

CHAPTER 6 - FROM RURAL ROOTS TO PROFESSIONAL STAGES: INTERSECTIONALITY AND THE APPROPRIATION OF *Kajarī* FOLKSONGS

I stepped into the field in 2021, believing that women were the sole practitioners and bearers of *Kajarī* folksongs, as I had only ever heard these songs sung by women. Additionally, the genre is deeply connected to the *Kajarī* festival, which centres around women and *kajjalā Devi*, the goddess of *Vindhyācala*. However, these assumptions were shattered when I recorded and heard the performances and narratives of men/women. It started with my uncle Parasnath Chauhan's statement that his brother was an excellent *Kajarī* singer. I recorded his elder brother's (Kavi Chauhan) songs along with the performances of a few other male singers in Gaura village, which set the background of this chapter. My uncle took me to the neighbouring village, which was mainly divided into *tolas* (small socio-economic settlements inside the village) such as *Pasiyan* (a cluster of *Pasi* caste houses), *Ahiran* (an area populated by Yadav community), and *Koiran* (the area where Kushwaha or Maurya caste people reside), to meet his maternal aunt. I met with many male singers (Daya Shankar Maurya, Raja Ram, and Brij Mohan Maurya) whose performances I recorded at the *nāga-pañcamī* festival. Next year (2022), I conducted fieldwork in urban areas of Mirzapur, where I came across more male singers associated with *akhādās*, stage performances, instrument players and organisers of events related to *Kajarī*. The representation of women in public performances of *Kajarī* folksongs is significantly limited due to the existing social structure of Indian villages. In most public gatherings, men occupy central positions and outnumber female singers, with rural women rarely featured except for a few well-established performers. Meanwhile, men/women from privileged upper-class and upper-caste backgrounds have increasingly assumed the role of custodians of *Kajarī* folksongs, both on stage and across digital platforms. This shift has led to commercialising a tradition that

once served as a space for rural women's innovation, improvisation, and subversion of societal norms. Consequently, this chapter critically examines the implications of this transition, focusing on issues of rural women's autonomy, ownership of their folk traditions, and the evolving dynamics of performance spaces.

As mentioned in the introduction section of the thesis, the *Kajarī* song is mainly performed by rural women at the festival and is confined to a festive folksong. To understand the intricate politics surrounding the appropriation and commercialisation of women's folksongs, it is essential first to confirm that rural women are the original creators and custodians of these songs and to identify those who later altered and appropriated them. The data collected from respondents suggested pieces of evidence to support this claim that rural women are the primary source of *Kajarī* songs. For instance, Malti Devi (a housewife in her late 70s) said, '*It is a pastime while planting (rice) padi*' (M. Devi, Personal Communication, 20 July 2021), highlighting its association with the rhythmic movement of planting *padi*. Another reason for ascribing the role of women as originators is rooted in women's cultural and ceremonial lives. It is associated with their festival, *Kajarī*, held on the third day of the *Bhadra* month (mid-July to mid-August). It entails the women's fasting for their husbands' well-being, merry-making, and singing practices. Thirdly, academicians locate the emergence of this folksong in the colonial period when male-out migration to sugar plantations from Assam, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh became prevalent after the abolition of the slavery act of 1833. Mostly, women were left behind in the villages, and their longing and separation were converted into creative voices and formed *Kajarī* songs (Singh, 2016). These details solidified this claim that women are the originators and bearers of the *Kajarī* songs. However, the contemporary folkloric landscape has witnessed a transformation in the performance of *Kajarī* songs. Mechanised farming, technological

advancements, and disinterest among the younger generation in preserving cultural art forms have shifted the context. Today, rural women use these melodic expressions in festive and ritualistic environments within their homes or village confines. Despite its historical association with rural women and the absence of musical instruments in village performances, the scenario has changed. Affluent male/female *Kajarī* singers have claimed the genre in contemporary Mirzapur, marking a shift from the traditional space where rural women articulated their emotions, grievances, and gender resentments. This chapter seeks to unveil the evolving nature of *Kajarī* songs, once a sanctuary for women's innovation. They are now transformed, appropriated, and commercialised, depriving rural women of a traditional platform for expressing their intricate emotions.

Similar oral traditions exist for both men and women, and they are integral to folk traditions. As a result, North Indian states feature a diverse range of folk genres performed by both genders. During my fieldwork and data collection, I encountered numerous male-dominated and caste-specific folk performances across different states, such as *Dhobi* dance, performed by men of the washermen caste whose traditional occupation is washing clothes and ironing in Ghazipur, *Birahā*⁹ and *caitī*¹⁰ in Mirzapur and *Bidesia*¹¹ folksong in Bihar. Nevertheless, this chapter solely focuses on the *Kajarī* folksong and its changing dimensions in recent years. This chapter uses *Kajarī* songs and interviews of rural women along with stage singers (mainly men),

⁹ *Birahā* is a folksong of the Yadav caste sung in the Bhojpuri region of Uttar Pradesh—the word *Birahā* derived from *Viraha*, meaning where the pain of people is depicted.

¹⁰ *Caitī* is a variety of folksong sung by men. It is named *caitī* as it is sung in the month of *Chaitra* (Mid-February to mid-March). It is vowed around the themes of love, eroticism, and separation and uses the word 'Rama' in the song text.

¹¹ *Bidesia* is both a folksong of men and folk theatre developed by Bhikhari Thakur in Bihar. It describes the pain of indentured labourers who have migrated abroad. It is equivalent to *Kajarī* songs reflecting the pain of left-behind women.

academicians, instrument players and digital content creators of Mirzapur and Bihar (I interviewed Bihar's folk singers in Ghazipur during the cultural evening of a conference titled "International Seminar on Trajectories of Folk Literature and Culture: Indian Perspective" held on November 12–13, 2022) as source material to inquire into the issues ranging from the appropriation of women's traditional folksongs to the role of government-run organisations affecting the present and future of this folk expression. For this, I conducted in-person interviews in the urban areas of Mirzapur. I contacted the artists of Bihar (who were attending a conference in Ghazipur) with the help of Professor Ram Narayan Tiwari, the conference organiser. With these artists, I conducted interviews over the phone and through Google Meet. In Ghazipur, male singers and instrumentalists exclusively occupied the stage, effectively marginalising female performers. A similar trend was observed in Mirzapur, where male respondents significantly outnumbered their female counterparts, reflecting entrenched gender disparities in participation. This pronounced imbalance not only signifies the appropriation of the genre by male performers but also underscores the structural inequalities and gendered division of labour within folk performance traditions. While rural women's engagement remains largely restricted or rendered invisible, professional male singers continue to assert dominance over the genre, further eroding women's agency and creative contributions to the folk music tradition.

In recent years, academicians have used subcultures, especially folk genres, as a medium to understand the changing dimensions and commercialisation of folksongs in the current scenario and how they affect the lives of their practitioners. In addition, the analysis of rural women's oral tradition provides a fertile ground for investigating how functions and emotions are transformed when the context and means of communication in folk genres change (Blackburn & Ramanujan, 1986). Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) argues that oral lyric poetry is a tool

of women's resistance in Bedouin society, which is excluded from the commercial recordings of the Bedouin culture. It is appropriated and adopted by the young men and used as a strategy of defiance against the older relatives. Peter Manuel (1988) has noted significant support for this negative interpretation of mediated music's impact on traditional culture. He cites reports of processes through which traditional musical sources or genres may be commercialised, acculturated, decontextualised, or stripped of socio-economic class meanings. Ethnographer Smita Tewari Jassal (2007) examines the transformation of women's songs, highlighting how traditional spaces for female creativity and improvisation are systematically appropriated and commercialised. This process benefits only the appropriators, while the original female practitioners are marginalised and excluded from the economic and cultural gains. Conversely, women are silenced and continue to be the focus of male attention. Jassal (2019) stated that *Kajli* is now recognised as a light classical form, with its rural roots and ties to labouring women largely forgotten. As it transitions from the fields to cultural spaces, its original earthy essence fades, becoming known merely as a rainy-season song. This shift reflects society's detachment from manual labour, erasing *Kajli's* role as a collective voice for working women. Its refined form as *Kajri* further distances itself from their lived realities, even while remaining integral to their culture. Classical music traditions today stand far removed from these authentic expressions of labouring women's songs. Simona Sarma and Anjali Monteiro (2019) explain women's Goalpariya folk music transition from common folk to a respectable platform. They further analyse how oral tradition must undergo shifts to adapt to various social, economic, and cultural forces. This chapter discusses the changes and modifications in the *Kajarī* singing tradition and how the appropriation of *Kajarī* folksongs incurs appropriative harms, further strengthening the act of silencing and epistemic injustice. It furthers our understanding of how the change in

performative context and means of communication transform the meaning and themes of folksongs. A similar chapter by John Lawanda (2003) explores males' political and commercial appropriation of women's music in Malawi and Southern Africa. Such appropriation often negatively affects women, rendering them voiceless both politically and economically. However, my work argues that recognised factors of commercialisation and change contribute to gender inequalities and influence power dynamics by silencing marginalised women. Additionally, it suggests that the public appropriation of female music may diminish the subversive and creative potential of folksongs, ultimately reinforcing gender stereotypes.

6.1 Social Location and Identity of the Respondents: An Overview

The Maurya (vegetable-growing caste) and the Kurmi (not elite tillers) are the main castes that live in the Mirzapur region. Traditionally associated with river-based occupations, the Mallah caste lives in this district near the banks of the Ganga. The Maurya, Kurmi, and Mallah castes are the primary sources of women's songs; most are illiterate or somewhat literate. I observed and interviewed several artists from Bihar during a conference in Ghazipur; most of them belong to the upper-caste Hindus, particularly Brahmins. Brahmins (teachers and priests), Thakurs (landowners), and Srivastavas (traditionally clerks, authors, and accountants) make up most of the stage and professional artists in Mirzapur city, which draws attention to notable differences in education and socio-economic status that are based on gender, caste, and class. These singers are professionals who usually come from wealthy families, live in Mirzapur and have additional sources of income and properties in the adjacent villages. For them, singing is a side job because they work as advocates, teachers, doctors or owners of marriage halls. Thus, rural women and their traditions are marginalised by the patriarchal caste-based social framework that governs women and caste boundaries in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Several tactics are used to restrict and

control women's performances, frequently designating them as offensive or vulgar. Their folksongs are commonly disregarded as unworthy and devoid of aesthetics, further marginalising their expressive traditions.

These gender and caste dynamics raise a pertinent question as to why women's folksongs are levelled as inappropriate and vulgar for refined audiences yet embraced and appropriated. The adoption of women's expressive culture is driven by the political economy, which accrued monetary gain and recognition to the appropriators. Women's songs are reworked to appeal to more sophisticated listeners (targeting anonymity and using the politics of name by attributing their authorship). These performances erase the cultural meanings of folksongs and remove them from their natural and ritualistic surroundings to appeal to an educated, upper-class audience. Many male respondents construct new narratives or falsely claim that men have historically performed these songs, deliberately overlooking the contributions of the original female creators, which I will discuss in the upcoming section.

The chapter is divided into five different sections. The first section provides the rationale for using the theoretical lens of intersectionality and cultural appropriation. In the next section, I trace the evolution of women's *Kajari* singing and its other regional developments. The following section deals with social-cultural shifts, the politics of name and the issue of aestheticisation. The fourth section highlights the appropriation process concerning the musical aspect and women's emotions, particularly when the musical context and communication methods change. In the last section, I discuss the possible appropriative harms negatively affecting the genre and the rural women who own this oral tradition.

6.2 Theoretical Framework

Women's folk dances, music, and other cultural expressions collectively form a rich and intricate tapestry of tradition. These female-centred subcultures thrive within the broader contexts of religion, festivals, and rituals, which are fundamental pillars of cultural identity. Within this framework, men's adaptation of folk music can be understood as a form of cultural appropriation. However, a singular focus on appropriation fails to account for the intersecting influences of caste, class, and gender. A purely gender-centric analysis is insufficient for unpacking the *Kajarī* folk tradition's complex power dynamics and commercialisation. To fully grasp these interactions, an intersectional approach is necessary, which situates gender alongside caste and class as critical analytical categories. This framework of intersectionality provides a more nuanced understanding of the socio-political structures, particularly how male performers appropriate folksongs while systematically marginalising the songs and their original female creators.

Cultural appropriation is often defined as the 'taking from a culture that is not one's own of intellectual property, cultural expressions and artefacts, history and ways of knowledge' (Ziff and Rao, 1997, p. 1). To make it more comprehensible, in a framework of appropriation, the influential group takes aspects of the culture of the subordinated group, making them its own (Jackson, 2021). Now, the question arises: What can one culture/community appropriate from another culture? Here, James O. Young's (2008) classification of three forms of cultural appropriation is significant: subject, content, and tangible object appropriation. Subject appropriation, or 'voice appropriation,' occurs when individuals outside a cultural group narrate or depict the lived experiences of insiders, as seen in Joseph Conrad's writings. Content appropriation refers to the adoption and reinterpretation of cultural elements by artists from

outside that tradition. In contrast, object appropriation involves the physical relocation of cultural artefacts across borders, exemplified by Lord Elgin's removal of the Parthenon friezes.

This chapter examines the cultural appropriation of women's *Kajari* folksongs by socially dominant men/women, a distinct content or style appropriation. These male performers restructured and modified the folksongs to align with market demands, transforming them into commodified, saleable art while erasing their original cultural and gendered significance. Drawing from the proclamation of cultural appropriation by James O. Young (2008), they can result in unjustifiable harm, such as setbacks to the economic, pedagogical, or other opportunities available to those within the culture. Perhaps it could impede their ability to preserve and maintain their cultural heritage. The lens of intersectionality provides another theoretical backup to examine the dimensions of class, caste and social standing affecting women's traditional art form.

Kimberlé Crenshaw used intersectionality to explain how the different power systems negatively affect marginalised groups. It emerged from the writings of women of colour in the 1960s-1970s, which rejected gender as a single analytical tool (Samuels & Ross-Sheriff, 2008). This theory explains how different social identities, such as class, gender, ethnicity, caste, and race, intersect to produce a system of oppression and privilege (Crenshaw, 1989). Women's folksongs, which have great cultural significance, serve as a tool for resistance and communal cohesion, apart from their lived experiences. These songs are frequently taken out of their original context and meaning by privileged class/caste groups, which perpetuates cultural erasure and exploitation. Therefore, it has become a significant tool in comprehending the social inequalities and marginalisation resulting from the various social identities instrumental in the appropriation, reproduction, marketing, and consumption of women's folksongs. Intersectional

theory challenged the reductionist approach, which often overlooked the multiple forms of discrimination by identifying the multifaceted nature of identities. Moreover, an intersectional lens highlights the complex power dynamics at work. It emphasises the importance of recognising and addressing the various forms of oppression and inequality in these cultural appropriations.

6.3 Stages of Development in Rural Regions and Urban Practices

While the core of *Kajari* folksong remains rooted in rural women's ritual and seasonal practices, especially during *rājāga* nights in village courtyards, its contemporary expressions in urban Mirzapur have undergone significant transformation. These urban adaptations, ranging from government-sponsored cultural programs, Rotary Club-hosted performances, to *akhārā*-style competitions, reflect a shift from community-centred participation to stage-based, elite-dominated performance cultures. For instance, the *Vindhyācal* temple, though part of the sacred geography, has also become a stage for curated performances during *Kajari* season, dominated by well-known singers with formal training and caste-class privilege. Unlike the spontaneous, community-driven songs sung by rural women, urban events prioritise professionalism, celebrity status, and visibility, often at the cost of authenticity.

A sharp contrast emerges when comparing the village-based *rājāga* celebrations, where rural women participate collectively in intimate settings, to the urban events like the one organised at Lions School, Laldiggi, a posh locality in Mirzapur. Jata Shankar Sharma, a performer of high stature, was not invited to that event and thus felt hesitant to enter the hall where the event was going on, highlighting how caste, class, and institutional gatekeeping

regulate access to urban cultural spaces. Moreover, rural women are marginalised doubly, as women and as rural voices, excluded from the planning and performance of such events.

There is an iconic bridge in Mirzapur at the confluence of the *Puṇyajālā* (later known as *Ojhalā* River) and *Gaṅgā* rivers, hence named *Ojhalā Bridge*. It was built by cotton merchants around 1772. The lower part of the bridge has several room-like structures, and locals told me that it used to serve as a halting place for traders who arrived via the river route. *Ojhalā Bridge*, once a vibrant centre of folk congregation during local fairs, is now occupied by events like *Kajarī Mahotsav*, curated by political and commercial interests. As Rajaram Nishad, a local performer and organiser, said, ‘Big leaders’ involvement and their greed for money along with internal politics... ruined the culture of *Kajarī Mahotsav*’ (R. Nishad, Personal Communication, 01 September 2023). The event, while offering a stage to certain artists, often lacks representation from the authentic rural custodians of the tradition. These developments reflect a change in the performative tradition of rural women and a threat to the integrity of *Kajarī* as a female-centred, rural expressive form. The urban turn has rebranded it into a cultural commodity, diluting its subversive potential and silencing the voices of rural women whose songs once articulated desire, protest, and community bonding.

This section briefly introduces the developments of the different *Kajarī* singing traditions in the Mirzapur region. It also highlights the changes noticed in the different branches of the singing tradition in rural areas and urban spaces. Additionally, the recent growth of new singing trends in Mirzapur can be divided into *akhāḍā* tradition and stage/professional singing. Before discussing these two stages, I briefly explain another development of male *Kajarī* singing in rural settings, resembling rural women’s singing tradition but with a new flair.

I witnessed rural men's singing sessions on the *nāga-pañcamī* in Bandhawa village. The day was marked with joyous celebrations, worship of snake posters, organising different sports events, and cooking various dishes. The village comprises diverse caste groups, including Maurya, Pasi, and Yadav. Within women's performative settings, male singers have developed a distinct variation of *Kajarī* songs that diverges from women's traditional performances. Similar groups exist across multiple villages, where men have established their parallel folk genre of *Kajarī*. However, through close interaction with performers and detailed documentation of their performances, notable modifications and adaptations become evident. Unlike women, who traditionally sing *Kajarī* every night, these male performers primarily perform on special occasions such as the *nāga-pañcamī* and the *Kajarī* festival. The noticeable difference is the non-performing men's congregation witnessing their performance, which marked their performance as different from women's singing culture. As in women's performances, they constitute the audience and the performers. Men's songs are primarily drawn from Hindu scriptures such as the Mahabharat and the Ramayana, and social problems like dowry system, child marriage and the materialistic world, distinguishing the themes (such as playful banter, breaking the stereotypes, social and personal issues) and singing style from the women's form. They do not receive formal music training but are competent enough to perform publicly in the presence of an audience in a formal setup. However, these singers are less professional than stage performers, as they do not belong to formal musical groups and are rarely commissioned by patrons or audiences for performances. Their renditions are informal and intended for small-scale entertainment, particularly during festive occasions.

In urban spaces, most stage singers are the product of the *akhādā* tradition of *Kajarī* singing or with formal training. *Kajarī akhādās* are official training centres where interested

students receive training in singing under the guidance of a teacher (*Guru*), who is both a singer and a composer.¹² They are trained to compete against singers from other *akhādās*, as the rules of each *akhādā* prohibit competition among its members. The Mirzapur region is the home to various *Kajarī akhādās*. Devi Prasad Maurya, a disciple of Baffat *akhādā*, provided a list of those *akhādās*, ‘*There were seven popular Kajarī akhādās named after the gurus such as Baffat, Jahangir, Shivdas, Bairagi, Murat, Bhairav, and Akkhad. However, most of them are on the verge of disappearance*’ (D. P. Maurya, Personal Communication, 28 July 2021). The rigid social structure of contemporary society imposes significant barriers that prevent women from participating in these centres. While I encountered a few upper-caste women who were part of these *akhādās*, their presence remains marginal and far less recognised than their male counterparts. I rarely encountered *akhādā* style females performing on the public stages; instead, they are associated with All India Radio.¹³ This disparity stems from deeply entrenched societal restrictions on women, particularly regarding their visibility and engagement in public spaces. These *akhādās* are on the verge of extinction due to ready-made means of entertainment and the apathetic attitude of performers and listeners toward cultural art forms. Mamta Srivastav highlighted this issue and said:

Nowadays, people have a TV. They will turn it on and watch whatever they want. Nobody goes out to participate or watch these performances. Earlier, we all used to gather and watch together; there was laughter and joy. Now, everyone stays inside. It feels like all our traditions and ways are slowly slipping away.

¹² Composer refers to the independent writers or teachers of the *akhādās*. Mostly, they use an intricate style of writing *Kajarī* folksongs, characterised with Hindu mythology and social issues.

¹³ All India Radio (AIR)/Akashvani is India’s national public radio broadcaster, playing a crucial role in promoting cultural heritage. Folk singers associated with AIR perform and record traditional songs, preserving regional music. As members, they receive recognition, opportunities for radio broadcasts, and contribute to archiving endangered folk traditions, ensuring their continuity for future generations.

Presently, these centres of teaching and learning music are on the verge of shutting down, and the same trained *akhādā* singers have shifted to professional or stage singing to fulfil their needs.

Moreover, the most refined and recognised branch of the *Kajarī* singing is visible in the semi-classical tradition. A semi-classical version of *Kajarī* is a fusion of classical rules and folk music; however, it does not strictly follow the rigid rules of classical music. Varanasi became the centre of this refined form of *Kajarī*. Various legendary artists such as Pundit Chhannulal Misra,¹⁴ Shobha Gurtu,¹⁵ Girja Devi,¹⁶ Rajan and Sajan Mishra¹⁷ have popularised this genre globally. The famous shehnai (clarinet) player Bismillah Khan¹⁸ was born and brought up in the same city and gained popularity by playing the tunes of semi-classical *Kajarī*. However, the chapter solely focuses on other developments of the *Kajarī* tradition in the socio-cultural context of the Mirzapur region, except for the semi-classical version.

The next section of the chapter explains the shifts and modifications in this folk performance across the developments mentioned above. It discusses the changes regarding the performative context, music, composition-related modifications, audience, and reception.

6.4 Shifting Dynamics

The section explains the contextual shifts in performance that affect rural women's oral traditions. This discussion deepens the debate on whether folksongs should be understood as a part of tradition or a professional genre. While women's performances are deeply rooted in

¹⁴ Pandit Chhannulal Mishra is a distinguished Kirana gharana vocalist known for his expertise in Khyal, Thumri, Dadra, and Bhajans, deeply rooted in the Banaras Gharana tradition.

¹⁵ Shobha Gurtu, the Queen of Thumri, mastered Thumri, Dadra, and Ghazal, blending Jaipur-Atrauli influences.

¹⁶ Girija Devi, a legendary Banaras Gharana exponent, elevated Thumri, *Kajarī*, and Chaiti, earning her the title 'Queen of Thumri.'

¹⁷ The Mishra brothers, Rajan and Sajan, were celebrated for their soulful Khyal and Bhajan duets. These artists have preserved and enriched Hindustani classical and semi-classical music, influencing generations with their emotive and intricate vocal artistry.

¹⁸ Ustad Bismillah Khan was a legendary shehnai maestro of the Banaras Gharana, celebrated for popularizing the instrument in Hindustani classical music and receiving the Bharat Ratna award.

ritualistic and communal practices, modern male performers have largely stripped these songs of their ritual significance, transforming them into staged and commercialised productions. This shift raises critical questions about the evolving nature of folk music, whether it remains a cultural tradition or has transitioned into a professionalised art form. In India, every folksong is associated with a season (*Kajari*, *caitī*, *Holi*, *Barahmasa*), daily activities (*ropanī*, *jatasār*), and *samskāras*,¹⁹ e.g. *Sohar* on the birth of a child and wedding songs. In contrast, contemporary stage singing excludes these spatiotemporal features from the performance. This section examines how the natural performance spaces of women, which traditionally enabled them to engage in bold and uninhibited expressions, have been systematically excluded from male-dominated performances. The exclusion alters the performative essence of the folk tradition and raises important questions about aestheticisation and the politics of authorship. Unlike traditional folksongs, which are collectively created, anonymous, and passed down orally across generations, the male reinterpretations often seek legitimacy through structured authorship, further transforming the cultural landscape of these performances, which I will discuss in the following section.

Rural women's folk performances provide a transient yet cathartic flight from the hardships of daily life, the monotony of physical labour and normative behaviour (Singh, 2019). Women must create unrestrained and empowered spaces to articulate their resentments and anxieties. Moreover, their acts of defiance are legitimised in the festive and ceremonial context, which has been removed from the folk genre in the modern-day context. Women's *Kajari* tradition is deeply rooted in the ritualistic lives of the folk, as the genre is associated with the

¹⁹ In Hinduism, *samskāra* (rite of passage) are sacred sacraments performed at different stages in life, ranging from the conception of the child in the womb to the cremation, according to Grhyasutra. *Sohar* (folksongs sung at the birth of a child) and wedding songs are sung on marriage.

ritual of planting *jaraī*. On *nāga-pañcamī*, women and young girls visit the nearest water body, such as the Ganga River, while singing *Kajarī* songs. They collect soil, return home, and plant barley seeds, placing that soil (with seeds of barley) at the *caughat* and worshipping it as Goddess *jaraī*. From that evening until the *Kajarī* festival, which falls on the twelfth day after *nāga-pañcamī*, they continue singing *Kajarī* songs, believing that the music nourishes the plant. Sunita Devi, a housewife from Madguda village, explains, ‘*This plant is Goddess jaraī, and Kajarī songs are its food, helping it grow*’ (S. Devi, Personal Communication, 02 July 2023). On the *Kajarī* festival, women and girls, dressed in their finest attire, ceremoniously immerse *jaraī* in the same river or pond, concluding the day with *Kajarī* songs. Contrarily, the official stage culture has replaced the ritualistic aspect and natural performative space, symbolising liberated and empowered female space. Pattar Pandey (stage singer in Mirzapur city) highlighted the significance of the performative context of folk tradition and said:

There was a time when *Kajarī* or *caitī* (a type of male folksong) was performed in designated months, e.g., March-April. However, nowadays, if you are singing on the stage and if the audience or sponsor demands you to sing *caitī* in the *Sāvan* month, which is meant to be sung in the Chaitra month (Mid-March to Mid-April), you have to sing it, which undermines the significance of season-specific song and context (P. Pandey, Personal Communication, 30 July 2022).

Similarly, women actively engage in *Kajarī* performances through play, song, dance, and enactment, freely expressing their subversive and transgressive potential. This is evident in their unfiltered language and mockery of authoritative figures, challenging societal norms with impunity. Moreover, such created spaces are meant for women’s innovation and improvisation as they indulge in funny digressions through jokes, improvisation of the song lyrics and impromptu

additions. Due to the dynamic nature of folklore, new words and themes have been introduced and adopted by women, which is evident in this song sung by a young girl in Madguda village- '*Raja roz Brandi pite hai aur nashe me roz rahate hai*' [My husband drinks brandy every day and is constantly intoxicated]. It also alludes to the dynamic ability of folksongs to express and integrate the current societal issues of men's alcoholism that are common in both rural and urban areas, thereby fulfilling the educational goal for women. Professional vocalists eventually popularised similar efforts made by poets and songwriters. To take one example, Devi Prasad Maurya replaced some words in a traditional *Kajari* song- '*Hamake mehndi mangai da Pitarkunda se jay ke Hero Honda se na*' [bring some henna from Pitarkunda as you go by Hero Honda]. The original song was '*Hamake mehndi mangai da mo Tij heel se jay ke saikil se na*' [Bring some henna from Motijheel (a place in Varanasi), as you have to go by cycle]. This adaptation highlights the fluidity of folklore and its ability to absorb fresh ideas, emphasising its dynamic quality.

In this song, the word toe ring (jewellery items usually featured in *Kajari* songs) has been replaced with a skirt, a symbol of womanhood. It further highlights the migrated husbands' indulgence in inappropriate acts. Another similar example was found when Rani Singh highlighted the features of creativity and dynamicity of *Kajari* songs by improvising and adding new words to a traditional song (*Hamake Mehndi liya da Motijheel se jaye ke saikil se na*). Including new and innovative terms reiterates the idea of adaptability and reflection of contemporary society, which is reflected in these folksongs.

*Hamake mehndī liyāī da Gaṅgā para se,
Jāye ke moṭar kāra se nā.*

Rani Singh, Chowk (Mirzapur), 2022

Bring me henna from the other side of the Ganges,

You have to go by the motor car.

Therefore, the performative context, rooted in festivals, rituals, and the *caughat* setting, is crucial for women's subversion, innovation, and improvisation in *Kajarī* performances. These elements provide women a distinct cultural and symbolic space to challenge societal norms, experiment with new forms of expression, and articulate symbolic resistance. However, these contextual elements are stripped away in male-dominated stage performances, reducing *Kajarī* to mere entertainment rather than a powerful medium of social critique. By removing the natural, communal, and ritualistic setting, male performers not only erase the deeply embedded meanings of the songs but also deprive women of their agency in creating an alternative cosmos. In this space, they can reimagine and redefine their roles.

Another debatable issue is the folksong's status as a traditional or professional art form. Rural women and mostly male performers have different views on this question. When I asked Manta Devi (skilled dancer and singer in Shivpur village) why she did not join the stage singing or register herself with the different government organisations working to safeguard the endangered art form in the Purvanchal region, she replied, *'This is not our (dhandha) profession, but this is part of our tradition. Our mothers and grandmothers passed it on to us, not for money, but because it kept our stories and songs alive. If we don't carry it forward, who will remember what came before us?'* (M. Devi, Personal Communication, 14 July 2022). This traditional value restricts women from performing on stage because they believe that songs are the medium through which they express their emotions and are not commodified art. In contrast, upper-caste women, such as Urmila Srivastava and Ajita Srivastava have gained visibility on national and international stages, demonstrating how their social privilege has played a crucial role in establishing them as prominent voices in the *Kajarī* genre. This highlights the intricate dynamics

of caste and social status in the popularisation and recognition of folksongs, where access to resources, platforms, and cultural legitimacy often favours performers from privileged backgrounds over marginalised singers. Additionally, Jata Shankar Sharma's statement hinted at the male performer's outsider status and their professional outlook on the folksong:

Men entered and used it as a profession and enjoyed its benefits. From what I have experienced and observed, men are primarily in programs, and their participation is greater than that of women. Female stage performers are significantly fewer in number (J. S. Maurya, Personal Communication, 28 July 2022).

Usually, folklore is characterised by “anonymity” and “collectivity” (Westerlund et al., 2019, p. 56), meaning the oral tradition rarely has authors and an outcome of collective consciousness. Geeta Devi said, *‘Kajarī songs are transferred from one generation to another in women’s cases, and women learn them from the senior female members of the house’* (G. Devi, Personal Communication, 14 July 2022). The composers of these songs are unknown, highlighting the collective experiences of rural women. However, men’s songs always include the composer’s name or appear with the name *Kavi*, which is associated with the politics of naming, recognition, and power. The songs may or may not have a connection with their own lived crisis, but writing songs is mainly approached as a literary project that would popularise not only the songs but the names of their authors as well, further highlighting the politics of authorship in oral traditions. Authorship of folksongs marks a departure from the fact that folksongs are owned collectively and exchanged freely and orally across groups in multiple sites. It reveals that, despite the song being composed in a woman’s voice, it is authored by a man (Singh, 2015). The politics of naming is a powerful tool that enables men to reinforce their perceptions and constructions of women. The following male-authored song exemplifies how such narratives ideologically

entrench stereotypes, framing women as the root cause of conflict and even legitimising the practice of taking a second wife. Furthermore, the song reinforces normative expectations of female behaviour, dictating strict social roles that women must adhere to, implying that failure to conform will result in abandonment and exclusion. Through this linguistic and narrative control, men perpetuate a patriarchal discourse that shapes how women are perceived and constrains their agency.

Kailū kavan kamāī ho pyārī, raha ke bāp-mahatariyā me? (x2)
Khelalū nahīra ke dagāriya, guṇa ekko nā sīkhalū gujariyā,
Ghumalū bana ke sakhiyā bāwariyā, cala calā tū chōḍa dagāriya.
Cahilū masta bhaū tū eka dina, maune aura dalariyā me,
Jaba prītama kī āyī paṭiyā, jhanake lagalū dina au ratiyā.
Ṭapa de karaṇa lagu hukmatiyā, thāṭha banāwalū wahī bākhatiyā.
Ḍātale sajan savata liyā ke, rowana lagū bakhariyā me.
Dhaṇa ekko nā lagī bahānā, pīchē hoeba pacatānā.
Phasa jaibū jaba ghaṭa jāiha khajānā, Bābū Mahābalī Mastānā.
Kahate Rājarāma, nāhīm kōī, likhata mauja Kajariyā nā.

Kavi Chauhan, Gaura, 2022

Oh, lady! What did you earn in your parents' home? (x 2)
 You only played there and did not learn any skills.
 You roamed around with your friends and deviated from the right path.
 You became happy once you got money and dollars.
 You regretted day and night when you received your husband's letter.
 You acted like a boss and showed off at that time.
 Your husband scolded you after bringing a co-wife.
 Your excuses would not work, and you would be left with regrets.
 You will be in a miserable condition once your wealth is over.
 Rajaram is writing this *Kajarī* in an ecstatic mood.

Sometimes, the names of saints and founders of famous cults are included in these songs even though they did not compose them. It was composed by some local bard or reworked by people associated with the *Shiv-Charcha*²⁰ cult, as the name Harendar Bhaiya (brother Harendar)

²⁰ *Shiv Charcha*, or the talk of Shiva is a popular activity among the Maurya population in eastern Uttar Pradesh. A few years ago, it started in Purvanchal, and it accelerated right before the 2014 elections. It was first held on Mondays and Saturdays in the village's ancient temples. Although the majority of attendees are women, the lead

appears in the last couplet of the *Kajarī* song, who started the cult of *Shiv-Charcha*. After listening to that song, Ram Narayan Tiwari said, ‘*This is not the traditional Kajarī folksong, but the organisers of the Shiv-Charcha modified it by adding the name of Harendar. It is used by organisers/composers as a strategy to associate and publicise their names*’ (R.N. Tiwari, Personal Communication, 28 April 2022). It presents a changing reality that women use their cultural expression to inculcate philosophical ideas and the transient nature of being’s existence, whereas shiv-gurus (Kathavachak or storytellers of Lord Shiva) appropriated their songs without acknowledging their contribution. Similarly, the name Kabir (famous Indian saint) adds weight and male authority to this song. I recorded one such song in Gaura village, which is as follows:

*Kahata Kabīra, suno bhāī sādhu, manuṣa tana kabahu nahi pāibo.
Sītārāma bhaja ho bārī dhaniyā, Rāma binā sukha pāibu nā.*

Chamela Devi, Gaura, 2021

Kabir is saying to Sadhu- You will not be reborn as a human being,
Therefore, worship the almighty; you will not be pain-free without Rama.

Akhādā style and stage singers’ *Kajarī* songs are written by famous poets or the masters who teach them all. They usually have a complex way of composing songs on social problems or specific occasions, which helps them compete with singers of other *akhādās*. The comprehension of this complex composition is beyond the reach of common folk. Another reason is the aestheticisation of folk music, where the folk tradition was being transformed into a recognised, formalised, and beautified art form. The process of aestheticisation frequently entails blending creativity and authenticity with local elements, integrating them with the new, artisanal, and particular (Dagalp & Hartmann, 2021). Pamela Moro has referred to such forms of standardisation and systematisation as ‘cleaning-up’ before being promulgated widely (Moro,

singers, known as Shiv gurus, are always men. In the non-Chamar Dalit and backward populations, Shiv Charcha is most well-liked. Shiv gurus sing devotional songs of Shiva at the end of the ceremony, which begins with the attendees’ personal hardships being narrated.

2004), as Rajbali Pandey (an *akhādā* singer and organiser of singing events in Kantit village) said, ‘*Mahilāyoṅ ke gīt gandē hote hain, unke gīt bhaddē hote hain*’ [Women’s songs are bad, their songs are vulgar and therefore, they need refinement] (R. Pandey, Personal Communication, 10 July 2023). Therefore, these *akhādā* and professional singers tried to imitate or sound like semi-classical singers to get rid of these perceived impurities. It resonates with the argument of Sumanta Banerjee (1989), who discussed how folk traditions in West Bengal (usually tend to originate from lower castes due to the moral ethics imposed upon upper castes) have been marginalised as a sanitisation process, thus segregating the women of Bhadraklok from the world of lower-class women.

Men’s adaptation of this art form excludes its ritual context and ritualised spaces created by women, depriving them of their subversive performance. Authorship politics emerge when male composers sign their works, in contrast to the anonymity of women’s *Kajarī* songs. These conscious variations of men tend to mould the folk genre into a semi-classical style that attracts financial gain and recognition to a broader and more sophisticated audience. This shift highlights the tension between preserving traditional women’s songs and adapting them for professional purposes.

6.5 Modifying the Musical Tradition

Introducing musical instruments and the classicisation of *Kajarī* songs have affected women’s traditional musical practices. It traces the evolution of these songs from a folk tradition rooted in community expression to a commercialised, profit-driven art form, contrasting the performances of professional singers with those of rural women’s groups. Additionally, it examines how political and economic forces shape the production, consumption, and distribution of folk music,

emphasising the role of government agencies in safeguarding and preserving the indigenous art forms of Uttar Pradesh, many of which face the risk of extinction.

In North India, every folksong has its specific context and tune through which their identification is possible. Similarly, *Kajarī* songs also have multiple tunes in the past, but most of them are lost. However, I recorded over twenty tunes of *Kajarī* songs manifested in women's songs. Generally, they can be identified with the starting and ending words such as '*Hare Rama*', '*Re Samāliyā*', '*Na*' '*Balamu*' and '*Jhir jhir buniya*'. These words typically appear at either the beginning or end of the song. While women may lack formal theoretical knowledge of musical scales and compositions, their performances exhibit diverse melodies that can be identified and traced. In contrast, male and female stage singers have developed a more polished and stylised form of *Kajarī*, tailored for elite and refined audiences. However, despite this refinement, they continue to draw upon the traditional tunes of *Kajarī*, effectively appropriating melodies that have long been associated with women's singing traditions.

I recorded rural women's songs across the Mirzapur region, specifically Gaura Bisen, Mirzapur city, Shivpur and Madguda, but no musical instrument accompanied their performance. When I asked Parvati Devi why she did not use the musical instrument, she said, '*There was nothing in the past, and even there is nothing today. We still perform without Dholak or harmonium*' (P. Devi, Personal Communication, 15 July 2022). Their singing accompanies women's dance in a circular motion, known as *Dhunmunīyā Kajarī*, as they bend backwards and forward their bodies to match the rhythm of the songs. In the Bandhawa village, I recorded the male variety of *Kajarī* singing where musical setups, such as a mike, harmonium, Indian drum, and cymbals were used, and they received rewards in the form of money from the audience during and after the songs. Similarly, in Ghazipur, I witnessed men's performances, elaborate

setups, vibrant dresses, and musical instruments. These add-ons are more apparent and advanced, even among female stage singers, as I move to the urban areas of Mirzapur. Stage performers sometimes add *Dhol* (a bigger version of a two-headed drum) and other electronic musical instruments to add novelty and fill the audience's demands. Pappu Nishad (*Kajarī* and *Birahā* singer from Madguda village) told me how new technologies have been introduced to this genre:

When I was singing, we used small bells (*Ghungroo*), a small bell attached to a thread, and three small bells; we wore them on our fingers and danced while bending and snapping them just like this. These drums, harmonium and cymbals are new instruments. Initially, nothing existed when we performed; even today, women do not have any of them.

Modifying and including these musical instruments beautifies and gives a professional touch to the genre. These changes can be seen as a form of classicisation. According to Chatterjee (1993), a classicised tradition undergoes reformation, reconstruction, and reinforcement to shield it from criticisms of barbarism and irrationality, making it more acceptable to middle-class sensibilities. This process serves as a means of sanitising and systematising traditional forms, aligning them with dominant cultural and aesthetic norms. Pattar Pandey's comment solidifies the argument of shift and modifications within the genre as he said, '*Male performers need Sāz, Mizāj and Samāj*' (P. Pandey, Personal Communication, 07 January 2022), covering all the three significant modifications visible in the male tradition of singing, referring to musical instruments, the performers' mood, and the audience's nature. The last point refers to the audience's nature and distribution shift. Men are rarely present during rural women's performances as they perform mainly at night after getting free time from their daily chores. Lalmani Devi said, '*Men are not there. Only women are there. They played, enacted, went everywhere, and sang*' (L. Devi,

Personal Communication, 10 August 2022). Married and unmarried women constitute the performance's audience. However, men's lurking presence is always there. A similar tradition of a homogenous audience is present in the singing tradition of male performers in rural contexts. In contrast, a diverse range of people constitute the audience for stage performances or concerts, including both males and females, because of its development as a professional genre instead of a traditional or private performance. This shift in audience undermines the idea of free space, unfiltered performance, solidarity and collectivity.



Figure 6.1 shows a women's group singing in a natural setting without artificial light, a complex setup and musical instruments.

Source: The picture was taken by the researcher during his fieldwork in Gaura, Bandhwa, Mirzapur, 2023.



Figure 6.2 shows men’s performative group singing and playing instruments with a microphone and other musical instruments.

Source: The picture was taken by the researcher during his fieldwork in Gaura, 2023.

Men and even some reputed persons, such as the head of the village and ex-village head, are part of men’s performances in rural settings. Male performers receive money from the audience to reward their performance, which I observed in Danti Bandhawa and Kantit. However, this is an occasional episode in the lives of local male singers because they do not sing for a patron, sponsor, or on a personal invitation. They perform on specific occasions and within the festive context. At night, I encountered a group of men in Bandhawa village who sang without a formal setup, such as a microphone, stage, or instruments. Not even a person in the audience other than the group was present then, suggesting that singing is still a part of their culture rather than a purely professional exercise. The themes of those songs ranged from social issues to ambiguous

and overtly sexual content, with the erotic imagery of various ‘vegetables’ and ‘fish in the pond.’ Contrarily, women’s singing tradition consists of a community’s voice and problems, whereas male singing tradition within the village confines carries an individual voice. However, they have a performative group consisting of instrument players and a choric group that repeats the lines sung by lead singers. They had limited time to perform; therefore, they sang just one or two songs, generally based on social issues or religious themes.

Folk genres emerge as the emotional and creative expressions of community-based practices deeply embedded in tradition, collective participation, and cultural identity. Within this framework, rural women and male stage performers engage in group-based performances. However, a fundamental distinction exists between them. Male performance groups typically include trained instrumentalists, dancers, and choric members, whereas women’s singing traditions remain largely untrained, oral, and rooted in informal transmission. Women’s performances are considered traditional and non-commercial, characterised by gradual evolution and minimal structural change. In contrast, men’s performances align more closely with popular, profit-driven, and highly mediated forms of folk expression. The integration of commercial interests fundamentally reshapes male-dominated performances, where financial gain becomes central to their artistic endeavours, such as receiving money during live performances and getting programs from official and unofficial organisations.

This transformation is particularly evident in urban centres like Mirzapur city, where folk singing has evolved into a professionalised act. Male/female singers have formed structured groups, often comprising six to twelve members, including instrumentalists, dancers, and chorus singers. Notable groups such as Jata Shankar and his team or Shivlal Gupta and his ensemble perform at private invitations, organised singing competitions, and cultural events. Local

organisations often facilitate these performances, which establish a fixed remuneration for each act.

Furthermore, many of these groups are officially registered with government-funded cultural institutions, such as the *Sanskriti Vibhag* (Lucknow), *Uttar Madhya Kshetra Sanskritik Kendra* (Prayagraj), *Suchna Evam Jansampark Vibhag* (Lucknow), and *Akashvani*. These organisations play a pivotal role in preserving and promoting endangered folk traditions, ensuring local art forms continue to thrive under institutional support. In particular, Suchna Evam Jansampark Vibhag is a state agency that leverages folk performers to disseminate government schemes and welfare programs in rural areas, assigning projects to these registered groups and providing financial compensation.

However, this institutional structure also concerns internal marginalisation within these groups. The group leaders exercise considerable control over financial decisions, member selection, and logistical arrangements, often leaving other performers with little agency. Issues such as delayed government reimbursements, lack of formal contracts, and the absence of transport provisions create further challenges. Consequently, monetary benefits disproportionately favour urban-based performers, who have adapted the oral traditions of rural women into a classicised, commercial format. Despite this shift, the representation of females in professional folk singing remains limited. The few notable exceptions include Ajita Srivastav (Padma Shri Award in 2022)²¹ and Urmila Srivastav (Padma Shri Award in 2024), who have successfully brought *Kajarī* songs to the international stage. While their contributions have been instrumental in popularising the genre globally, it is important to recognise that their

²¹ The *Padma Shri* is India's fourth-highest civilian award, instituted in 1954. It honors individuals for distinguished contributions in arts, science, literature, education, and social work. Conferred annually by the Government of India, it recognizes excellence and service to the nation.

performances also adopt the classicised, elite-driven adaptation of *Kajarī*, reflecting the broader transformation of folk traditions in contemporary cultural politics. This also highlights how their social position help them popularise the folksong on international stages.

Men's singing tradition appropriated the most fundamental feature of a folksong, which is its specific tunes. Moreover, to gain wider acceptance, they sanitised the perceived impurities of folksongs. They beautified/modified the genre by introducing and using various Indian and Western musical instruments, thus distorting the authentic form of *Kajarī* songs. Moreover, economic gain and individual recognition stimulate these changes, making it a more popular folk genre. Various government-funded organisations and their initiatives have played a crucial role in shaping and institutionalising the contemporary form of men's folk singing traditions. While many rural women are interested in participating in such programs and showcasing their singing heritage, several barriers prevent their inclusion. Their limited awareness of these organisations, restricted mobility beyond domestic spaces, and lack of formal training create significant obstacles to their involvement. During my fieldwork, several women voiced their desire for greater recognition and requested assistance amplifying their performances through digital platforms, such as YouTube and other social media platforms. Others sought guidance on registering their groups with government institutions, hoping to secure opportunities similar to those of their male counterparts. Their appeals highlight the pressing need for greater accessibility, institutional support, and digital outreach to ensure women's folk traditions' preservation and equitable representation.

The following section discusses how men adopted the first-person feminine voice and replaced women's desires and experiences. It furthers our understanding of how the changes in the folksongs occurred if the natural context and platform have changed.

6.6 Appropriating emotions

This section follows Stuart Blackburn and A.K. Ramanujan's (1986) argument that the function and meaning of folksongs change when the performative context and means of communication change. Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger (1996) explains how folksongs of Chhattisgarh are labelled by women as bad songs if taken out of their natural context. As previously discussed, women's folk traditions serve as a vital medium for expressing suppressed emotions and societal grievances. These performances provide an outlet for repressed thoughts and act as a dynamic space for the (re)construction and subversion of gender roles, driven by the principle of *swāntaḥ sukhāya* (for their own pleasure). However, when removed from their original cultural and ritualistic context, these songs transform, shifting from a means of catharsis and resistance to a commodified form of aestheticised entertainment, ultimately altering their primary function and socio-political significance. Professor Ram Narayan Tiwari, during his interview, said, '*Auraṭan ke gīt bhogal gīt hokhelā, aur ādamīn ke gīt jogal gīt hokhelā*' [Women's songs are the result of their experience, whereas men's songs are the outcome of their deliberate efforts]. (R.N. Tiwari, Personal communication, April 20 2023). Thus, it shows how male performers adopt and replace women's emotional experiences and voices.

In North India, a famous song in the popular media goes like '*Reliya bairan piya ko liye jaye re, Reliya bairan*' [This enemy train is taking my husband away]. This song highlights a significant problem of male-out migration, which is still prevalent in rural areas of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. In contrast, women remain left behind in their marital homes. Their feelings of longing and separation found a creative outlet through *Kajarī* song. However, when sung by a stage performer, keeping its original context aside, the entire song remains an object of musical perfection and aesthetics. Similarly, a male singer of Gaura village adopts the first-person

feminine voice, which male singers across the folk genres do. The following song deals with women's issues in the absence of their husbands, such as longing for intimacy, sexual frustration, and reuniting with their husbands, which is a lived reality of the north Indian left-behind women. However, I could not find this song (Make a gold nose-ring for me, then only I will work in the Fields) during the fieldwork, which suggests that the song might have been written by some male composer adopting and replacing the voice and emotions of a woman. It also hints at another variety of male *Kajarī* songs popularly known as *Shayari Kajarī* or *Badi Kajarī* (bigger *Kajarī*), as women's songs are shorter than *Shayari Kajarī*, starting with a poem-like composition. This composition gives a brief idea of the song's theme, beginning with the couplet:

*Sim barase badariyā, lekin barasane nā pāye sewati,
Pāpī papīhā sewati ko johe, kī eleven to twelveāravā me ādar gamiyaṣī.
Manabhāvanavā sajanavā bhavanā nā āye,
Ā nāhīm pathāye hame kōī patī.*

*Auratiyā kahale kā bā ho bhaiyā—
Kī barase rimajhima karī re badariyā nā,
Eka tā piyā pardesa, dūsara āyala nā sandesa (x2)
Tīsare jīyarā mare dhani, raṅga chunariyā nā.
Cauthē Madana satāwe, rahī-rahī jīyarā jarāwe (x2)
Pānchave Madana bāthelā mōra sharīriyā nā.
Chaṭhe sakhiyā ke malāla, sātave nika nā māngācāra (x2)
Aṭhave me mōrī sunī bā sejarīyā nā.
Nave jhūlā ke samaiyā, dāsave nika nā dukhadaiyā (x2)
Gyaraha bāraha wālī julumī umariyā nā.*

Kavi Chauhan, Gaura Bisen, 2021

Poetry: It is raining heavily, but not in the *Swati Nakshatra* (Arcturus constellation).
Hawk cuckoo is waiting for the rain of the *Swati Nakshatra*,
It gives a sudden chill in my heart.
Neither the ruthless husband came home, nor did he send any letter.

The woman is saying that black clouds are drizzling,
My husband is in a foreign land and did not send any message
This light green colour torments my heart.

Madan (God of love and desires) haunts me and inflicts my heart too.
Oh, Madan! Why do you torment my body?
I am not too fond of invocation and my friend's grief,
Furthermore, my bed is abandoned, too.
It is a time for swing, but I do not like this tormentor.
I am at a very tender age of eleven-twelve.

During the *Kanyādān* ritual, a ceremony in which a father, or in his absence, a brother, ceremoniously gives away the daughter in marriage, women traditionally sing a wedding song. Pawan Babu, an emerging singer from Bihar, shared one such song, stating, '*The song's original context is Sita's (Hindu goddess and female protagonist of the Ramayana) Kanyādān,*²² where she expresses the pain of a daughter for arranging her marriage at such a tender age' (P. Babu, Phone interview, 02 June 2023). This illustrates how historical narratives are invoked to validate folk traditions (Sarma, 2020). Furthermore, it underscores how male performers assert their authority over folk knowledge by anchoring it in the historical past. Ram Narayan Tiwari elaborated on this point:

Folk usually relates their art forms with the past to have a firm grounding in the present; therefore, they relate it with goddess Sita as they perceive their daughter in the form of Sita, who is an epitome of devotion as a wife, daughter, and daughter-in-law in the popular imagination (R. N. Tiwari, Phone interview, 02 June 2023).

Usually, women sing this song during the ritual of *Kanyādān* at weddings. The song contains 'avifauna imagery' (Sharma, 2020, p. 99) and symbols from women's immediate surroundings. The commonly used word (*papa*) for father replaced the word *baba*, which stands for father in rural areas, to suit the taste and familiarity of the modern audience. Pawan Babu's claim (through

²² *Kanyādān* is a significant Hindu wedding ritual where the bride's parents 'gift' their daughter to the groom, symbolizing the highest form of charity. Rooted in Dharmaśāstra texts, it signifies parental duty and blessings for the couple's future. Traditionally, it reflects cultural values of sacrifice and devotion.

stage performances and social media sites) to preserve and popularise the disappearing subcultures by taking them out of their localised context, simultaneously appropriating the emotions and silencing the other, harming them on two levels. It often takes away the agency of the people who thought they needed rescuing, thus making them mere puppets in the hands of the powerful other. In such rescues, however, the songs began to be associated with the rescuers more than the original performers (Sarma & Monteiro, 2019).

*Kacī āmvā toḍalā ho pāpā, bagiyā kailā ho sunavā.
Sundara dhiyā bisaralā, ē pāpā, aṅganavā kailā ho sunavā.
Rozī-rozī kahalā, ē bābā, dhiyavā baṛī janjālava. (x2)
Arē, ekko dina nā kahalā, ē bābā, patohiyā baṛī janjālava. (x2)
Kacī āmvā toḍalā ho pāpā, bagiyā kailā ho sunavā.
Kacī āmvā toḍalā ho bhaiyā, bagiyā kailā ho sunavā.
Sundara bahinī bisaralā, ē bhaiyā, aṅganavā kailā ho sunavā.
Kacī āmvā toḍalā ho pāpā, bagiyā kailā ho sunavā.*

Pawan Babu, Aurangabad (Bihar), 2022

Oh, Father! You pluck the raw mango and make your garden desolate,
Oh, Father! You forget your beautiful daughter and make the courtyard isolated.
You repeated this daily that your daughter is a big problem.
You did not say once that your daughter-in-law is in trouble.
Oh, Father! You pluck the raw mango and make your garden desolate,
Oh, brother! You pluck the raw mango and make your garden desolate,
Oh, brother! You forget your beautiful sister and make the courtyard isolated.
Oh, Father! You pluck the raw mango and make your garden desolate.

Similarly, appropriation of voice, emotion, and meaning can be seen in another song where a man assumes the first-person feminine voice and interprets the song, which may undermine the discourse of women's sexuality and contradict the women's opinion. The song portrays the woman's negotiation skills and demand for a nose ring for her labour in the field. When I asked the singer why she was asking for a nose ring, he said, '*It is not only about nose rings. It means some other thing, which I can not tell you*' (R. Vishwakarma, Personal communication, 29 June

2022), pointing towards physical intimacy and sexual demands. It contradicts the idea of women's demands for materialistic stuff such as jewellery, a common motif in *Kajarī* songs.

*Haṁkē jhulanī nā gaḍhāibā, mazā ḥusna kē nā pāibā.
Pās āibā nahīm, bīṭa jāī jawāniyā, piya, tab karab kisanīyā piya nā.
Haṁkē sōnē kē gaḍhāī dā, jhulanīyā piya, tab karab kisanīyā piya nā.*

Rajendra Vishwakarma, Gaura Bisen, 2021

If you do not give a nose ring, then you will not be able to have pleasure.
I will not let you come close to me; your youth will be wasted in hope.
Make me a gold ring; otherwise, I will not work in the field.

In summary, this section emphasises how altering the natural context of folk performances leads to shifts in both their meaning and function. Additionally, it highlights how men's *Kajarī* songs incorporate a contradictory interpretation by adopting the first-person feminine *I*, ultimately distorting the notions of women's autonomy, female perspective, and authentic interpretation. Therefore, when the original performative setting is removed, and contemporary advancements and technology in musical instruments replace conventional means of communication, these acts of appropriation impact the major goals of women's songs, compromising and significantly changing them.

The following section explains how this appropriation process of women's expressive tradition negatively impacts the originators of *Kajarī* folksongs. It deals with the appropriative harms which are associated with the ideas of women's invisibility in the public domain and rendering them voiceless.

6.7 Appropriative Harms

This section examines how men's appropriation of women's folk traditions affects the songs and the women who have carried them for generations. It explores the idea of appropriative harm,

showing how this process distorts the oral tradition and pushes its original singers into the shadows. The discussion also touches on misrecognition, highlighting how women's voices and contributions are often rendered invisible or silenced. Moreover, it sheds light on how men, benefiting from their social privilege, reshape the narrative around these folk traditions, detaching them from the women who nurtured them and claiming them as their own. In doing so, they not only rewrite history but also deny women the recognition they deserve.

Some scholars of appropriative harm theorise this aspect but also suggest that it differs from one type of cultural appropriation to another. Eric Hatala Matthes (2016) indicates that studies on cultural appropriation should focus on 'appropriative harms', such as silencing and epistemic injustice. James O. Young (2008) explores both the harms and potential benefits of cultural appropriation, particularly concerning insider art forms. The appropriation of *Kajarī*'s musical tradition falls under content appropriation, where an outsider claims cultural expressions as their own or incorporates them into their work (Lalonde, 2021). One of the most significant appropriative harms, primarily carried out by upper-caste male performers, is the erasure and misrepresentation of lower-caste women's voices, as discussed earlier in this chapter. This not only distorts the cultural and social realities of the women who originally shaped these songs but also marginalises their traditions, depriving them of both recognition and an audience. Furthermore, it leads to the theft of religious and cultural significance as male performers reinterpret and repurpose these songs, stripping them of their original meaning and ownership (Hart, 1997). Nowadays, digital media is flooded with audio-visual content, where the same music is produced with entirely new flair and fervour. Similarly, ceremonial aspects have disappeared from men's tradition of *Kajarī* singing, especially in urban spaces and on the stage.

Non-recognition pointed towards two potential cultural threats, such as voicelessness and invisibility. It involves ignoring the claim and appropriating the material without regard to the culture. Usually, the dominating group, here men in the case of *Kajarī* folksongs, are privileged and decide what is available for appropriation while silencing and building narratives to dissociate the folksong from the women, reflected in the stories and narratives shared by male performers during the interviews. Jata Sharma and Khokha Mirzapuri (a stage and *akhādā* singer from a Muslim community) shared different stories about the origin of the folksong. According to Khokha Mirzapuri, *'The tradition of singing Kajarī was started by four Muslim pirs (saints) who sang in the temple of goddess Vindhyavāsīnī on the birthday'* (K. Mirzapuri, Personal communication, 03 September 2022), thus trying to build a grand narrative that usually favours men. However, it also helped them shape the idea of harmony between Hindus and Muslims in the region, which is still visible in the singing tradition as some renowned Muslim singers sang *Kajarī* songs. Rural women are unfamiliar with the stories and legends about the genre across the region, further bringing in the danger of invisibility. Due to the lack of sufficient resources and proper training, the rural women of Mirzapur failed to disseminate and publicise their folksongs; therefore, they requested that I upload them to the internet and YouTube. They are very interested in seeing themselves online, but the lack of modern communication and training prevents them from entering the public domain and using virtual platforms.

On the contrary, many contemporary singers have learnt or taken the songs from a song collector/writer or a rural woman. They record the song in music studios with all modern musical instruments and artificial settings, and the financial gain accrues to these singers, producers, and appropriators. In contrast, rural women, the prime source of these traditional songs, remain out of the picture. This practice hints at two significant issues: the genre's potential to generate money

and its commodification in the marketised world. The commodification of art holds a negative meaning, as the women's *Kajarī* song has been conceptualised as '*swāntaḥ sukhāya*' (meaning joy for self within) or an outcome of their multifaceted emotions. However, the globalised market and its pressure negatively changed the tradition of folksongs. These changes lead to the distortion of the originality and authenticity of the genre, set the prevalence of written text, eliminate the need for oral transmission, and appropriate one of the available mediums through which they release their animosities and harmful emotions.

This concluding section explains how upper-caste men incur appropriative harm in the form of disowning and misrepresenting the original contributors, which further renders them invisible and voiceless. Moreover, it sheds some light on the commercialisation of *Kajarī* folksongs, negatively impacting the motive of '*swāntaḥ sukhāya*.'

6.8 Conclusion

This chapter highlights how upper-caste male performers adopted and modified the women's folksong *Kajarī*, mainly in Mirzapur and Bihar. Women conceive of folksongs as a medium to express their experiences and crises. Additionally, it serves other purposes, such as pedagogical and political, other than entertainment. It enables them to challenge gender norms and imagine themselves as defiant social being during the performance. Primarily, men of dominant caste groups such as Brahmins, Thakurs, and Srivastav started modifying and moulding women's singing traditions according to the taste of modern-day audiences, which was carried on by upward-moving caste groups such as Yadav (non-elite peasant pastoral caste), Sharma (barber) and Maurya. Rani Singh (graduate of B.Mus. and an actress in the Bhojpuri film industry) highlighted this act of restricting women's participation in cultural oral practices when she said:

Be it any singing, people considered it an art of lower status and bad. Women of the Brahmins and Thakurs are prohibited from performing. You will find *Dhangar/Dhankar* (shepherds classified as scheduled caste in Uttar Pradesh), *Yadav* and *Nishad* women singing these songs.

The study highlights the strategies employed by upwardly mobile caste men to regulate and transform women's folksongs, which are often marked by resistance and emotional expressiveness. While these male performers refine and aestheticise the songs, their modifications fundamentally alter the tradition, stripping it of its original performative context and subversive potential. The process of appropriation has had detrimental consequences for women's oral culture, leading to both economic and identity-related harms by depriving them of traditional spaces for performance and self-expression. Furthermore, government institutions tasked with preserving endangered art forms prioritise financial assistance and formal training for those who commercialise this folk heritage. At the same time, the original custodians receive no resources or support, further marginalising their role in sustaining these traditions. Women's folksongs are deeply intertwined with their lived realities and crises. However, with the removal of their performative and ritualistic context, these songs have been reinterpreted in ways that distort their original meaning. Male-authored *Kajarī* songs, for instance, often construct an idealised feminine prototype, reflecting men's expectations of women in roles such as wife, daughter, or mother. This raises important questions for future research on gendered representations in folk traditions. Ultimately, this entire act of appropriation subverts the original intent behind women's engagement with folk performance, namely, the creation of an alternative social imaginary and expression of female agency.

Moreover, the broader patriarchal and caste-based social structures continue to restrict women's presence in the professional domain of folk music. Most rural women refrain from appearing on stage due to normative expectations, family honour, and internalised self-censorship, which further reinforces their exclusion. Meanwhile, music producers have commercialised and commodified the tradition of *Kajari* folksongs. Folk singer Avinash Pandey, who shares his work on platforms such as YouTube, describes this transformation as a form of “bazarikaran”, a commercialisation driven purely by market interests. This chapter has examined how the intersections of caste, class, and gender shape the production, distribution, and appropriation of women's cultural expressions, marginalising rural women and their artistic contributions. Due to time constraints, I was unable to visit Bihar and conduct in-person interviews with performers, relying instead on phone interviews, an acknowledged limitation of this research. However, this study underscores the urgent need to critically examine the forces that push rural women's folk traditions to the margins while privileging male performers in the commercial and institutional domains.

The next concluding chapter summarises the key arguments raised in the previous chapters. It briefly discusses the limitations I faced and overcame in the research in general and during the fieldwork. This chapter will suggest a few things that can address the problems of those rural women, along with directions for future research.