereby underlining the experiential and non-literary roots of folk knowledge. Vidya Niwas Mishra contrasted Indian folk tradition with its Western counterpart, stating that while the West often sees folk as remnants of the past or rustic traditions tied to the illiterate, in India, folk is ‘inclusive of everything which is real and visible... not inanimate, but animate’ (Mishra, 2000, p. 28). His interpretation emphasises the immediacy and vitality of folk expressions. Krishna Dev Upadhyaya added another dimension, explaining that ‘folk refers to the people who live in their present while carrying their past, while being out of the influence of the Sanskrit and sophisticated group (Upadhyaya, 1957, p. 12). This definition reflects the authenticity of folk life, rooted in tradition yet distinct from the elite and classical cultural domains. Together, these perspectives highlight that folk in India are not static or backwards categories but are living, evolving forces deeply interwoven with spirituality, social identity, and the oral transmission of values and stories across generations.

In essence, folk literature represents a community's living voice, rooted in tradition, sustained by collective memory, and transmitted orally across generations. K. D. Upadhyaya said:

> It is not the creation of any individual but rather emerges from society's shared experiences and cultural fabric. It reflects the hopes and disappointments, the joys and sorrows, the sacrifices, conflicts, and lived realities of people who respond to their present circumstances in deeply personal yet universally resonant ways (Upadhyaya, 1957, p. 25).

This literature exists outside the influence of formal literary institutions and evolves naturally through the rhythms of rural and communal life. Dr Hazari Prasad Dwivedi (1954) believed that whatever arises directly from the soul of ordinary people, whatever inspires, moves, and influences them, may be termed as folk literature, folk art, folk story, or folk drama. Dr Shyam Parmar highlighted the feature of the collectivity of folklore and stated, 'These expressions are not marked by the imprint of a specific author; instead, they bear the hallmark of collective wisdom, emerging in oral forms that articulate the soul of the community in a uniform and impersonal manner.' Thus, folk literature is both a mirror and a map of societal consciousness, deeply intertwined with its traditions yet always alive and evolving. In the researcher's view, folk literature is a spontaneous cultural pulse that thrives in oral tradition, grows through communal participation, and profoundly expresses the emotional, spiritual, and everyday truths of ordinary people. Here, the most authentic voice of the people finds form, vivid, unpolished, and profoundly human.

1.6.3 The Early Development of Folklore Studies in India

Indian folklore studies began to take shape during the colonial era, prompted by British and Indian scholars alike who sought to document the myriad oral traditions and customs of the Indian subcontinent. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, this emerging discipline aimed to preserve narratives and cultural expressions that were often under threat due to colonial modernisation efforts. This era of documentation coincided with a heightened interest in myth and legend as colonial administrators and researchers endeavoured to understand Indian society. These early studies provided a foundation for exploring folklore as a significant component of Indian identity and cultural resilience (Kirkland, 1961).

Jawaharlal Handoo, a renowned scholar in folklore studies, explored the evolution of Indian folklore across distinct historical phases, highlighting the influence of sociopolitical contexts on its research and interpretation. During the colonial period, scholars viewed folklore through a Eurocentric lens, with British administrators and missionaries documenting traditions for ethnographic and administrative purposes. Scholars like William Crooke and Sir Richard Temple collected Indian folk traditions but often misrepresented them as static, primitive, and exotic. Handoo critiqued this phase for failing to recognise folklore's dynamic and adaptive nature, treating it as inferior to India's classical literate traditions. Post-independence, the study of folklore gained new significance to affirm India's cultural heritage and foster national identity. Researchers began emphasising the richness of regional languages and oral traditions, with efforts to revive epics like *Pabuji ki Phad* in Rajasthan and Tamil Sangam literature. Handoo regarded this period as pivotal for decolonising folklore studies, advocating an indigenous framework that treated folklore as a living and evolving tradition shaped by historical and environmental contexts. In the contemporary period, folklore has transformed under globalisation, urbanisation, and digital technology. Traditions now thrive in urban and virtual spaces, with social media enabling the dissemination and reinvention of folklore. Bollywood's incorporation of folk elements, such as the Rajasthani Ghoomar, exemplifies this hybridisation. Handoo identified this era as one of revitalisation, where folklore adapts to new media while continuing to reflect identity, resistance, and social cohesion. His work underscores the trajectory of Indian folklore from a colonial construct to a vibrant, evolving cultural phenomenon, urging a holistic approach that integrates historical and cultural perspectives.

In India, folklore is a living repository of cultural and historical memory, particularly for communities with limited access to written records (Kothari, 1989). For instance, in Northeast

India, folklore is crucial for preserving the region's diverse tribal histories and addressing ethnic identity crises. It also functions as an alternative source of historical knowledge, as many local histories are remembered and transmitted orally rather than through formal records (Deka, 2011). This approach resonates with India's long-standing tradition of oral transmission, evident in classics like the *Panchatantra*, a foundational work of Indian folktales that originated in ancient Bihar and was used to impart moral values to young royals (Sahay, 2000).

1.6.4 Contemporary Indian Folklore Studies: Expanding Definitions

Contemporary Indian folklore studies have moved beyond the traditional lens of oral traditions and rural customs to encompass a broader, interdisciplinary framework that includes anthropology, literature, performance studies, and digital media. Scholars such as Brahm Prakash (2019) argue that folklore in India is not merely a reflection of cultural heritage but an active space of political resistance and social negotiation. Folklore is where caste, gender, and power structures are contested, particularly through performative traditions. Stefan Fiol (2017) highlights how folk music and performance in India serve as cultural identity markers and tools for mobilisation and demobilisation, demonstrating their fluid and adaptive nature in contemporary contexts.

Sharmila Rege (2002) has emphasised the role of folklore in subaltern studies, particularly regarding gender and caste. Folkloric forms such as women's songs, oral narratives, and performance traditions challenge hegemonic structures while simultaneously preserving collective memory. Anna Stirr (2017) further extends this argument by exploring how folklore and folk music intersect with contemporary political discourses, particularly in South Asia's

musical traditions. These perspectives underline that folklore is not static but constantly evolving, incorporating modern influences such as mass media, digital platforms, and tourism.

Folklore studies in India today recognise the dynamic relationship between tradition and innovation. Folk traditions adapt to changing socio-political landscapes, from the commodification of regional music in the entertainment industry to the resurgence of Indigenous storytelling and activist movements. The study of folklore thus bridges the rural-urban divide, oral and written culture, and past and present narratives. The following section defines and contextualises *Kajarī* folksongs within the socio-cultural framework of Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh, highlighting their current status and relevance.

1.7 *Kajarī:* A Festival of Rural Women and Its Variants

Kajarī festival in North India centres around women and is observed in rural and urban settings. *Kajarī* folksongs are traditionally performed throughout the monsoon months (July–August) in Eastern Uttar Pradesh and parts of Bihar (Jassal, 2012). Currently, it falls particularly on Tritiya Tithi of Krishna Paksha in *bhādrapad* (August–September), which involves fasting, ritual performances, and communal singing by women. They observe fasts for the well-being of their husbands and offer prayers to Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati. The festival is also characterised by women's communal gathering, singing and dancing. Similar festivals, such as *Hariyali Teej* and *Haritalika Teej*, also occur during *Sāvana* and *bhādrapad* (July–September) and are closely associated with *Kajarī*.

Hariyali Teej falls on the *Tritiya Tithi* (third day) of *Shukla Paksha* in the month of Sāvana, marking the arrival of the monsoon and symbolising the reunion of Goddess Parvati with Lord Shiva after her penance. On this day, women observe a fast for marital happiness and

don green attire, representing fertility and nature's abundance. The festival is characterised by joyous celebrations, with swings decorated with flowers and applying henna (*mehandi*), which adds to the festive spirit.

Haritalika Teej is observed on the *Tritiya Tithi* of *Shukla Paksha* in *bhādrapad* (August–September), a day before Ganesh Chaturthi. It commemorates the event where Parvati's friends abducted her (*hartalika*) to prevent her marriage to Lord Vishnu, ultimately leading to her union with Shiva. Women observe a rigorous *nirjalā* fast (observing fast without water) and create clay idols of Shiva and Parvati for worship. This festival is widely celebrated in Bihar, eastern Uttar Pradesh, and Nepal (as *Tīj*), with similar rituals, such as *Swarna Gowri Vratha*, observed in South India.

The festival and folksongs are widely celebrated in Bihar and Varanasi, though with regional variations in tradition. In Varanasi, women once gathered in groups on *Ganga Dussehra*,[1] observed on the tenth day of the *Jyestha* month (May/June) and sang *Kajarī* songs every night until the *Kajarī* festival. *Kajarī* fair is organised annually in Khojwa and Sankuldhara area, comprising *Shiv-Baarat* (marriage procession of lord Shiva) to celebrate the night. Women also led a procession, characterised by unfiltered singing and dancing at night. Ramnath Sharma, a dweller of Khojwa area, said, '*Their performance is exclusive where men were banned and if they see any man, they chase, verbally abuse and beat them with stick'* (R. Sharma, Personal Communication, 11 September 2023). The celebrations were rich in symbolic

[1] *Ganga Dussehra* is a Hindu festival celebrating the descent of the sacred river Ganga from heaven to earth. Observed on the tenth day (*Dashami*) of the waxing moon in the Hindu month of Jyeshtha (May–June), it holds immense spiritual significance. Devotees believe that bathing in the Ganges on this day absolves sins and grants salvation. The festival is marked by rituals, prayers, and offerings at major riverbanks, particularly in cities like Haridwar, Varanasi, and Prayagraj. According to mythology, King Bhagiratha's penance led to the Ganga's arrival to purify the souls of his ancestors, making the river a divine embodiment of purity and liberation.

rituals, with performers being invited through offerings of clove (*laung*), cardamom (*elaichi*), and date palm (*chuhara*). Sarita Devi said:

> The clove, cardamom and date palm symbolise men, women and transgender/dancers for the performance. Women also participated in a special procession known as *Kajarī kī barāt*, which was traditionally closed to men. However, with time, these traditions have gradually disappeared.

Urbanisation, changing social dynamics, and the decline of folk performances have led to the fading of *Kajarī's* cultural significance. Today, the festival is rarely observed in its traditional form, with only remnants of its songs and rituals surviving in historical records and the memories of older generations.

Similarly, in Bihar, unmarried girls observe a fast for their brothers during the *Bahura* festival, which is celebrated on the Krishna Paksha Chaturthi of Bhadrapada. Ramnarayan Tiwari compared this festival to *Kajarī*, noting that while unmarried girls fast for their brothers during *Bahura*, married women fast for their husbands during *Kajarī*. Additionally, *Bahura* emphasises the farmer's reverence for cattle, with rituals dedicated to Lord Ganesha. The festival also draws inspiration from the touching legend of *Bahura*, the devoted mother cow who pleaded for her calf's life when confronted by a lion. The story's themes of motherly love, trust, and mercy have been central to the festival's cultural significance. Though urbanisation has led to changes in cultural practices, the *Bahura* festival continues to be celebrated in rural Bihar with great devotion. Women and young girls observe fasts, sing traditional folksongs, and perform rituals that reflect the deep connection between family bonds, agriculture, and cattle worship. The

festival remains integral to rural life, preserving the rich traditions and oral narratives passed down through generations.

1.7.1 *Kajarī* Folksong: Tunes as Identity Markers

In the Indian cultural landscape, every significant *saṁskār* (rite of passage) and occasion is deeply intertwined with a rich tradition of folksongs, each serving a distinct purpose and identity. Folksong constitutes an integral part of these celebrations, ranging from singing songs about the birth of a child to the wedding. These songs are not merely expressions of joy or sorrow but also carriers of cultural memory and social identity. Among them, *Sohar* is traditionally sung to celebrate the birth of a child, while *Vivah ke Geet* (wedding songs) accompany various ceremonies within a marriage. *Ropanī*, a song sung while planting saplings, reflects the deep connection between agricultural practices and folk traditions. Similarly, *Jatasār*, the grindmill song, resonates through rural homes where women grind grains, blending labour with lyrical expression.

These folksongs have unique melodic structures and lyrical markers that distinguish them. A prominent feature of many such songs is the repetitive invocation of words like *Ho Rama!*, which serves as an auditory signature, helping listeners identify their category. Likewise, *Kajarī*, a seasonal folksong associated with the monsoon, historically had multiple distinctive tunes, many of which have unfortunately faded with time. However, despite the loss of certain melodic variations, the identity of *Kajarī* is still preserved through its signature ending phrases, such as *Re Harī*, *Re Samāliyā*, *Loy*, and *Na*, which remain prominent in the folk traditions of rural women. For example, *Harī harī belā khile ādhī rātī, chamelā bhinsarī re harī* (Oh Hari! Arabi Jasmine blooms at night and Jasmine blooms at dawn) or *Kālī kālī julfī lagāve*

madhutelavā, harī ke julfī nā, jaise lahare amolavā, harī ke julfī nā (My husband applies fragrant oil in his hair, his hair sways like a tree of wild mango). These elements function as essential identity markers, ensuring the survival and authenticity of these oral traditions even in the face of modernisation and cultural shifts.

1.7.2 Historical Documentation of the Origins of *Kajarī* Folksong

Mirzapur is the place where the culture of *Kajarī* singing originated and proliferated in the neighbouring districts such as Banaras, Ghazipur, Azamgarh and Jaunpur and in other North Indian states, namely Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Bundelkhand. There are places and stories associated with the genre's genesis in the people's collective consciousness in Mirzapur. Most women are unfamiliar with these stories, whereas most men know the stories behind folksongs' origins. Shahid Amin (2005) quoted Bhartendu Harishchandra, who described a Gaharwar King, Dadu Rai, whose wife, Nagamati, committed *Sati.*[2] Women of Kantit sang their glory in their ragas and tunes, which became *Kajalī*. In the same study, Ram Gharib Chaube's statement explained that Dadurai (king of Kantit) never allowed Muslims to touch the river Ganga. Upon his death, they reached the banks of the Ganga and desecrated his harem. In sorrowful melodies, women lamented the hardships and humiliations they endured at the hands of the Muslims. These songs took their name from the forest where they were originally sung. During my fieldwork, Suman Devi recounted the existence of *Kajalī-van*, a forest still found near the Asthabhuja temple.

[2] Sati traditionally refers to an ancient funeral practice in parts of South Asia, wherein a widow would immolate herself on her deceased husband's funeral pyre. Historically associated with ideals of marital devotion and self-sacrifice, the practice has been a subject of extensive critique and reform, particularly during the colonial and postcolonial periods. In contemporary scholarship, Sati is often examined not merely as a historical custom but as a symbolic site where gender, religion, power, and cultural memory intersect. Today, it remains a powerful metaphor in feminist discourse, representing both the historical oppression of women and the ongoing struggles over female agency, morality, and honor in South Asian societies.

In the collective consciousness, the most documented story narrates that the daughter of the king of *Kantit* (an area near the *Vindhyācala* temple)*,* whose name was *Kajali*, cried and sang in the absence of her husband and her painful songs transformed into tunes of *Kajarī.* Another story located the folksong in the cultural context of the Mirzapur region due to its association with the goddess *Vindhyavāsinī*/*Vindhyācala*. Goddess *Vindhyavāsinī*/*Vindhyācala* is one of the *Śakti-pīṭhāsa*[3] in the Hindu religion and the regional deity of the Mirzapur region. Her other name is *Kajjalā,* and *Kajali/Kajarī* is derived from the same word (Kesari, 1989). Moreover, prominent stage/professional singers sing *Kajarī* folksongs as offerings to the goddess on the night of *Ratjagā* (night vigil) in the present time. We found another description related to its origin, which is well-placed in the history of colonialism. After the Abolition of Slavery Act (1833), there was a shortage of slaves, which gave rise to a labour crisis in the British colonies. Indentured labourers were transported from different parts of India, particularly North India, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Assam (Singh, 2016). This culture of labour migration, mainly the young men of the houses, started a culture of left-behind women. These women had to face multiple issues, such as materialistic, social and personal, in their households. The creative and melancholic renderings of these left-behind women became *Kajarī* songs.

Kajarī folksong is classified into various types based on the performative context and themes, such as *Kajarī* as a labour song, dangal (competitive) *Kajarī*, dhunmuniya and *jhūlā* geet. I briefly describe these types here as they found full-fledged expressions in the upcoming chapters. In rural regions, women sing *Kajarī* songs while planting rice to make their work less

[3] Shakti Peethas (Śakti Pīṭha) are sacred sites in Hinduism dedicated to Goddess Shakti, the divine feminine energy. According to mythology, these sites mark the locations where body parts of Sati (an incarnation of Goddess Parvati) fell after her self-immolation and Lord Shiva's cosmic dance of destruction. There are traditionally 51 Shakti Peethas, though variations exist in different traditions. Each site is associated with a specific manifestation of Shakti and a corresponding form of Lord Bhairava (Shiva). These revered pilgrimage centers symbolize divine power, devotion, and the cosmic balance of feminine and masculine energies in Hindu belief.

onerous, as it needs hard labour. In this context, these *Kajarī* songs function as a medium to relieve their monotony and suffering. However, these songs have almost disappeared from the region with the advent of agricultural machines. Rural women's *Kajarī* songs are known as choti *Kajarī*, whereas *Akhada*/professional singers' songs are composed for the competition and are known as Dangali/Badi/Shayari *Kajarī*. It starts with a brief poem-like composition that hints at the song's theme. They draw their themes from the incidents of Hindu religious scriptures and social problems prevalent in contemporary society. Usually, singers perform these songs in a complex setup, driven by financial motives. Similarly, the *Kajarī* festival and monsoon season are associated with the swing (*jhūlā*). Women used to sing songs on the swing, known as *jhūlā geet*.

However, this study mainly focuses on the *Kajarī Teej*. In Mirzapur, women's preparation for the festival commences from *nāga-pañcamī*, another festival in Hinduism that worships snakes/idols and posters by offering edible stuff such as puffed rice and milk. Women and young girls performed various rituals such as *mātī lānā* (bringing soil from the nearby water bodies, e.g., Ganga river or pond)*, jaraī bonā* (planting barley seeds in the soil), invoking the local and place deities and *jaraī ḍubonā* (submerging the *jaraī* from the same water body). The festival is marked by women's singing, dancing and communal gatherings in every village. Women also commemorate the birth of the regional deity Goddess *Vindhyavāsinī* and celebrate at night as a festival called *Ratjagā.* The night is characterised by unrestricted performance and bawdy singing and dancing, and women conclude their fourteen-day performance on the day of the *Kajarī* festival.

1.8 Rationale to Pursue this Study

This study examines the significance of rural women's folksongs as essential sociological documents that capture their lived experiences, expressions, and subversive potential within patriarchal structures. During fieldwork, women's interactions and performances revealed the deeply embedded norms that regulate their voices and expressions. For instance, during the first visit to the field in 2021, Meera Devi, a 38-year-old housewife from Gaura village (Mirzapur), hesitantly remarked, *'I will sing this song in a low voice as it contains a complaining tone'* (M. Devi, Personal Communication, 7 September 2021). Her reluctance stemmed from her awareness of the domestic setting, the kitchen, where elders might overhear her. This moment underscores how women navigate self-censorship within domestic spaces, adhering to societal expectations of silence and deference. Similarly, Neelam Devi, another housewife from Gaura, gently instructed her husband before singing, *'Will you listen to the songs too? Go and sleep'* (N. Devi, Personal Communication, 9 September 2021), subtly asserting control over her expressive space while maintaining deference. However, such instances illustrate the gendered boundaries that shape women's performative agency. Additionally, Vimala Devi from Shivpur shared, *'She did not step out of her house until she bore two children'* (V. Devi, Personal Communication, 28 July 2023), highlighting the restrictive mobility imposed on women until they fulfil societal expectations of motherhood. These experiences collectively emphasise the necessity of performative spaces for women. Unlike men, who inherently claim public and private spaces, women must carve out creative, often hidden, realms to voice their emotions, grievances, and desires. By exploring these folksongs as a form of performative agency, this study investigates how rural women construct and negotiate expressive spaces within the constraints of tradition, reinforcing the importance of oral traditions in understanding gendered subjectivities.

1.9 Literature Review

Table 1.1. provides a concise overview of the objectives, methodology, results, and key research gaps of the studies examined in the literature review. A detailed discussion of the literature on *Kajarī* folksongs is included.

Table 1.1

Author (s)	Year	Purpose/Objective	Methodology	Key Findings	Research Gap
Nisha Sahai-Achuthan	1987	To collect and examine the folksongs of the Uttar Pradesh region, which are in scattered form	Archival Data Analysis	Categorised folksongs into seasonal, ceremonial and occasional songs and traced the region of the decline of these cultural expressions	Briefly discussed the sociological aspects of these songs
Arjun Das Kesari	1989	To collect and examine *Kajarī* folksongs of *akhāḍā* singers of the Mirzapur district	Ethnographic Approach	Collection of Authentic *Kajarī* songs from Akhada singers	Attention to the *akhāḍā* singers overshadowed the folksongs of rural women.
Indurama Srivastava	1991	Analyse folk songs which deal with women's multifaceted emotions	Ethnography	Women's Representation in folksongs challenges their stereotypes in the social context	Analyses various North Indian folksongs but lacks an in-depth enquiry of *Kajarī* songs.

K.D. Upadhyay	2000	To study the Bhojpuri culture, language, and socio-cultural context of the Bhojpuri folksongs and their collection	Ethnographic Method	An extensive description of Bhojpuri culture, types and themes of folksongs, along with the collection of various Bhojpuri folksongs	Detailed analysis, performative and social contexts are less explored
Smita Tewari Jassal	2012	To unearth the labour conditions of women and inequality is prevalent in a rural area	Ethnography	Songs present critiques of gendered division of labour, resource allocation and issues of migration	The work was carried out in the Jaunpur district, Uttar Pradesh.
Shanti Jain	2014	Collect and compile *Kajarī* songs of different languages and variety	Archival Data Analysis	Discusses history, background and themes traditionally associated with *Kajarī* folksongs and lists many *Kajarī* songs written in different dialects	Does not deal with the primary data and women's experiences
Asha Singh	2017	To explore the left-behind women's experiences of men's migration	Archival and Ethnographic Study	Songs articulating women's struggle with emotional, material and social vulnerabilities	Focusing on various women's folksongs not particular focus on *Kajarī* folk song

Heeralal Mishra	2019	Study of literary *Kajarī* songs composed by the authors of Hindi literature	Textual Analysis	Explains various aspects of the *Kajarī* singing in the context of the Mirzapur region and discusses songs composed by literary and *akhāḍā* style singers	Dealing with the only literary and *akhāḍā* style songs
Smita Tewari Jassal	2019	To investigate the role of folksongs in unearthing the consciousness of labouring women	Ethnography	She explains that these labour songs provide women with a space to examine the patriarchal structure and production and reproduction of gender norms	Hinted at the fashioning of *Kajarī* songs by professional singers
Mannu Yadav	2021	To explore the multiple dimensions of *akhāḍā* style *Kajarī* folksongs	Archival Analysis	Provide multiple definitions and explore regional variations of ritualistic and performative aspects of *Kajarī* songs.	Mainly focuses on the *akhāḍā* style of singing.

Scholars in the past decades have analysed the folk cultures of unlettered communities to understand the multi-layered issues. They unearthed these cultural expressions to comprehend the complex interplay of oral tradition, gender dynamics and subtle resistance. However, most work focuses on the north Indian folksongs as a cluster, not a separate folk genre. Similarly, scholars have researched *Kajarī* folksongs, but they are scattered or treated alongside other North Indian folksongs. In general, most of the available literature is in the form of a collection of

songs with an introduction containing the details of the origin and history of the folksongs. Moreover, they contain interviews with *akhāḍā* singers from the Mirzapur region. This literature review aims to mention and locate the present study in the literature's oeuvre, specifically dealing with *Kajarī* folksongs. This literature review is divided into two sections: the first part focuses on the works containing song collections and introductions. The second part consists of ethnographic works. This section solely focuses on the works that dealt with the *Kajarī* folksongs, particularly and excludes the works that emphasise the folksongs of Rajasthan (Raheja and Gold, 1994), folksongs of Kangra (Narayan, 1986; 1997) and folk tradition of Chhattisgarh (Flueckiger, 1996).

A critical examination of modern literature on *Kajarī* folksongs reveals significant contributions by various scholars. Arjun Das Kesari's *Kajari Mirzapur Sarnam* (1989) presents an extensive historical and geographical analysis of *Kajarī*, incorporating interviews with *akhāḍā* singers and composers. This book provides valuable insights into the performance traditions and musical structures of *Kajarī*; however, its scope is restricted to *akhāḍā* singers, neglecting the rich singing tradition of women. Shanti Jain's *Kajarī* (2014) builds upon Kesari's work, offering a more structured approach by dividing her book into three sections: a historical and thematic overview, a classified collection of *Kajarī* songs, and musical notations. While her book broadens the scope of the study by categorising songs geographically and thematically, it lacks explanatory depth, presenting the songs without interpretation.

A more comprehensive approach is found in Heeralal Mishra's *Kajari Sahitya ka Itihas* (2020), contextualising *Kajarī* within a broader literary and socio-cultural framework. By referencing literary figures like Krishnadeva Upadhyaya, Bhikhari Thakur, and Mahender Mishra, Mishra offers a nuanced understanding of *Kajarī*'s philosophical, environmental, and

spiritual dimensions. His study benefits from synthesising anthological references and self-composed works, presenting a holistic perspective on *Kajarī*. Similarly, Dr Mannu Yadav's *Kajari Mimamsa* (2021) expands the discussion by incorporating various scholarly definitions of *Kajarī* and exploring its regional variations, particularly in Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, Bundelkhand, and Mithila. Yadav's work delves into the ritualistic aspects of *Kajarī* and examines the intricate compositional styles employed by *akhāḍā* singers, culminating in biographical sketches of prominent *akhāḍā* artists.

These contemporary studies reflect the evolving academic engagement with *Kajarī* folksongs, moving beyond mere compilation to analytical interpretation. While each work contributes unique insights, there remains a gap in integrating rural women's singing traditions and performative dimensions and their role in preserving and transforming the *Kajarī* tradition. Further interdisciplinary research combining ethnomusicology, oral history, and gender studies is needed to construct a more inclusive understanding of this folk tradition.-

1.10 Ethnographic Studies of *Kajarī* Folksongs

Ethnographers have extensively explored North Indian folksongs. However, a few scholars examined the *Kajarī* folksongs from an ethnographic lens. Early folklore scholarship in India saw the emergence of figures such as K. D. Upadhyaya, who contributed significantly to the classification and study of Indian folk narratives, including folksongs like *Kajarī*. Upadhyaya's work emphasised the typological and thematic structures within Hindi folklore, demonstrating how oral traditions encapsulate cultural, moral, and social elements (Upadhyaya 2000).

Nisha Sahai-Achuthan (1987) comprehensively examines the region's musical traditions, particularly concerning *Kajarī* folksongs. It delves into the origins, themes, and performance practices of *Kajarī*, highlighting its significance during the monsoon season and its role in expressing emotions of longing and devotion. The analysis effectively contextualises *Kajarī* within the broader cultural and social framework of Uttar Pradesh. However, the article could benefit from a more detailed exploration of the musical structure and stylistic nuances of *Kajarī* songs to provide a fuller understanding of their artistic complexity.

Indurama Srivastava (1991) investigates the representation of women in regional folksongs, including *Kajarī*. It highlights how *Kajarī* songs express women's emotions, particularly themes of longing and separation during the monsoon season. However, the analysis lacks depth regarding the musical structure and performance context of *Kajarī*, offering limited insight into its cultural significance beyond lyrical content. A more comprehensive exploration would enhance understanding of this folk tradition.

Smita Tewari Jassal, in her book *Unearthing Gender: folksongs of North India* (2012), explored the issues reflected in the *Kajarī* folksongs. She dedicated a chapter to defining the *Kajarī* as a folksong sung by the female agricultural labourers, lowest on the caste rungs. She collected the data from the rural areas of Jaunpur (Uttar Pradesh, India). She argued that these songs provide an outlet for women to critique the gendered division of labour and the emotional burdens placed upon them, especially in the context of male migration and societal expectations. She delves into the questions of conformity, resistance, and folksongs used to bargain with the patriarchal values to play or take time off from the onerous nature of agricultural work and household duties.

Asha Singh (2017) analyses rural women's Bhojpuri folksongs, particularly *jatasār, ropanī, sohanī, jhūmara and kajri,* in the social fabric of Bihar. She uses these songs as a lens to explore the experiences of women left behind due to male migration. She used archival material to collect data. This article highlights how these songs articulate women's struggles with emotional, material, and social vulnerabilities, including limited resource access, shifting gender roles, and sexual dynamics. Themes of longing, critique of co-wives, and cultural changes like mobile phones replacing letters are central.

Smita Tewari Jassal (2019) examines women's work songs, particularly *Kajli* and *jatasāra*, highlighting their deep connection to labour, community, and cultural expression. Work songs serve as both a means of rhythmic coordination and a form of resistance, articulating the struggles and resilience of labouring women. Research indicates that such songs, including *Kajarī*, have transformed as they shift from agricultural settings to classical and commercialised forms, often erasing their original context. The erasure of women's voices in these transitions underscores broader patterns of cultural sanitisation and detachment from labour traditions, necessitating further inquiry into their historical and social significance.

1.11 Research Gap

Folksongs serve as a vital medium of cultural expression, preserving communities' histories, emotions, and traditions across generations. As an integral part of oral traditions, they reflect societal structures, beliefs, and lived experiences, often providing a voice to marginalised groups. Among the diverse folk traditions of North India, *Kajarī* folksongs hold particular significance, especially in the lives of rural women. These songs are deeply embedded in local customs, seasonal cycles, and social practices, making them an important study area. However, despite

their cultural richness, research on *Kajarī* remains limited, revealing several theoretical and methodological gaps in the literature.

1. Limited scholarly focus on *Kajarī* folksongs, with most existing works being general collections or introductions rather than in-depth analyses.
2. Predominant reliance on field data from professional/*akhāḍā* singers in urban Mirzapur or literary *Kajarī* composed by Hindi scholars, while rural women's oral singing traditions remain largely unexplored.
3. Few ethnographic studies focus exclusively on *Kajarī*, with most research addressing multiple North Indian folksongs collectively.
4. Previous studies primarily discuss themes like migration, longing, spirituality, and nature worship, overlooking the performance strategies, rituals, and theatrical aspects of *Kajarī*.
5. Rural women's subversive strategies in *Kajarī* singing, such as their use of language, humour, and laughter, have not been adequately examined.
6. The influence of globalisation and mechanisation on *Kajarī* folksongs and their cultural significance remains underexplored.

Therefore, this study bridges this gap by focusing on rural women's *Kajarī* songs, rooted in the socio-cultural milieu of rural Mirzapur. It explores the performative aspects and subversive techniques rural women employ to sustain their culture and suppressed voices, thus highlighting the significance of traditionally available places and oral tradition. It contributes to the themes addressed in the existing literature by focusing on the subversive strategies in the form of voices, dynamicity, language, humour, and laughter while assessing the impact of globalisation and mechanisation over such cultural practices and sites in the contemporary world.

1.12 Research Objective

Examining the rural women's *Kajarī* singing tradition, rituals, and performative culture offers a nuanced understanding of rural women's self-imaginings, usually oppositional to the prototypes represented in the media and literature. This approach provides a rich understanding of how folksongs permeate various aspects of rural women's lives by delving into their subjective experiences, perceptions, and the meanings they attribute to the *Kajarī* festival, associated rituals and performative tradition. Researchers can investigate how individuals find meaning in their religious practices, highlight how participation influences their personal and collective identities, examine the emotional and spiritual aspects, contextualise rituals during celebrations, and reveal acts of agency and resistance in religious engagement and oral traditions. This thesis has certain questions, which are as follows:

1. To investigate the role of rural women's folksongs in the Mirzapur region, focusing on the *Kajarī* festival, its associated rituals, and their socio-cultural significance.
2. Explore how *Kajarī* folksongs function as performative and theatrical strategies of place-making and ritualised transgression, offering subtle resistance and adherence to societal norms.
3. Examine subversive and metaphorical language, analysing distinctions between everyday speech and folk expressions.
4. Trace the evolution of women's folksongs, assessing their contemporary status and the risks of appropriation by privileged class and caste performers.

1.13 Aim of the Study

The study aims to examine the world of women as depicted in *Kajarī* folksongs, along with the rituals related to the *Kajarī* festival and their narratives. It explores the potential of performative places and *Kajarī* folksongs as the hidden transcript, negotiating subtly with the established ideas of gender norms, code of conduct and discrimination without disrupting the hierarchical order, thus acting as a release valve. The folksongs would not be treated as autonomous expressive specimens, solely concentrating on formalist features of language and rhetorical intricacies. Still, they would place them in an overall strategy of cultural analysis of women's expressive tradition. The study also evaluates women's identity and stereotypes articulated by Mirzapur's rural women in their folksongs. In this context, it will also be seen whether women-centred narratives have truly evolved into a counter system, an alternative way of looking at the world and whether there is a latent inversion of chaste pativratas championed by the shastric paradigm.

1.14 Research Questions

1. How are *Kajarī* folk singing traditions and rituals performed and interpreted by rural women in the Mirzapur district within the broader context of the *Kajarī* festival?
2. How do the performative space and context of *Kajarī* folksongs (e.g., festivals and communal gatherings) shape how women engage with and navigate social structures?
3. In what ways do the performative strategies and theatrical elements of *Kajarī* folksongs, such as role reversals, dress codes, language improvisations, and embodied expressions, interact with prevailing gender norms?
4. What changes have occurred in the tradition of *Kajarī* folksongs over time, and how do these transformations reflect broader socio-cultural shifts?

1.15 Summary of the Chapter

The thesis is organised into seven chapters, shedding light on the various dimensions of the *Kajarī* folksongs and the performative culture of women.

The first chapter establishes the theoretical framework by tracing the historical evolution of folklore as a discipline, from its 19th and 20th-century origins to its contemporary understanding. It critically examines shifting academic perspectives, highlighting folklore's transition from a Eurocentric focus to a more inclusive and contextualised study within Indian scholarship. The chapter explores the impact of historical, cultural, and colonial influences on oral traditions in both European and Indian contexts. Additionally, it introduces the *Kajarī* folk festival and its regional variants, analysing their cultural significance across different communities. It discusses the origins, historical development, and documentation of *Kajarī* folksongs while examining the festival's ritualistic aspects, such as soil collection, barley planting, and the ceremonial submersion of barley shoots. These practices are analysed as religious traditions and performative acts, reinforcing communal identity. The chapter concludes with a literature review, identifying research gaps and the need for a gendered perspective, while also outlining the research questions and objectives that frame the study.

The second chapter defines the theoretical frameworks that inform the study's analysis. It uses key concepts from performance studies, place-making, and intersectionality to examine rural women's performative traditions, rituals, and folksongs. Performance studies provide insights into the embodied and ritualistic dimensions of *Kajarī* traditions, while place-making theory helps analyse how women navigate spatial constraints to create performative spaces. Intersectionality further explores how caste, class, and gender shape women's access to folk

traditions and performance spaces. By integrating these perspectives, the chapter demonstrates how folk expression serves as a means for rural women to challenge patriarchal structures, assert agency, and construct alternative identities. This interdisciplinary approach lays the foundation for the empirical analysis in subsequent chapters.

The third chapter delves into the ritualistic and performative dimensions of the *Kajarī* festival, focusing on the night of *Ratjagā*. It opens with an ethnographic account of the festival setting, immersing the reader in the experiences of rural women as they engage in collective performance. The chapter examines the distinction between place and space, analysing how women transform ritual sites into semi-autonomous cultural arenas within a male-dominated environment. A key focus is the role of *Ratjagā*, a unique performative element tied to the mythology of *Vindhyavāsinī*. Unlike traditional Hindu female figures like Sita or Sati, *Vindhyavāsinī* represents a more assertive form of femininity. The chapter explores how women use the festival's rituals and performances to challenge gender norms and assert agency. It further examines how humour, subversive language, and laughter function as performative tools to navigate patriarchal constraints. Through these performative acts, the chapter highlights how the *Kajarī* festival serves as both a site of cultural preservation and a medium for negotiating gender roles.

The fourth chapter examines rural women's transgressive and subversive practices during the *Kajarī* festival, particularly in response to societal constraints on their public presence and behaviour. It explores how folksongs serve as dialogic tools through which women challenge male authority and expose contradictions within patriarchal norms. A key focus is the strategic use of cross-dressing, crude humour, and imitation as theatrical devices that disrupt gender roles. These acts create spaces for women to momentarily invert power dynamics, using satire and

performance as forms of resistance. The chapter argues that such performative expressions allow women to navigate power structures without confrontation, demonstrating how oral traditions can serve as tools for dissent and community cohesion.

The fifth chapter explores the linguistic and symbolic dimensions of *Kajarī* folksongs from the ethnolinguistics lens. It focuses on how women use folk speech as a subversive tool within their performances. It analyses how subversive expressions, erotic metaphors, and improvisational dialogues challenge dominant gender ideologies. By examining the interplay of humour, irony, and double entendre, the chapter illustrates how women assert agency and resist restrictive portrayals of femininity. It also considers non-verbal elements such as body language, gestures, and vocal modulation, demonstrating how these enhance the communicative power of *Kajarī* performances. Ultimately, the chapter argues that *Kajarī* folksongs function as a dynamic form of resistance, providing women an alternative space for self-expression and social critique.

The penultimate chapter critically examines how dominant caste and class groups have appropriated women's performative spaces by commercialising *Kajarī* folksongs. It explores how male performers and urban elites have transformed *Kajarī* from a communal rural tradition into a commodified art form, displacing the women who initially sustained it. The chapter analyses how caste and class hierarchies shape these songs' production, performance, and reception, revealing how dominant groups have altered their aesthetic and thematic elements. It further interrogates the consequences of this appropriation, including the erosion of women's agency and the diminishing spaces for female folk expression. The chapter argues for reclaiming these performative spaces to ensure authentic and inclusive representation.

The concluding chapter revisits the study's key research questions and summarises significant findings from each chapter. It reflects on methodological challenges and limitations encountered during fieldwork while incorporating respondents' perspectives on preserving women's folk traditions. Additionally, it considers the study's broader implications, particularly in light of globalisation and mechanisation and how these forces are reshaping rural performative cultures. The chapter concludes by outlining potential directions for future research and advocating for further studies on the intersection of folk traditions, gender dynamics, and socio-cultural transformations.