CHAPTER 4: *KAJARĪ* FOLKSONGS AS ACTS OF DEFIANCE: THE TRANSGRESSIVE NATURE OF TRADITIONAL MUSIC

Kajarī songs have long been perceived as lighthearted expressions of rural women, marked by playful banter, minor grievances, and skilful negotiation within the confines of tradition. Existing scholarship often frames them as spaces of teasing and humour, reinforcing a seemingly innocuous cultural practice (Jassal, 2012). However, ethnographic data gathered during the *Ratjagā* in 2021 and 2022 challenge this reductive portrayal. Instead of mere jest, these performances reveal an undercurrent of defiance, voices that subvert gender norms and disrupt entrenched hierarchies. It provides an impetus to focus on their songs and plays' subversive and transgressive potential. Far from being passive articulations of cultural continuity, *Kajarī* songs emerge as a performative space of subtle resistance, where women navigate and contest oppressive social structures under the guise of folk tradition. Along with their singing sessions, they also indulge in enactments and play-like performances where the role of transvestism and unfiltered language is apparent. Women of the Mirzapur region follow the tradition of celebrating *Ratjagā* as they associate the night with goddess *Vindhyavāsinī's* (one of the *Śakti-pīṭhāsa*)[7] birthdate, who is the form of '*Shakti*'. The legend says that Goddess Durga killed the demons Sumbha and Nisumbha with Mahishasur and chose to live on this mountain range (*Vindhyācala* mountain). Thus, she is known as *Vindhyavāsinī/Vindhyācala* Devi (Yokochi, 1999). Her victory over the demon symbolises the victory of female power over the malefic forces of society. Since the genre is associated with pure female energy, this chapter addresses the following two questions:

[7] In the Hindu religion, Śakti-pīṭhāsa are the sacred pilgrimage sites or shrines where the different body parts of and adornment of goddess Sati (wife of lord Shiva) fell after her death.

(1) Is this empowered and defiant female voice reflected in women's *Kajarī* performance?

(2) Do these songs contradict the image of traditional Indian women or contradict the hegemonic patriarchal conception of women's image? If yes, then what are the strategies through which they construct this transient identity?

To unravel the complexities of gender constructs and address these questions, examining women's performances during the *Ratjagā* night and their rule-defying acts on the day of the *Kajarī* festival is crucial. Understanding the contradictory ideologies and subversive behaviours of rural women in Mirzapur requires a deeper exploration of their historical representations within the region's socio-cultural landscape. In their daily lives, these women embody the ideals of conformity within the Indian cultural framework, reflecting the gendered expectations shaped by traditional archetypes. The prototypical figures of goddesses such as *Sati*, *Sita*, and *Grihalakshami* serve as foundational models, reinforcing the notion of the ideal woman as one devoted to domestic life and fulfilling the roles of a faithful wife, nurturing mother, and dutiful daughter. This alignment with established cultural constructs underscores how deeply ingrained societal norms shape their identities. Similarly, German Indologist Meyer stated that the poems of *Damyanti* and *Savitri* are the greatest tales of faithful wives' love for their husbands (Meyer 1915, 215, 340). Contrarily, the goddess *Kali* represents chaos, transgression, and unrestrained power. Her image, wild, dark, and often depicted standing over Shiva, defies patriarchal ideals of feminine decorum (Chakravarty, 2017) and could be the reason nobody associates a girl/woman with the goddess *Kali*. Thus, the concept of *Pativrata Dharma* becomes a marker for virtuous Indian women. *Pativrata Dharma* refers to a woman's enlightenment and release from the cyclical reincarnation based on her good conduct and virtue, achieved by showing complete obedience to her husband (Cox, 2011). Women have accepted and adopted such roles, which turn

out to be a trap for their subjugation and marginalisation in Indian society. Moreover, the same association of women with *Pativrata Dharma* and carriers of culture was being cashed by the 20th-century social reformers. Partha Chatterjee provided the classification used by the Indian Nationalist Project, which, according to them, was a response to colonial dominance. The classification is between material/spiritual and outside/inside, consecutively represented by men and women. Therefore, it was essential to protect, preserve, and strengthen the inner core of the national culture, its spiritual essence (Chatterjee, 1989). It also defined moral and social codes of conduct and behaviour, such as *Lajjasilata* or feminine virtues. Any woman devoid of these feminine qualities is labelled as a bad woman, which forces her to comply with normative behaviour.

Furthermore, certain traits such as coarseness, vulgarity, loudness, and lack of perceived superior moral virtues are associated with lower-caste women. In the 19th and 20th centuries, social reformists saw their cultural expressions as morally corrupt, vulgar, misleading, and a threat to patriarchal control. Even during an interview in Kantit village (Mirzapur), when I asked Rambali Nishad, who belongs to the Mallah caste, historically a caste of professional boatmen who worked on rivers as traders, boatmen, or fishers on the rivers (Sinha, 2014), about women's culture of songs. He replied, *'Mahilao ke geet gande hote hai, mahilao ke geet bhadde hote hai'* [Women's songs are bad; women's songs are vulgar] (R. Nishad, Personal Communication, 04 August 2023). Therefore, reformers from the higher caste simultaneously tried to improve the popular cultural practices of the lower castes, particularly those about women, to purge them of what they saw as immorality and perceived evils. Both Arya Samaj and Sanatan Dharma were against 'bad customs,' such as the singing of obscene songs, women bathing seminude at public ghats, and their participation in Holi, melas, and the theatre (Gupta, 2001, p. 26). This male

anxiety towards women's collective efforts and cultural expressions is evident when they try to call these practices polluting and curb them. The reasons behind controlling and curbing both women and their cultural art forms are twofold: first, these cultural expressions have subversive potential that will dismantle the established notions of gender and hierarchical order, and second, they act as an obstacle for those caste groups who are seeking upward mobility. It also hinted towards the process of Sanskritization as M.N. Srinivas introduced the term in his book '*Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India'* (1952), where he defined the term as an act of imitation/adoption of beliefs, customs, and rituals of upper castes and Brahminical ways of life by the lower caste people which is theoretically forbidden (Srinivas, 1956). Even in Mirzapur, young girls are rarely seen during such performances. When I asked the reason for the apathetic attitude of the young generation towards their subcultures, Sitara Devi said, *'Young girls want to learn the songs, but their parents did not allow them to participate because of their status as low-class art forms. They call it naach-gana (singing-dancing)'* [pejoratively used for low-class art forms] (S. Devi, Personal Communication, 13 August 2023). Due to this, cultural expressions containing deviant and subversive voices are significant to study, as they show entirely different self-imagings of women other than the *Sati, Sita,* or *Grihalakshami* model.

Moreover, Bhojpuri's rural society and its rigid structure provide less freedom and autonomy, making women subordinate subjects who are devoid of identity and individual self. In some cases, except for senior women, adult women always appeared in *ghūṅghaṭa* (veil), a symbol of cultural control and patriarchy (Chowdhry, 1994). Furthermore, their performance of daily chores like cleaning the house, cooking, washing clothes, serving food, and obeying all the instructions of senior female members and men portrays the image of conformist women, especially in rural regions of Mirzapur. Therefore, these subversive cultural expressions became

the epistemic resources to unearth the suppressed voices of women manifested in the form of songs and enactments. By highlighting women's transgressions, these songs challenged the hegemonic masculinity and culturally constructed notions of gender, thus seen as a threat to the male authority (Chowdhry, 2015).

Many anthropologists and scholars of gender investigated the traditional oral literature to unravel the different aspects of gender and identity construction of women, their subversive and deviant potential, and their working conditions in North Indian villages. An ethnographer, Lila Abu Lughod (1990), underlining the types of resistance, explained the intricacies of power dynamics in Bedouin culture and how it shifted. Moreover, she argued that technological advances excluded the subversive arts of women, such as folktales and lyric poetry, from the Bedouin culture. Later on, it was used by the young generations as a resistance/protest against the growing power of the older kinsmen, further introducing the issue of the dynamicity and appropriation of lyric songs. Ann Grodzins Gold (1997) explores women's bold and subversive voices in Rajasthani folksongs, which contradict the idea of gender stereotypes and prevailing female virtues. She further highlighted how oral expressions and narratives help them shape their identity and cultural landscape. Smita Tewari Jassal (2012) analysed the *Kajarī* songs in a chapter, 'Singing Bargain,' and argued that women in Jaunpur (India) used them as a tool for their recreational activities. Women further utilise them to take time off from monotonous and tiring labour. Vicky Vishal Shandil (2019) stated about the portrayal of Indo-Fijian women as subversive and meek in wedding songs; however, he argued that there are songs that not only negate the stereotypical roles of women as well as their potential for non-normative language, behaviour, and gender subversion. This chapter argues that women's customary practices, play-like performances, and folksongs associated with the *Kajarī* festival actively challenge and

deconstruct dominant gender norms. By engaging in these cultural expressions, women subvert traditional gender roles, contest gendered spatial boundaries, and promote non-conformist ideas that disrupt patriarchal expectations. Rather than merely reflecting societal norms, these practices serve as acts of resistance, redefining female agency within the festival's framework.

For this chapter, the source material has been drawn from the recordings of the performances on the night of *Ratjagā* in two villages, namely Shivpur and Madguda, populated mainly by Mallah caste people whose livelihood is based on the river. The data collected from these two villages displayed the subversive potential of women's subcultures. However, the songs collected by multiple recording sessions of women from Gaura also hinted towards the transgressive voices related to sexual desires and domestic lives resulting from the separation of their husbands. In Madguda, I recorded an entirely different performance/customary practice, highlighting the subversion of gender ideologies in the rural context; however, it has almost disappeared from the region. Moreover, the women in these two villages are vocal about their rights and discriminatory norms, which I will discuss in the following section.

4.1 *Kajarī* Singers: An Overview

Shivpur and its adjunct village, Madguda, are situated on the bank of the river Ganga, where most of the population belongs to the Mallah caste. Jagannath Nishad (Shivpur) mentioned that most of the boatmen in his village used to travel to Pakistan and Bangladesh to deliver red sandstone, a speciality of the Chunar region of Mirzapur. The expansion of transportation infrastructure and the extensive road network established after independence have displaced traditional livelihoods in these villages, resulting in widespread unemployment. Once engaged in stable occupations, many men face economic precarity, forced into low-paying, unstable jobs as

daily labourers and fishermen. Rather than serving as a viable alternative, seasonal farming on the sandbar highlights the fragility of their economic situation, underscoring the broader consequences of infrastructural development on marginalised rural communities. 25% of the people own 2-3 small boats on which they fish and sell them to the nearest fish market, which is the primary source of income for these two villages.

Manta Devi is in her late 70s, belongs to Shivpur village, and is a skilled dancer. In this village, most women run small shops to support their families or bring extra household income because they do not have land to cultivate. She, too, has a small and temporary shop where she sells the stuff required for the ritual of *Pind-dan*[8] because the river bank is known as *Ram Gaya Ghat*. The *Nishad* community of that region believed that lord Ram (described as the Hindu religion's principal deity and king of the Ayodhya region) performed the ritual of *Pind-dan* of his father at this ghat. Ramesh Nishad narrated another story: *'Nishad/Mallah community associated themselves with Nishad Raj Guha (who helped lord Ram, his wife Sita and his brother Laxman cross the river during their exile)'* (R. Nishad, Personal Communication, 11 August 2023). Manta Devi developed excellent dancing skills, which are evident in her performance during the singing sessions. She is confident and vocal about women's rights. While talking about a song, I asked her why the girl was reluctant to go to her marital house; she replied in a proud yet irritated voice, *'Why would she go? If her husband is a drunkard and jobless fellow. She should not go'* (M. Devi, Personal Communication, 06 January 2023).

Lalmani Devi, in her late 70s, runs a small shop in her home. She has a small piece of land inside her house where she planted various trees such as jackfruit, guava, pomegranate,

[8] In the Hindu religion, pind-dan is an annual ritual that offers homage. The son usually performs it for the departed souls.

lemon, and leafy vegetables. She was brought up on a rich diet of songs, rituals and play-like performances, which she called *nakkal. Nakkal,* meaning to imitate or copy, is a form of women's play-like performance distinguished by role reversals, cross-dressing, and scripted dialogues. These theatrical expressions are further enriched through dynamic physical movements and accompanying songs, enhancing their performative impact. It follows the pattern of the regional folk genre *nauṭaṅkī,* in which men usually perform in front of a rural audience (Hansen, 1992). This feature of public performance distinguishes the *nauṭaṅkī* from women's *nakkal,* as women played the role of both audience and performers. Another characteristic that differentiates *nakkal* from *nauṭaṅkī* is the context of the performance, as *nauṭaṅkī* is performed for professional purposes and on different festive occasions at different places. In contrast, women's performances occur mainly on the night of *Ratjagā* or at the *Kajarī* and *Tīj* festivals, while in their designated places or inside the village confines. Moreover, women in the entire region follow the philosophy of *swāntaḥ sukhāya* (meaning for one's happiness) as they perform and rejoice in the complete absence of the male audience. Lalmani Devi developed the potential of a good actor and led the performative sessions. She has shown her acting skills by playing the roles of a commoner, mother and *Sai Baba* (a *Sufi* saint famous in India).

Another noticeable aspect was women's selective and conscious approach to explaining the meaning of songs. They differentiate between their songs and songs sung by other women. When I asked about a song sung by Damakala Devi, she said, *'This is not my song, so you go and ask the woman who sang this song'* (R. Devi, Personal Communication, 14 August 2022), highlighting the song's ownership. However, their sense of ownership stems from their familiarity with the songs, which have been passed down orally across generations without

attribution to any specific individual. This tradition of transmission underscores the communal nature of their musical heritage, where authorship is neither claimed nor emphasised.

Hiravati Devi is another Mallah caste woman residing in Madguda village. She is one of the oldest and most respected women in the village. When I first met her, she could not walk due to her old age (around 80 years), but was enthusiastic about the songs and the festival. Moreover, she is an expert in competitive *Kajarī* singing, another development of folksongs popularised and adopted by stage singers. In this form, one group/individual asks and another group/individual answers through songs. During a singing session, she challenged Jatashankar Sharma and Jagdish Sonkar to compete with her in song by stating, *'You guys will run away as I will easily catch up the lyrics and tunes'* (H. Devi, Personal Communication, 09 August 2023). It shows her confidence and expertise in these art forms. Moreover, she is worried about the decline of these cultural practices and holds the government responsible for the decline in the popularity of customs and rituals.

Sunita Devi, a middle-aged woman, lives in the same village. She appeared to be a very shy and introverted person when I first met her. On our second visit to this village, Jatashankar Sharma requested them to enact a customary ritual performed at the *Tīj* festival. *Tīj* is celebrated during the *Sāvana* month when the bride's family members bring edible stuff and adornments for their daughter, known as *(Tīj le jana),* bringing the *Tīj*. They also took a group of *Kajarī* singers along in the old days. However, with the passage of time and singers' professional attitudes, these practices are on the decline, as explained by Pappu Yadav (local *Birahā* performer). Women on the groom's side tease, abuse, and mock the relatives who brought *Tīj* as a fun activity. Sunita Devi appeared as a joker, entirely covered with a dress of multiple colourful clothes during a performance. I observed a complete reversal of her usual behaviour during the

entire performance. She hurled abuses at the men, poked fun at them, and sometimes used her stick/*lāṭhī* to push them. This unusual behaviour of women during festivities hinted towards the liminal sites and elevated personas of women. Her covered face pointed towards her ambiguous identity, enabling her to move and act freely even under the tightly controlled social setup.

The following section contextualises women's transgressive acts and songs on *Ratjagā* and the *Kajarī* festival. It shows women's strategies to go beyond the limitations of time and space through their performance during the festivity. Their performance subverts the notions of private spaces and prescribed time by defying the norms given to them by rural societies.

4.2 Spatio-Temporal Transgression

This section illustrates women's deviant practices, enabling them to challenge the spatiotemporal restrictions imposed by the social system. Women in the north and central Indian states, for instance, in Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Jharkhand, have relatively lower mobility (Mehta and Sai, 2021). In Mirzapur, women's songs and performative acts challenge the conventional idea that women must follow rigid standards, stating that they cannot occupy outdoor areas beyond a specific time, especially in rural settings. Moreover, it highlights the performative context of men's and women's *Kajarī* songs. This viewpoint emphasises women's agency in challenging and redefining these constrictive norms.

Public spaces are available and entirely occupied by men, specifically in rural areas, which renders rural women devoid of public space, further depriving them of their voices. I was in the Bandhawa village (Mirzapur) during the *nāga-pañcamī* festival in 2022 to record men's *Kajarī* performances. Usually, rural men perform on important occasions such as *nāga-pañcamī, Ratjagā* and *Kajarī* festivals. Most importantly, *nāga-pañcamī* starts the *Kajarī* festival. I noticed

a different type of *Kajarī* performance in the village. They set up a tent equipped with professional musicians, loudspeakers, and a microphone, drawing a massive crowd, predominantly composed of men and young boys, to listen to their performance. It further hints towards men's appropriation of women's singing tradition, which I will discuss in the penultimate chapter of the thesis. Men dominate public spaces during such performances, while women and young girls are systematically excluded or discouraged from attending due to prevailing social norms. As the night progresses, the nature of these performances often shifts to include lewd and indecent content, further reinforcing gendered restrictions. This dynamic highlights how men freely occupy and control public spaces, whereas women are deliberately kept away, limiting their social and cultural participation.

Similar ideas about gendered spaces exclude women and perpetuate gender inequalities in both rural and urban spaces, which is known as the masculinisation of spaces (Fernandes, 1997, p. 525). A.K. Ramanujan has also classified the folk genres based on the theme, context and performance features. He used the terms *Akam* (Domestic) and *Puram* (Public) for the folk genres of men and women. Akam refers to the oral tradition associated with women and inner landscapes. They are usually performed inside the village confines, rooms, or courtyards, whereas Puram genres are performed by men in public spaces containing personal names and historical and communal events (Blackburn and Ramanujan, 1986). Other scholars similarly argued that public spaces are sites to perpetuate gender ideologies in rural areas. Prem Chowdhry (2014) argued in her article how the exclusive spaces in Haryana emerged as a locus for the overwhelming strength of men and patriarchal control, as the public spaces have been reserved and utilised by men. She further explained the concept of masculinisation of spaces by stating that it provides access to and control over resources of various kinds, sociocultural, materialistic,

political and ideological. It signifies male power's symbolic and material dimension, further controlling women. Similarly, women are not allowed to go outside their houses after 7:00-8:00 P.M. in rural areas, which shows the type of control and surveillance over them. However, women's festive mood and collectivity enable them to free themselves from the spatio-temporal norms that restrict their movement outside their homes.

In 2022, I was invited to record women's performances in the Shivpur area on the night of *Ratjagā*, which is celebrated as the birth date of Goddess *Vindhyācala* in Mirzapur. Jatashankar Sharma asked me to go to the *Vindhyācala* temple to get *darshan* (seeing the deity), as women would take some time to start their performance. We visited the temple and returned around 8:00 P.M. Women in Shivpur had already started their singing session. Another group of women performed in the same village, but I could not record their performance as I recorded the first group's performance from the beginning. Their performance is characterised by spirituality, bawdy humour, unrestrained laughter and mockery of dominant ideologies. Women's singing sessions usually start around 8:00-9:00 P.M. and end around midnight. However, on the night of *Ratjagā*, their performance continued till 1:30 A.M., an unusual event in women's lives in this village. Thus, their traditional performative tradition and celebratory atmosphere enabled them to challenge the notion of time, curbing women's mobility at night. I observed that women are rarely seen outside their houses after dark, but the night of *Ratjagā* provided them with a breathing space to subvert the established norms of time and place. When asked about *Ratjagā*, Kamala Devi said, *'We sing Kajarī songs throughout the night. We sing, dance, and play. We stopped around 1 A.M. because of the rain. Women encircle the entire village'* (K. Devi, Personal Communication, 15 August 2022). Encircling the entire village hinted at women's act of reclaiming public spaces traditionally controlled by men, challenging and deconstructing the

paradigm of male-dominated spaces exerting control over women. Singing, dancing and roaming around the village at night show their disapproval of the presumed routine of village life. In the following year (2023), I recorded women's and young girls' performances in Madguda village (a neighbouring village) on the night of *Ratjagā*. After completing their performance at dawn (around 5:00 AM), women converted the entire village into their playground or *caughaṭ*. They encircle the entire village, which they call *gāṁva goṭhanā,* forming a circle around it. This act of women traversing the entire village separates the inner/inside from the outer/outside of the village. It is a process through which women keep the maleficent spirits lingering outside the village (Mines, 2005). Another similar incident that marks them free from the restrictions of spatial limits is their performance on the day of the *Kajarī* festival. After performing the entire night, their performative place shifted from *caughaṭ* to the marketplace, a potential site for subversion (Urban, 2001). The well-groomed and well-dressed women led a procession the following day to the marketplace near the railway crossing while singing *Kajarī* songs. They accompanied the young girls who went to submerge the *jaraī* to place it on the ears of male village members. However, women sing and dance at the centre of the marketplace in front of the male onlookers of their village and male passers-by of neighbouring villages. Thus, women sing and dance in front of the commons, undermining the hegemonic gender expectations. These performances or transgressive acts gave them free movements outside the confined spaces in controlled societies. Therefore, it can be considered a threat posed to the normative actions imposed upon women by patriarchal communities.

The following section explores how the structure of the *Kajarī* folksongs, and especially the dramatic performance, allows them to reinterpret the traditional values and norms. It furthers

our understanding of women's use of creative and humorous strategies to denounce patriarchal control.

4.3 Critique of Patriarchal Structure

This section focuses on women's critical songs in their performative context. The enactment and song's dialogic structure act as a performative strategy, enabling them to comment critically on the hierarchical structure. These songs highlight the temporary yet powerful voice of opposition towards dominating patriarchal values. Moreover, they devise strategies of performance to denounce patriarchal designs by targeting masculine features and men's weak moral standards. It allows them to challenge the influential administrative roles and the power structure, which is otherwise impossible in everyday life.

Women's cultural practices challenge societal power dynamics by boldly mocking and denouncing gender roles (Chowdhry, 2005). Similarly, women's *Kajarī* songs are usually concerned with seeking permission to visit a natal home and material demands, but sometimes, they harshly challenge male dominance. They, who otherwise are allowed to speak and behave in a normative way in front of male members, register their protests through songs. In songs, they symbolically attack the physical features to condemn men. As in this piece, the wife does not ask for permission but is determined to visit her natal house. She is so adamant about fulfilling her wish that she is ready to violate all the gender expectations by openly challenging and disrespecting their otherwise respected male relatives.

Abaki Sāvana me ho sajanava naihar khelab Kajarī
sasuru jo bolihe atyacari onkar pagadi leb utari (x 2)
kal saberava bade ho bhorhariya dharab naihar ka ho dagārī (x 2)
abaki Sāvana me ho sajanava naihar khelab Kajarī (x 2)
bhasuru jo aihe le anvaiya onahu ta karihe atyacari onkar hurmat leb utar (x 2)
kal saberava bade ho bhorhariya dharab naihar ka ho dagārī (x 2)
abaki Sāvana me ho sajanava naihar khelab Kajarī (x 2)

devaru jo bolihe atyacari onkar julfi leb kabari (x 2)
kal saberava bade ho bhorhariya dharab naihar ka ho dagārī (x 2)

Group Performance, Shivpur, 2022

I will play *Kajarī* at my natal home this time,
If the oppressive father-in-law says a word, I will take off his turban (x 2)
I will take the road which leads to my natal home at the break of the dawn (x 2)
I will play *Kajarī* at my natal home this time (x 2)
My husband's oppressive brother will also come to take me; I will downgrade him too (x 2)
I will take the road which leads to my natal home at the break of the dawn (x 2)
I will play *Kajarī* at my natal home this time (x 2)
If my oppressive brother-in-law utters a word, I will dishevel him (x 2)
I will take the road which leads to my natal home at the break of the dawn (x 2)

The extract aptly uses the cultural symbols of a turban, moustache, and hair to insult men, as these are culturally associated with status, honour, and respect in the Indian context. During a singing session in the Madguda village, Hirawati Devi mocked the masculine features of a man (an old man with a long moustache was continuously interrupting or commenting amid the performance) and said, *'Hey, you long-bearded man, I will pluck out your moustache'* (H. Devi, Personal Communication, 11 August 2022). Sometimes, they attacked the hypermasculine traits by being the perpetrators of violence. I asked Lalmani Devi, *'Did anyone stop you from participating in these performative acts?'* She replied, *'We would be violent if a man forbade us from participating in such performances'* (L. Devi, Personal Communication, 15 August 2022), which is evident in her song:

Hamase śāna jina dekhāye, more bāre bālamū,
Tora kapaṛa phoṛvāibe, aspātāl bhejvāibe,
Pāgiyā bāndhane ke kara debe, mohal bālamū.

Lalmani Devi, Shivpur, 2023

Do not flaunt in front of me, dear husband,
I will break your head and send you to the hospital,
I will make it difficult for you to tie the turban.

In a rural setting, raising questions about men's unruly and inappropriate behaviour is not permissible; still, evidence of women being critical of such attitudes is available in folk performances. Moreover, songs help them raise questions about men's pretentious nature and socially inappropriate behaviour because they cannot discuss such issues daily. If they do so, they are labelled as bad women. The next song critiques male migration and its moral decay. The lyrics depict a husband who gambles away his wife's jewellery, engages in reckless behaviour and indulges in vices like smoking and hiring prostitutes. This portrayal is not merely a personal lament but a broader commentary on how migration enables men to abandon familial responsibilities while women bear emotional and economic burdens. By weaving social critique into song, women reclaim their right to question male authority and expose the double standards that govern their lives.

Rājā mora juārī Kalkatavē mẽ bā; ho saīyā mora juārī Kalkatavē mẽ bā,
Hamāra sikadī utar juwānā khelata bā, hamāra ṭikavā utar juwānā khelata bā,
Khelata bā ho khelāvato bā; dhūā̃ kasavā para kasabīn nācāvata bā.

Group Performance, Shivpur, 2022

My gambler king is in Kolkata; my gambler husband is in Kolkata.
He gambles while keeping my chain and tikka at stake.
He is playing and making others play; He smokes and makes prostitutes dance.

Folksongs show the women's ability to be critical of men's unethical practices in their songs and their concerns for their well-being/safety under males who do not control their toxic habits. The following folksong serves as a poignant reflection of the societal pressures and gender dynamics within the context of marriage in certain cultures. The repeated invocation of '*gawana*,' which refers to the practice of sending a bride to her husband's home, underscores the urgency and expectation placed upon young brides to conform to traditional marital roles. This urgency is further emphasised by the father-in-law's insistence on bringing the gawana as soon as possible, highlighting the patriarchal structures that dictate women's lives and choices. However, the last

line suggests a subversive undertone, implying a desire to disrupt traditional norms associated with masculinity and authority. This line can be interpreted as a metaphor for challenging male dominance within the domestic sphere, where women often find themselves relegated to submissive roles. When I asked why she was unwilling to go to her in-laws' house, Manta Devi replied, *'If he (husband) drinks and smokes, why would she go to his house?'* (M. Devi, Personal Communication, 09 August 2022) which shows their awareness of the typical traits of men. They raise subversive voices against the hegemonic patriarchy by criticising the practice of child marriage.

> *Abahī barī baho umariyā, piya mora lavaī ho gāwanā. (x2)*
> *Are, kahe-kahe more bāre sasur jī, jhaṭpaṭ lāī calu tuhū gāwanavā. (x2)*
> *Oṅkār pagaḍī ke ho bāndhbāvā, debe bhulvāī ho bālamū.*
>
> Group Performance, Shivpur, 2022
>
> I am at a very tender age, and my husband asks for *gawana* (x 2)
> My father-in-law said to bring the *gawana* as soon as possible (x 2)
> Oh, husband, I will make him forget how to tie the turban.

These songs challenge the adulterous and immoral intentions of the males. In a song where men are trying to lure the woman for sexual favour, her outright rejection of persuasive offers and temptations given by every family member shows the potential of resistance. She boldly denounces all the advances and attacks the vicious nature of men. Despite their socially inferior and submissive status, they challenge the morally corrupt men and redefine themselves as strong, independent women. The image of women reflected in this song also refutes the men's perception of women as 'voluptuous temptress' (Chanana, 2001, p. 40), luring men for the fulfilment of their sexual desires.

> *Nibiya ka ped bhaiya nibiya k ped ho nibiya k ped cautarva nishani Kajarī khelali diljani ho*
> *Soraho singar bhaiya soraho singar ho soraho singar kaike cadhali atariya sasuru dharale gori bahiya ho* (x 2)

Are chodu-chodu sasuru re mori gori bahiya ham t hayi tor patohiya na (x 2)
Sup bhar sona bhaiya sup bhar sona ho sup bhar sona ham toke debe batiya na fute kacahariya me (x 2)
are aag lage susuru tore sup bhar sona me batiya t forab kacahariya me
Nibiya k ped bhaiya nibiya k ped ho nibiya k ped cautarva nishani Kajarī khelali diljani ho
Soraho singar bhaiya soraho singar ho soraho singar kaike cadhali atariya bhasuru dharale gori bahiya ho (x 2)
Are chodu-chodu bhasuru re mori gori bahiya ham t hayi tor bhayohava na (x 2)
Sup bhar sona bhaiya sup bhar sona ho sup bhar sona ham toke debe batiya na fute kacahariya me (x 2)
are aag lage bhasuru tore sup bhar sona me batiya t forab kacahariya me

Group Performance, Shivpur, 2022

Oh, brother! A tree of Indian lilac and a dais are signs; the sweetheart plays *Kajarī* (x 2)
Oh, brother! Sixteen bridal adornments, I go to the attic after applying sixteen bridal adornments, but my father-in-law seizes my hands (x 2)
Leave my hands' father-in-law, as I am your daughter-in-law.
A winnowing basket full of gold, I will give you a winnowing basket full of gold, do not reveal it in the court (x 2)
To hell with your winnowing basket full of gold, father-in-law; I will reveal it in the court.
Oh, brother! A tree of Indian lilac and a dais are signs; the sweetheart plays *Kajarī*. (x 2)
Oh, brother! Sixteen bridal adornments, I go to the attic after applying sixteen bridal adornments, but my brother-in-law seizes my hands (x 2)
Leave my hand's brother-in-law as I am your sister-in-law.
A winnowing basket full of gold, I will give you a winnowing basket full of gold, do not reveal it in the court (x 2)
To hell with your winnowing basket full of gold, brother-in-law; I will reveal it in the court.

Women deny the superiority of authoritative figures such as 'councillors,' 'father-in-law,' and elders for their corrupt professional behaviour because each culture harbours critiques of its most authoritative pronouncements (Raheja and Gold, 1994). In Mirzapur, rural women lead a procession to the market to challenge the social and legal powers of the police and other officials on the day of *Kajarī*. They critique not only the influential roles but also the corrupt qualities of the person. The *nakkal* performance, featuring women impersonating a capitalist and a

commoner discussing carpet weaving, becomes a vehicle to critically question male occupational roles and societal corruption. This dialogic performance empowers women to publicly denounce male villagers and critique their professions, as evidenced by Rajkumari Devi's statement: *'Amritlal advocate that bugger is an asshole. He takes money from people in the court. He did nothing'* (R. Devi, Personal Communication, 13 August 2022). Similarly, the performance addresses the corrupt practices of an elderly sorcerer in their village, with Rajkumari Devi stating, *'He asked to bring clove, camphor, and a bottle of alcohol first'* (R. Devi, Personal Communication, 13 August 2022). This conversational style allows them to critically comment on administrative officials like councillors and leaders, thereby challenging male authority and exposing corruption within their community through performative satire.

These women critique the prevailing inequalities by highlighting the corrupt behaviour of administrators. They ridicule the unmarried status of a councillor because marriage is still a symbol of social status, and unmarried status is a social stigma. Their critical outlook is not limited to men only, whereas sometimes, the intensity of their criticism goes to the extent that they do not even spare their group members. For instance, when a woman tries to defend the *Pradhan* (village head) by stating, *'Will he sleep on Earth? He needs a carpet'* (D. Devi, Personal Communication, 13 August 2022). Another woman replied, *'Why don't you go and sleep on that carpet?'* (R. Devi, Personal Communication, 13 August 2022). Furthermore, the inclusion of the term 'A.C.' reflects the adaptability and evolving nature of traditional folksongs while emphasising the unequal distribution of resources and disparities in power structures.

> *He has yet to get married.*
> *Another woman- He will sleep in the Air-Conditioned room. If the leaders come, where will they stay if he does not have a carpet?*
>
> Group Performance, Shivpur, 2022

Thus, women's critical songs underline that women's traditional practices are subversive, harbouring feelings of complaint and protest. They subtly challenge the dominant and deep-rooted ideology of power and patriarchy. Women also confront the authoritative and administrative voices through songs. Additionally, these songs present an alternative portrayal of women, challenging traditional gender stereotypes by questioning societal notions of masculinity. They also critique men's immoral behaviour and hypocritical social roles.

The next section discusses the theatrical potential/strategies, particularly the culture of cross-dressing, role reversals and the use of props. It underlines how these theatrical aspects of rural women are linked to the language of power and subtle resistance in a rigid social setting.

4.4 Cross-dressing and Role Reversals

This section explores the phenomenon of cross-dressing in rural women's *Kajarī* performances, which has its roots in the conventional roles that women have traditionally played. Performative features like cross-dressing, hysterical laughter, impromptu humour, and imitation set these theatrical acts apart. It also looks into how female role-playing and cross-dressing enable women to engage with the discourse of patriarchy without punishment and how these activities empower women in their daily lives and in the performative domain. Similarly, deliberate dressing up as the other sex, according to Judith Williamson quoted by Greenhill:

> [It] might appear as part of the liberation from sex roles which feminists have demanded for years and the recognition of genderised dress and body image as being in some way a symbol of the workings of power in a society where power is invested in the male sex (Greenhill, 1995, p. 165).

It is unusual for women in rural India to dress like men, unlike women in India's major cities. However, women's traditional places allow them to assert and exercise their agency by transgressing the female dress codes. Cross-dressing, thus, while nowadays narrowly construed to refer to dressing across gender lines, was at one time a much broader concept, referring to any breach across the rigid regulations governing attire (Ramet, 1996). It is a common practice through which women challenge the gender norms across the regions in women's play. However, both genders cross-dress during festivities, such as men during *Holi* and women during *Ratjagā's* play and *nakāṭā*. Men cross-dress and assume the roles of women during the *Holi* festival, which legitimises their performance of the female gender and reverses the gender hierarchies outside the home. Their conversation is characterised by lewd, vulgar, and inappropriate content during the festival. Similarly, Manta Devi equated her performance with men's bawdy and vulgar behaviour during *Holi* and said, *'As you (men) say vulgar and inappropriate things during Holi (Phagua) in the same way women perform in Kajarī'* (M. Devi, Personal Communication, 13 August 2023). Similarly, during the *Kottankulangara* or *Chamayavilakku* festival, celebrated in Kerala, India, men participate by dressing as women. It is an offering to the goddess *Bhagvathy*. Examining the same tradition, Anu Kuriakose argued that the religious space gives those socially considered males a chance to flaunt their gender identities through cross-dressing (Kuriakose, 2018). Even women's *nakāṭā* follows the same structure, where women constitute both the performer and the audience. In *nakāṭā*, women cross-dress as husband and wife and perform all the marriage rituals, acts of consummation and other things which serve a pedagogical purpose for unmarried girls (Srivastava, 1991). Thus, it can be inferred that cross-dressing and role reversals are strategies adopted by both men and women to educate the young generation and perform gender subversion in a specific context.

In contrast to the urban spaces, where dressing as a man is typical, doing the same in an Indian rural context is transgressive. When I asked why women cross-dress during the performance, Sumitra Devi replied, *'It is a play or gimmick. Mostly in nakkal, they play the different roles of men* (S. Devi, Personal Communication, 13 August 2023), which further contributed to their increased mobility. Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger supported this claim and noted that disguise or concealed identity is an integral part of many festivals of reversal worldwide, as it provides a freedom of action traditionally not available to the festival participants or characters (Flueckiger, 1996). In Mirzapur, women assumed the male roles and were cross-dressed on different occasions, such as on the night of *Ratjagā,* the *Kajarī* and *Tīj* festivals.

On the *Kajarī* festival, three women, Mangra Devi, Lalmani Devi, and Manta Devi, cross-dressed and assumed the roles of a police officer, Sai Baba (*Sufi* saint), and a stylish man consecutively. They all adopted influential male roles, signifying power and position. In the same attire, they reached the Shivpur market and demanded money from every passerby, which shows their performance and crossdressing's transgressive potential. Through their actions, they use the authority they obtained during the celebration, besides enjoying their freedom. The correlation between dressing as a man and the associated power with it is evident from Vimala Devi's statement, *'Women are masters. They wear clothes, shirts, pants, and a turban'* (V. Devi, Personal Communication, 16 August 2023). By dressing as men, they challenge the notion of dress-code impositions and transgress the sexualised female body.

Similarly, the festivity and celebratory atmosphere of the *Kajarī* festival and *Ratjagā's* unregulated and bawdy play give them a chance to emerge from all the imposed restrictions. Bhojpuri society proscribes women's oppositional and challenging views because of

their threatening nature to the social order. However, transgressive and norm-defying views are present in folk performances. Women must follow the guidelines of the female dress code, specifically in men's presence. The cosmic fear of patriarchy and punishment is still lurking in the usual context, as Manta Devi (she played the role of a stylish city man on the *Kajarī* festival*,* which pokes fun at urban elite men and their attire) during a procession leading to the marketplace where two other women, dressed as men along with other women, stated:

> I am afraid of my husband. I do not go in front of him in that attire. Moreover, he would be angry if I went in and got up as I was. He will pick up *lāṭhī* (a stick as a weapon) even if he is lame.

Men generally have unrestricted access to public spaces, allowing them to express themselves without the need for designated private areas. In contrast, women often require such liberated spaces, as female cross-dressing, whether on stage or in public, has historically been perceived as a challenge to established gender and class norms, even sparking fears of social disruption. (Ramet, 1996). Therefore, women's cross-dressing helps them create performative places and lighten the atmosphere of controlled spaces in rural Mirzapur. Jata Shankar Sharma highlighted the tradition of cross-dressing and the existence of similar performative culture in rural contexts by comparing women's performance with men's folk drama *nauṭaṅkī* and said, *'Where a boy (launda impersonating a female) danced as a woman, and there was a joker too'* (J. S. Sharma, Personal Communication, 04 August 2022).

Cross-dressing and a sense of power are synonymous during performative acts. I observed that women assume the role of influential and authoritative male characters, for example, police, constable, and head of the family, to articulate their anxieties and animosities

that momentarily disrupt societal power dynamics. Kalyani Devi's statement during a group interview supports this idea that dressing as a man is coupled with power. *'When we dress as men while singing, it feels like, for a little while, we step into their world, that freedom, that power. Kajarī is not just a song; it is a way to show our own strength'* (K. Devi, Personal Communication, 15 August 2022). During the *Kajarī* festival, women, namely Mangra Devi, Lalmani Devi, and Manta Devi, led the procession near the railway crossing in Shivpur, an annual ritual associated with the *Kajarī* festival. Other women appeared well-dressed, well-groomed and refreshed on this day because they purged animosities and repressive thoughts through their unrestrained and bawdy performance the previous night. Women took out the procession to perform, stopped men to ask for money and accompanied young girls who were going to submerge the *jaraī* (referring to the barley shoots grown by young girls on the day of the *nāga-pañcamī* festival). Their male attire allows them to reach the market and indulge in such rule-defying activities, which become a custom at the festival because they cannot sing, dance, and perform at the marketplace. Women's opposing behaviour is mainly controlled by society, but sometimes, they are self-censored due to family reputation and cultural codes, as these behavioural traits are ingrained in their minds. For instance, Mira Devi (Gaura, Mirzapur) did not sit before her husband's elder brother-in-law. However, she sat once he left the place. They stated that they could perform outside this performative context, but refrained as they were aware of the context and the festive atmosphere. Therefore, such carnivalistic ideas are displayed and permitted in the ritualistic and festive domain. I observed at the marketplace that Lalmani Devi and Mangra Devi block the road of every passerby, including bike riders and tractor drivers. In contrast, disguised as a stylish chap, Manta Devi danced in front of shopkeepers, village councillors, and other men. They do not even care who the person is, as stated by

Lalmani Devi, *'Be it DM (District Magistrate) or SP (Superintendent of police), even if DM or SP bring their vehicles on the road, they will confront them'* (L. Devi, Personal Communication, 20 August 2022), hinting at the potential of festivity, cross-dressing, and women's agency outside their private performative place. Mangra Devi, leader of the group, described how cross-dressing lifted the participants out of their usual persona by creating an altered space for such occasions. She narrated her experience at the *Kajarī* festival at the Shivpur market when she stopped a police officer's vehicle and demanded money. She said:

> I broke the glass of a police officer. He said I will not give (money); I said I will break the glass. I do not recognise any constable, police, or judge on that day. I do not care whether I live or die (M. Devi, Personal Communication, 15 August 2022).

Figure 4.1 shows the procession of cross-dressed women leading to the marketplace on the *Kajarī* festival.

Source: The researcher took the picture during his fieldwork in Shivpur village in 2023.

Therefore, various aspects of play, such as role reversal and cross-dressing, provide a license to reverse the caste, class, and gender hierarchy with impunity. Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger stated that female characters most frequently appropriate male disguise for greater mobility in the "outside"/public world (Flueckiger, 1996, pp. 96-97). In addition, while playing the role of a joker at night in Madguda, Sunita Devi took the liberty to abuse and poke with her *lāṭhī* to their (Jata Sharma and Jagdish Ji) private parts, which is unacceptable. However, due to the festive frenzy, free performative space, and her attire, which is made up of many small and colourful pieces of clothes entirely covering her body and face, she could perform all the activities without any punitive consequences from the relatives because nobody could recognise her in the attire of a joker. Thus, cross-dressing in this performance is a shield for Sunita Devi because it is almost impossible for any male to identify Sunita Devi. Further, this obscure and disguised identity gives her complete freedom to move freely in the presence of men and denounce fixed gender markers, highlighting the performative nature of gender. Moreover, the character of the Joker posits a double satire on personhood, pretending to be a male Joker who pretends to be someone else.

Figure 4.2 shows Sunita Devi assuming the role of a joker in the Madguda village while chasing male relatives of the groom (Jata Shankar and Jagdish Sonkar) on the *Tij* festival.

Source: The researcher took the picture during his fieldwork in Madguda village in 2023.

This section explains the various performative traditions of both genders, such as the tradition of male cross-dressing during *Holi*, *Launda Naach*, and the festival of *Kottankulangara* or *Chamayavilakku* and women's folk performances such as *Kajarī* and *nakāṭā*, where they indulge in cross-dressing, assume various roles, and perform another gender. Furthermore, women's cross-dressing on the *Kajarī* provides more significant social mobility and freedom, as in the case of women taking out a procession to the market and abusing or behaving in a socially inappropriate way with men while playing the role of a joker. It allows them to express their repressed social and personal issues more freely than on regular days. Women perform deviant acts such as performing at night (from 8:00 PM till 6:00 AM) outside

their homes, dressing as males, and abusing and challenging men, which are not commonly acceptable behaviours in a rural context. Moreover, their performative acts function as a 'safety valve' (Bergson, 2002, p. 64), simultaneously giving a free passage to negative emotions which are non-threatening to society.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter utilises rural women's *Kajarī* songs and play-like performances to unearth the subversive potential of performers with fixed identities and conformist images in Indian settings. It highlights how these unlettered women challenge society's dominant ideologies by committing to this cultural expression during the *Ratjagā, Kajarī*, and *Tīj* festivals. Women's engagement in *Kajarī* singing often involves a gradual transition before and after the event. Before stepping into their performative roles, women mentally and socially prepare by gathering in familiar spaces, engaging in casual conversations, and subtly shifting their speech, gestures, and body language at the festivals of *Ratjagā, Kajarī*, and *Tīj*. This preparatory phase allows them to ease into the performance's ritualistic and expressive dimensions. This liminal phase enables a seamless shift between performance and daily life, reinforcing the cultural and emotional significance of their artistic expressions. This navigates how women's shared singing tradition develops an emotional and physical space where they can assert, affirm and build a sense of belonging. The analysis answers the questions of rural women's empowerment and the performative tools to achieve it. They experience a sense of empowerment in their performative context, aligning with ritualised resistance. Moreover, women's traditional performances and theatrical techniques enabled them to transgress the spatiotemporal boundaries as they performed at odd hours and outside their homes, which is prohibited behaviour in rural contexts. It allowed them to challenge men's

hegemonic conceptualisation of women as submissive, weak, and docile. Furthermore, the practice of cross-dressing bestows them extra mobility and freedom to bring out their usual gender roles and sexualised bodies transiently. The songs illustrate how women create a system of meaning that challenges the structural restraints. The representation of non-conformist portrayal of women was only possible because they created and owned that place during the festivity. Therefore, studying such revived and deified places along with the cultural practices and rituals is significant to explore the broader themes of the regional art form and its role in (re)constructing the discourse of gender, power, and patriarchal politics to curb such performances. However, these festive occasions also bring out conformist images of the same women when they perform fast for their husbands, worship gods, and do other household chores.

The festival bestows strength and power on the women performers. The festive atmosphere, liminal place, and women's subversive performance enabled the rural women to dialogue with the dominant values, gender bias, and normative behaviour. Similarly, the following chapter explores the voices of defiance and transgression through the language. Moreover, their *Kajarī* folksongs abound with both implicit and explicit occurrences of metaphorical language and symbols to address the issues ranging from their bold language to conveying their sexual desires. It further explores how this unrestrained language helps them challenge the powerlessness associated with the gendered female language. The next chapter briefly deals with the concept of laughter and jokes, which have been used to mock and highlight the weak moral nature of men. This aspect of their performance can be taken for future research.