CHAPTER 3: PLACE-MAKING, FESTIVAL, AND RITUALS IN MIRZAPUR

In Mirzapur, folksongs, festivals and performative cultures are closely associated with humans and their traditions. Collectively, they shape the cultural landscape of Mirzapur, India, focusing on the dynamic interplay between space, community, and identity. This chapter's objective is to understand how festive atmospheres and rituals function not merely as events but as active processes through which places are imbued with meaning, memory, and social significance. By examining specific performative strategies, including music, narratives, and embodied practices, this chapter uncovers how rural women address the issue of autonomous places, express collective identities, and create their alternative place within a complex socio-political context. Through detailed analysis of rituals, folksongs and cultural activities, the chapter highlights how performative acts create a sense of belonging and attachment to specific locales. These practices serve as a means of preserving cultural heritage and sustaining the subversive voices. The emphasis is on understanding how communities construct their environment through ritualised actions, transforming physical locations into symbolic landscapes reflecting their shared values and experiences. Ultimately, this exploration reveals how place-making, festival, and ritual are intertwined in a continuous cycle of cultural production, contributing to Mirzapur's rich and dynamic social fabric.

In July 2021, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Gaura Bisen (Mirzapur) to document *Kajarī* folksongs by rural women in the region. My understanding of these songs and their associated rituals was initially informed by oral narratives shared by my mother and grandmother. These narratives describe the fasting observed by women during the *Kajarī* festival and the ritual of *jaraī bonā*, in which barley seeds are planted in soil collected from a nearby pond or river and spread over a flat board. My first direct encounter with this ritual occurred in

Gaura village, where my cousin's daughter presented the sprouted barley. However, I had not witnessed the initial soil collection and seed planting process then. In the following year, I meticulously documented the entire ritual in Shivpur village with the assistance of Jata Shankar Sharma and Lalmani Devi. My association with Jata Shankar Sharma began in 2021 when I met him at the district court of Mirzapur. As a *President Awardee*[4] recognised for his contributions to *Caulara* dance, a male-performed variation of *Kajarī* accompanied by instruments such as the Indian drum and harmonium, Jatashankar Sharma facilitated my access to women in Shivpur and the neighbouring village of Madguda. In Shivpur, I was introduced to Lalmani Devi, a key informant within her community, who further facilitated my interactions with women in Madguda.

Establishing rapport with the community, particularly with female performers, required time and sensitivity. During my initial visit to Shivpur, women exhibited hesitancy in performing before a male outsider, later explaining that *Kajarī* songs are traditionally sung in private, gender-segregated spaces known as *Caughaṭ*, except during public performances on *Kajarī* and *Tīj* festivals. *Caughaṭ* is a designated platform-like structure in every village, serving as an exclusive space for women's *Kajarī* performances throughout the year. Observing rituals and spiritual practices provided a framework for analysing women's strategies for establishing and maintaining alternative spaces for artistic expression.

Over time, the women extended invitations for me to document their rituals and performances during significant occasions such as *Nāga-pańcamī̄*, *Ratjagā*, and the *Kajarī* festival. Despite being an outsider and male, their willingness to include me may have stemmed

[4] President Awardee is a person who receives the President Award (Rashtrapati Award) for his/her contribution in the fields of sports, art, military, literature, cinema, culture, science and technology, or scouting. The award is given by the President of India at the President's official residence.

from their enthusiasm for being recorded. Additionally, my relatively young age, comparable to their children's, may have contributed to their openness toward my presence in these culturally intimate settings.

3.1 Defining the Term Place and Space

Oxford English Dictionary refers to a place as a particular part or region of space: a physical locality, a locale, a spot, or a location. While conventional definitions of place often focus on objective physical locations, geographical perspectives emphasise the human experience as central to understanding place (Billinge, 1986; Paasi, 1991; Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1974). Philosophers like Heidegger (1972), Weil (2002), and Bachelard (1969) connect the concept of place to human existence within the universe. Ancient Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle distinguished between *chora* (χώρα) and *topos* (τόπος) to define space and place. *Topos* is a fixed, structured location that serves as a container for human experiences and is shaped by cultural, historical, and social influences. Aristotle viewed it as essential for physical existence, providing a reference point for actions and events. In contrast, *Chora* is fluid and dynamic, representing a space of potentiality where experiences and meanings emerge. Plato, in *Timaeus*, described it as an intermediary realm, fostering transformation. While *topos* aligns with place, *chora* corresponds to space, highlighting structured versus evolving spatial dimensions (Lane, 2001). Stokowski (2002) critiques the reduction of place to a mere geographical site, asserting that it is a social construct shaped by place-making, ideology, power dynamics, control, conflict, dominance, and resource allocation. Viewing place as an ongoing process highlights how users' activities produce its setting, making the remaking of place a fundamentally social endeavour (Arefi, 2014; Lombard, 2014). The distinction between space and place is foundational for place-making. However, space refers to functional physical areas, and a place emerges through a

relational understanding of space as a site of diverse stakeholders' social actions (Healey, 2001). This chapter argues that ritualistic acts, folksongs, and cultural practices transform physical spaces into meaningful places by embedding them with social significance through collective recognition, habitation, and lived experiences.

3.2 Place-Making: A Social Phenomenon

Place-making is a dynamic and socially constructed process that involves the congregation, interaction, and exchanges of social groups in both private and public spaces. It is not merely about the physical occupation of space but the transformation of abstract and empty locations into meaningful places embedded with social and symbolic significance. Patrick Desplat (2012) conceptualises place-making as transforming spaces by investing them with social and symbolic meanings, turning them from neutral or undifferentiated locations into significant cultural landscapes. Social constructionist scholars emphasise that place-making is a multifaceted process involving conscious and unconscious efforts to imbue meaningful spaces through daily activities, rituals, and collective practices. As Abe (2011) articulates, place-making is a continuous process through which individuals and groups shape their environments to reflect their dreams, passions, needs, and values while maintaining harmony with the physical and social landscape. Through such processes, geographical spaces are transformed into social spaces, reinforcing cultural traditions, social relationships, and a sense of community belonging.

Habibah et al. further elaborate on place-making as a tool for fostering social traditions and strengthening personal and communal ties, and argue that socio-cultural practices and strategies are essential in attributing meaning and value to places. Similarly, Relph (1976) highlights the reciprocal relationship between community and place, asserting that the two are

deeply interconnected, reinforcing the identity of the other. He notes that landscapes serve as expressions of collectively held beliefs, values, and interpersonal relationships, shaping and being shaped by human experiences (p. 35). This perspective aligns with Tuan's (1974) concept of *topophilia*, which refers to the emotional connections people develop with places through experience and interaction.

Religion and rituals play a significant role in place-making. Mazumdar and Mazumdar (1999) explore how the Hindu home, particularly various parts of it, becomes a crucial locus for women's social interaction, networking, self-identity, and community-based identity. Similarly, Eliade (1959) discusses how sacred spaces serve as anchors for religious and cultural identity, reinforcing the idea that place-making is not only a spatial but also a deeply symbolic and spiritual practice. Furthermore, scholars such as Massey (2013) argue that place-making is an ongoing, dynamic process influenced by historical, social, and political forces. She critiques the notion of places as static or fixed, emphasising that they are continually being reshaped through interactions with broader socio-economic and cultural forces. This perspective broadens the understanding of place-making by considering migration, globalisation, and power dynamics in shaping place identity.

In summary, place-making is an evolving social practice deeply intertwined with cultural practices, social interactions, and community values. It extends beyond the physicality of spaces to encompass the symbolic, emotional, and ritualistic dimensions contributing to identity formation and social cohesion. Whether through everyday routines, religious practices, or broader socio-political influences, place-making is a fundamental mechanism through which individuals and communities construct meaningful and enduring connections to their environments.

3.2.1 Why is it needed?

In this era of modernist and enlightened approaches, where religious attachment is considered to be an obstacle in the growth of an individual, an idea proposed by modernist and enlightenment thinkers is that distancing from such religious ties is a precondition for the individual and autonomous self (Halder, 2020). This chapter challenges the notion that religion or traditional practices inherently obstruct individual or communal growth and freedom. Instead, it argues that cultural practices and religion can serve as emancipatory sites, particularly for marginalised groups, offering spaces for agency and empowerment. If this is the case, it raises an important question: Why do women need religious or ritualistic spaces, and do these places foster a sense of empowerment? What strategies are involved in creating such spaces, and how do they benefit rural women? How do traditional performances and place-making contribute to women's agential capacity if they offer benefits?

Thus, answering the first question of women's need for such breathing spaces highlights the controversies surrounding the Supreme Court's ruling on the Sabarimala temple (which, on September 28, 2018, allowed women of all ages to enter the temple, overturning a long-standing gender-based restriction (*Indian Young Lawyers Association v. State of Kerala*, 2018) and the Padmavat movie[5] (directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali), which faced protests and called for a ban due to alleged historical distortions and misrepresentation of Queen Padmavati/Padmini (was the wife of Rana Ratan Singh, the ruler of Chittor, Rajsthan in the 13th-14th century) highlights broader issues of women's autonomy and identity. These controversies suggested that women are

[5] *Padmaavat* (2018) is a historical drama directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, inspired by Malik Muhammad Jayasi's epic poem *Padmavat*. It portrays Queen Padmavati (Deepika Padukone), Rana Ratan Singh (Shahid Kapoor), and Alauddin Khalji (Ranveer Singh), depicting Khalji's obsession with Padmavati and the Rajput resistance, culminating in her legendary jauhar (self-immolation).

often not seen as autonomous beings but as individuals shaped and constrained by societal norms. Another critical reason for studying women's religious acts and rituals is the lack of platforms for rural women to voice their issues and concerns. Unlike their urban counterparts, rural women often find themselves silenced due to societal constraints or self-imposed restrictions. Their speech, behaviour, and interactions are closely monitored by senior female family members, such as mothers-in-law or sisters-in-law, limiting their ability to express themselves freely.

Additionally, most public and private spaces are traditionally dominated by men (Chowdhry, 2014), who do not require specific spaces for self-expression. In contrast, women need secure and unobstructed spaces to express their emotions and frustrations, as societal expectations often suppress their voices. These traditional places become performative sites where women can articulate their suppressed thoughts, address dominant ideologies and display performative and theatrical schemes. This place-making process becomes crucial for rural women, as it helps them foster a sense of community, build networks, and construct both individual and collective identities. By participating in cultural practices, these women navigate the complexities of agency and identity within religious and societal frameworks. This chapter explores how women's cultural practices shed light on these issues, demonstrating the significance of places in their lives.

3.3 *Kajarī* Singers

To comprehensively grasp the conceptualisation of place-making as elucidated and enacted by rural women, it becomes imperative to delve into the contextual underpinnings and routine experiences intrinsic to these women's lives in rural settings. Here, Narayan's observations, as

articulated in a 1995 article, become an essential point, which builds upon Dundes's proposition dating back to 1966, where he explained the significance of contextual analysis in understanding the meaning of folksongs. However, to effectively contemplate the indigenous conception of these genres, it is imperative for the researcher to actively solicit the folklore's meaning directly from the folk (Narayan, 1993, p. 178). Therefore, this chapter briefly describes a few respondents from the different villages of the Mirzapur region whose insights help conceptualise place-making during the *Kajarī* festival/singing.

In Gaura village (2021), I stayed with my uncle *(fufa Ji)*, whose mother, Chamela Devi, is a 95-year-old widow from the Chauhan caste (Kshatriya caste, an upper caste in India). She introduced me to the festival, its singing traditions, and its duration. As my key respondent, she also facilitated my interactions with other women in the village and helped establish a strong rapport with them. Perhaps my uncle's reputation and grandmother's seniority and respect among other married women helped me get along with the women, which was impossible without these factors. Moreover, she is a storehouse of *Kajarī* songs. She has three sons, two of whom belong to the male *Kajarī* singing tradition. I interviewed one of them (Kavi Chauhan), but could not record the performance of the eldest son due to his sudden demise in 2018. Even in her 90s, the older woman performed all her daily chores while working in the field. She informed me that she learned most of the songs either from the senior female members or through books brought by her father. She remembered innumerable songs she could sing for hours, but could not sing more than 3-4 songs in a single stretch due to her old age. Most of her songs revolved around the themes of love or spirituality. Moreover, she expressed concerns about the *Kajarī* festival's dying tradition, rituals, and folksongs. Further, she said, *'During my time, it was in full swing, but nowadays, Kajarī (singing tradition) has disappeared'* (C. Devi, Personal Communication, 06

July 2021). She specifically used the term '*Uthan'*, meaning 'disappearance' or extinction of the genre.

I interviewed another prominent figure of the singing group in Gaura village. In her late 60s, Malti Devi belonged to the Maurya caste, a caste associated with vegetable farming. In rural areas of Mirzapur, most of the population indulges in the farming of vegetables, as in the case of all four villages, such as Gaura, Bandhawa, Shivpur, and Madguda. All the women in her surroundings respect her due to her age and knowledge of songs, rituals, and worldly wisdom. Another reason might be her wealthy status, as her sons have tractors through which all the agricultural fields of the village are ploughed. She leads almost all the singing sessions because of her excellent knowledge of *Kajarī* songs. She was one of the first women to inform me about the rituals of place-making, the ritual of planting barley seeds, and their symbolic significance. Over time, most of *Kajarī*'s tunes have been lost. Similarly, songs that detail this ritual are also lost.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the Maurya caste populates the village. However, two or three families of the Vishwakarma caste are the traditional village blacksmiths and carpenters. Meera Devi belongs to the same caste and is a 35-year-old housewife. However, her husband is neither a blacksmith nor a carpenter but works for daily wages. Her experiences and worldview compelled me to think about their self-censored behaviour, the surveillance of women in rural settings, and the significance of folk cultures in women's lives. Although she is not a skilled singer, she told me to lower her voice while singing a complaining song during her interview. She was afraid other house members would listen to her song, which could be offensive. It gives the impression that these folk genres are instrumental in presenting an

alternative voice/image of rural women that defies the dominant constructions of gender and stereotypes.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section explains how women use their rituals, folksongs, and cultural activities as strategies in a festive framework for creating their own private and uncontrolled place. The subsequent section details the performative context of *Ratjagā* in Mirzapur, a distinctive feature of *Kajarī* folksongs in the region. It examines how *Ratjagā's* association with narratives of the goddess *Vindhyācala/Vindhyavāsinī* facilitates the creation of place and the articulation of alternative conceptions of women's identities, diverging from conventional representations such as stereotypes. The last section briefly discusses the strategies (such as laughter, community, and language) women utilise to ease off the surveillance and patriarchal control, which help them perform, transgress, and challenge the dominant values of rural society.

3.4 Place-Making Strategies: Rituals and Folksongs

As Lang (1998) defined, rituals are religious acts performed in fixed sequences involving gestures, words, and objects. Michel de Certeau (1984) conceptualises ritual as a foundational element that provides space and serves as a performative field and theatrical base for communal actions. Platvoet (2006) further argues that religious rituals contribute to sustaining and solidifying communities. Expanding on this notion, Catherine Bell (1992) introduces the idea of ritualisation as a strategic practice that differentiates and privileges specific actions within a cultural context. She emphasises that rituals are not merely repetitive acts but are deeply embedded in power structures, influencing social hierarchies and gendered performances. Similarly, Victor Turner (1969) views ritual as a liminal space where individuals, particularly

women, negotiate identities and social roles through symbolic performances. In the context of women's ritualistic performances, Sally Ann Ness (1992) highlights how embodied practices in specific cultural and spatial contexts shape gendered experiences. Ness argues that place and ritual intertwine to create performative acts that both reinforce and subvert traditional gender roles. Similarly, this section argues that ritual as a structured yet dynamic form of performance, preserves communal identity and serves as a space where gendered expressions and power relations are continuously enacted and redefined.

In Mirzapur, the tradition of *Kajarī* singing is said to extend throughout the *Sāvan* month. Historically, agricultural women would sing *Kajarī* while planting paddy, embedding their labour within a rhythmic and communal musical practice. However, this tradition is now on the verge of extinction. My fieldwork in Mirzapur did not reveal any instances of such singing during agricultural activities, suggesting that the mechanisation of farming, resulting in reduced reliance on human labour, has contributed to the decline of this oral tradition. In Bandhawa village, Shankar Maurya, a male *Kajarī* singer, expressed concerns about the diminishing presence of this folk genre. He said, *'Modernization and the widespread availability of ready-made entertainment, such as television and mobile phones, are the primary reasons for the decline of this cultural art form'* (S. Maurya, Personal Communication, 08 September 2021). As a result, *Kajarī* has largely transitioned into a festival-specific genre rather than an integral part of daily rural life in the current situation.

The act of place-making, rituals, and festivals are intertwined in the Mirzapur region during the *Sāvana* month because the festival functions as a frame that highlights the ritualistic nature and further provides rural women with an opportunity to create their place where they sing, dance, enact and laugh without any surveillance or patriarchal control. Cummins et al., for

example, propose the development of research approaches that focus on not only 'the life course of individuals, but also the social and economic trajectories of the places which they inhabit' (2007, p. 1,832). Therefore, creating their place is sociologically crucial in decoding the individual or communities' ties to their respective place and meaning-making processes. However, one must understand the place before comprehending the place-making process.

The festival starts with women's rituals and cultural activities in Mirzapur villages. The preparations for the *Kajarī* festival commence on the day of *Nāga-pańcamī* (celebrated on the 5th day of the bright half of the lunar month of *Sāvana*) and continue for thirteen days, culminating in the festival's grand celebration, procession, singing and dancing. While *Nāga-pańcamī* is observed nationwide through offerings of milk and puffed rice to snake deities (often represented in poster form) (Pradhan, 2001), the festival takes on a unique dimension in Mirzapur. Here, it is directly associated with the ritual planting of barley seeds and the commencement of *Kajarī* folksong performances. Women's festival preparations, encompassing rituals, songs, and communal practices, reflect their agency in shaping cultural spaces and sustaining oral traditions. Studying these practices provides insight into the dynamic processes of place-making, wherein women negotiate, create, and preserve spaces for cultural expression within their socio-religious frameworks.

The *Kajarī* festival is women-centric and associated with different sites in rural areas, such as the river Ganga or nearby ponds, *Caughaṭ*, *Thaiya*, and the entire village as a created performative place. Women's festivals and rituals unite all these local sites during the festivity. Through their rituals and songs, women continue the culture of invoking and worshipping the village deities and goddesses. Women deify these inanimate sites through rituals and cultural practices, and worship the regional and specific place deity before performing the songs and

performative acts. In 2022, I was invited by the women of Shivpur village on the *nāga-pañcamī* to record the preparatory activities and rituals. They told me to wait when I reached there, as women were performing their daily chores and got ready to bring soil (known as the ritual of *mātī lānā*) from the river Ganga. Therefore, I went to the bank and recorded some male *Kajarī* songs centring on patriotism, chivalry, and dowry, which acted as an impetus to probe deeper into the male singing tradition of Mirzapur. After an hour, I rejoined the women and observed that they were well-groomed and well-dressed, accompanied by young girls, as they mainly performed the ritual of bringing soil. Kususm Devi said, *'When we sing and offer prayers, the soil wakes up. It is not just soil; it listens and feels. We call it with devotion, make it sacred, and it gives us life. This is how we honour our dharti maa'* (K. Devi, Personal Communication, 10 August 2023). They continued singing *Kajarī* songs on their way to the river and dug the soil from the bank to plant the barley seeds. I asked them to sing a song that detailed this ritual, but they could not remember any such *Kajarī* song. However, while interviewing women, I found a song explaining the ritual in Gaura village in 2023. Malti Devi sang the song, introducing the terms associated with bringing soil from the river/ponds, *Caughaṭ,* and their significance in rural settings.

Sabkara tā betī jalī maṭī leve, hamārī betī nā,
Tarase āpane sasuravā, hamārī betī nā.
Bābā tā gaye Caughaṭāwā ki roye lage nā,
Mukh deyi ke rumāliyā, ho ki roye ho lage nā.
Sabkara tā betī jalī jarāī boye, hamārī betī nā,
Tarase āpane duāravā, hamārī betī nā.
Māyā tā gaye Caughaṭāwā ki roye lage nā,
Mukh deyi ke rumāliyā, ho ki roye ho lage nā.

Malti Devi, Gaura (Mirzapur), 2021

Everyone's daughter brings soil, but
My daughter is yearning for her marital home.

Father went to the *Caughaṭ* and started crying,
Covering his mouth with a handkerchief while crying.
Everyone's daughter plants *jaraī* (barley seeds),
but my daughter is yearning for her marital home.
Mother went to the *Caughaṭ* and started crying,
Covering her mouth with her fringe while crying.

It is customary for married women to return to their natal homes during the monsoon season to celebrate the *Kajarī* festival and participate in its associated rituals. The abovementioned song portrays a mother's sorrow as she laments her daughter's absence, listing the rituals her daughter cannot partake in during the festivities. Moreover, these rituals are located in their consciousness and have symbolic significance. As Malti Devi further told me, planting barley seeds in the soil indicates a way to check whether someone's crop will grow that year, symbolically. She called it '*parakḥ,'* meaning inspection, and said, *'If it grows well, then you can expect a good crop; but if it does not grow well or becomes pale, then it is a sign of bad crop in the season'* (M. Devi, Personal Communication, 25 August 2023). Similarly, on the *Kajarī* festival, girls submerged the *jaraī* in the same water bodies, returning what they had taken from nature. These cultural practices indicated how their lives, festivals, and rituals are intermingled with nature, further hinting at deep ecology. It encourages humans to view the elements of the environment as having inherent values that must be protected and preserved.

Along with deifying the place, they also revered the *jaraī* plant, which they call *jaraī* Mata (Goddess *jaraī*). Heeravati Devi personified the plant by stating, '*Women offer water and songs as food and believe they will grow as you sing. If you do not sing, then she would be on fast'* (H. Devi, Personal Communication, 29 July 2023). Although rural women might not be familiar with the idea/word of music therapy, they knew that if they sang *Kajarī* songs, the songs would support the plant's growth. Therefore, women sing every night to offer food to *jaraī* mata.

Researchers like Bose (1902, 1926) proved that plants respond to sounds, and Subramanian et al. (1969) and Coghlan (1994) also observed that melodies help plants grow better.

Figure 3.1 shows the shoots of barley seeds planted on the *Nāga-paṅcamī* festival and revered as *jaraī* mata.

Source: The researcher took the picture in Gaura village during his fieldwork in 2022.

Women sang *Kajarī* songs to invoke the local deities for an hour and returned to their homes, where young girls spread the soil on a wooden flat board to provide a base and plant the barley seeds in it. Adult women usually begin singing on the same day each evening, offering their songs to Goddess *jaraī* and *Caughaṭ*. Women actively engage in religious practices and performative strategies to carve out their own ritual space and cultivate a sense of communal belonging, both among themselves and within their broader social and spatial environment.

Women deify this space by touching the ground as a gesture of worship before entering the designated space. They offer their songs, grains, and puffed rice before the performance because they consider it a living being and goddess who must be worshipped and pacified for everyone's well-being and a smoother performative experience. Women use a specific term for the place goddess, which is *Thaiya.* Another ritualistic aspect that transformed this physical site into a private performative place is the songs that start their singing session. They told me they started their singing streak with five spiritual/religious songs to invoke and worship Thaiyacal/village deities, such as goddess *Vindhyācala*, the earth goddess, and goddess *Kali*. Sometimes, they also start with *Devi Pachra*, another variety of women's devotional songs. The ritual songs known as *Devis* are commonly referred to as *Pachra*. These traditional songs honour and welcome the seven *Devis* before any significant Bhojpuri ceremony and are sung in upper-caste and lower-caste households (Nayyar, 2024). Lalmani Devi sang a song about the invocation and deification of the place before starting their singing session. She said:

> This is not just a physical space but a place occupied by the goddesses, and we offer our songs along with flowers and grains and do not want to offend the goddess, so the goddess leaves the place happily without negatively affecting the family members of the women's house.

Manta Devi also explained the importance of space (*Caughaṭ*) by stating that the place can not be shifted as it is reserved.

> *Dhana ethiyan kī ṭhaiyā re bhuĩyā, dhana ethiyan devhar loye.*
> *Calī mālinīyā ṭhaiyā manāve le, delahīn bhara phūla ho.*
> *Dalahīn-dalahīn phūla chaḍhāve, ḍhabavān-ḍhabavān pāna loye.*
> *Le tā na letu Māī hamārī manautī, hasata-khelata ghara jāī loye.*
> *Ekkau bāra jo bakai Bhavānī Māī, nauā na lebu tohara loye.*
>
> Lalmani Devi, Shivpur (Mirzapur), 2022

Oh, lady, here is thaiya (appointed place), earth; oh, lady, here is god's place.

The female gardener went to pacify the goddess Earth.
She pours many flowers and plenty of betel leaves.
Oh, goddess, please accept my offer and go happily.
I will not take your name if any harm comes to my family.

An artist, Poonam Mishra of All India Radio, has shared another version of the same song with a slight variation. She affirmed, *'Dhunmuniya is the oldest form of women's Kajarī songs (Kajarī ke mai dhunmuniya)'* (P. Mishra, Personal Communication, 12 September 2022). As I recorded, women perform *dhunmuniya Kajarī* by forming two semi-circular groups facing each other. One group bends forward while singing the first line and bends backwards, whereas the second group does the same action by repeating the same line and continues throughout the song. In 2022, I recorded Poonam Mishra's song, who said, *'I am going to sing the song with which the singing began'* (P. Mishra, Personal Communication, 12 September 2022).

Dhana ethiyan kī ṭhaiyā re bhuĩyā, dhana ethiyan devhar loye.
Tohare śaraṇa Māīyā, khelu Kajarīyā, bāravā nā bāke hamāra loye.
Ṭhaiyā manāve calī mālinīyā, le delahīn bhara phūla loye.
Kethuā kā ho delahī loye, kethuā kā haū phūla loye

Oh, lady, here is thaiya (appointed place), earth; oh, lady, here is god's place.
I will play *Kajarī* at your doorstep so that no harm can come to me.
The female gardener went to pacify the goddess with a basket of flowers.
Which material is used to make the basket, and which flower is used?

The song underscores the regional variations within folk traditions, evident even in compositions from the same locality. It emphasises the significance of local deities, the invocation of the earth goddess, and the blessings sought for the successful completion of rituals, ensuring the prosperity and well-being of one's kin. Through collective effort, women integrate traditional rituals and expressive arts to infuse vitality into animate and inanimate elements, reflecting their deep connection with the natural environment.

The following section explores the performative aspects of *Ratjagā*, a night of wakeful observance central to the lives of rural women in Mirzapur. It examines the ritualistic and artistic expressions that create a space for uninhibited performances, fostering a sense of agency and communal solidarity.

3.5 The Night of *Ratjagā* and Unsurveillance Place

It is mentioned in the previous chapter that their initial songs are dedicated to the goddess *Vindhyācala/Vindhyavāsinī,* and the entire festival of *Kajarī* is associated with the goddess whose other name is *kajjalā*. Similarly, *Ratjagā* is a prominent event held on the eve of the *Kajarī* festival. *Ratjagā* is typical in Indian villages, where women sing and dance in private spaces during childbirth, marriage, and the *Kajarī* festival (Prasad, 2010). In Mirzapur, *Ratjagā* is celebrated by women on the twelfth day of *nāga-pañcamī*, which is unique in a way that the night is mainly celebrated on the auspicious occasion of the birth date of Goddess *Vindhyavāsinī*. When I asked about their perception of the *Ratjagā* festival, Rajkumari Devi said, *'We sing Kajarī throughout the night. Women assume the roles of bride, groom, washerman and roam around the village. They encircle the entire village and indulge in unfiltered activities'* (R. Devi, Personal Communication, 12 September 2023). It hints at the private theatrical tradition of the folk genre on the night of *Ratjagā*, which I will discuss in the upcoming chapter. In 2022, I visited the temple to observe the celebration and saw a massive crowd of devotees for *darśana*. At the back of the temple, famous stage singers sang *Kajarī* songs (devotional) on the stage amidst the proper lighting, instrument players, and crowd. I returned after visiting the temple and experienced a different scene in the Shivpur village. Rural women started their performance after finishing their routine cooking and serving the family members, reinforcing the stereotypical image of women tied to the domestic domain. Women gathered at a site that, according to them,

was a sacred place; therefore, every single woman touched the earth as a gesture of respect/worship before joining the group or singing a song and performing a similar gesture when they ended their performance.

Another important aspect of this created/deified place is its status as an empowered female space. However, the sense of power is transient and limited to the festive and performative sessions. This place is 'gender-secluded' (Halder, 2020, p. 71), where *'No men can enter'* (L. Devi, Personal Communication, 13 August 2023), according to Manta Devi. The *Caughaṭ* is entirely unregulated and free from men's presence, although there is a lurking presence of men. This women-centric place enabled them to perform and address various discourses on gender, class and societal impositions on the night of *Ratjagā* without any reserve.

The performance of rural women often aligns with spatial distinctions between domestic and public spheres, as discussed by scholars such as Das (1996), Uberoi (1997), and Agnes (2001). The site of *Caughaṭ*, located within the village near homes or courtyards, serves as a performative space where women engage in interior (domestic) genres of folk traditions. These performances are deeply embedded in the everyday practices of women, reflecting their negotiation of cultural and social norms. Scholars like Wadley (2005) and Flueckiger (1996) highlight how rural women's folk performances blur the boundaries between private and public, challenging the conventional separation of gendered spaces. While men's performances are often staged in explicitly public venues, women's ritualistic and performative acts gradually extend beyond domestic settings, asserting their agency within the broader communal sphere. For example, after performing all night, I observed that women and girls (who played the roles of both audience members and performers) encircled the village at dawn, sang while roaming around the village, and then came to the same spot to touch the ground (*Caughaṭ*) to conclude

their performance in 2023. This act is called *gāmv̆a goṭhanā*, meaning 'encircling the village.' The women's movement marked the boundary between the village's inner and outside. In addition, it made references to appeasing evil spirits and malevolent entities to ensure everyone's well-being, undermining the notion that men predominate in Indian society's public areas. Moreover, women's performance shifted to the marketplace on the next day of *Ratjagā*, celebrated as the *Kajarī* festival. Santoshi Devi said, *'They accompanied the young girls who went to submerge the barley plants in the pond known as Kajarahava Pond. They accompanied the young girls, which seemed like a procession on the day of Kajarī'* (S. Devi, Personal Communication, 13 August 2023). They sang, danced, and demanded money from every man around them. Women attended the annual fair at *Kajarahava* Pond during the *Kajarī* festival, returned to their places, and ended the almost two-week-long performative tradition.

The festive occasion, ritualistic activities, and performance strategies are conducive to creating their own empowering and accessible space, traditionally available as a physical site for innovation and improvisation. However, the technologically male-dominated world compromises and occupies these traditional spaces in the modernised and globalised world. Therefore, the process of place-making becomes sociologically essential for understanding women's sense of place, the potential of their subcultures, and identity constructions. These created sites enabled them to transiently step out of the patriarchal fear, transgress the gender norms, and achieve a cathartic effect through their complete immersion in the performance.

3.6 Strategies for Alleviating Tension in Performative Spaces

This section briefly explores the strategies utilised by women to lessen the patriarchal fear and the strained atmosphere of the performative place. Women's subcultures are often characterised

by bawdy humour, laughter, unfiltered language, and transvestism, as evident in various folk performances of Uttar Pradesh, such as *gārī*, *Nāktā*, and *Kajarī. Gārī* is another variety of folksongs sung by women on the wedding day, and the women of the bride's party hurl abuses at the groom's party, including the groom. The song contains abusive content and jokes that create hearty laughter (Gupta, 2001, p. 87). Similarly, *Nāktā* is a women-centric genre entirely owned by women, where women play the roles of both the audience and performers. This particular genre explicitly details the sexual acts after marriage, problems, and household issues of a married woman (Srivastava, 1991, p. 278). The entire performative culture is characterised by hysterical laughter and funny digressions. Laughter and humour are conceptualised as a healing and communal act that tames anxiety and unifies the audience (Dougher, 2010).

In the same way, humour, laughter, and mockery are standard features of *Kajarī* songs. Moreover, women use obscene and abusive language, insulting tones for men, and unrestrained laughter as strategic tools to lessen the seriousness of the place. These tropes help them achieve the status of unfiltered and free social beings who were given free rein to use disrespectful tones, uncontrolled body movements, and free speech during the performance. During the night of *Ratjagā*, as I documented their songs and enactments, I observed a noticeable restraint in their laughter, particularly during humorous moments. Initially subdued and measured, their amusement seemed tempered, perhaps by social or contextual constraints. However, as the performance unfolded, this restraint gradually dissipated. Their laughter grew increasingly unrestrained, at times so overwhelming that it obscured the very lyrics they were performing, thus blurring the line between structured performance and spontaneous emotional release. Rajkumari Devi was singing a song that mocked the husband and praised the other members of the house, such as the father-in-law and brother-in-law. She said, *'While singing songs, we laugh,*

tease, and play with words. Our jokes and mimicry lighten the mood, making the performance lively. Even in sorrowful songs, humour binds us, easing burdens and bringing us closer (R. Devi, Personal Communication, 14 August 2022).

> *Sasurū boyele dhana dhanaīyā, bhasurū boyele masūrī;*
> *Hamāra saīyā bakchoḍvā boyelā titalī.*
>
> Rajkumari Devi, 40 Yrs.., Shivpur, 2022

> Father-in-law sows Paddy, and husband's elder brother sows red lentils;
> My husband is a senseless/idiot fellow who sows *Titli*.

Language is a social practice, and it is socially constituted and controlled by social and historical forces beyond the prerogative of individuals, especially women in rural contexts. Dale Spender (1985) argues that the dominant group constructs the world/reality through sexist language, which is in their interest. Moreover, women's language is sometimes controlled by normative behavioural patterns and sometimes due to their self-regulated behaviour. However, the question of language becomes significant when it comes to the use of language in folk cultures, such as folksongs, proverbs, riddles, and stories. It can be argued that women's language use during singing and performance completely differs from the language they use daily. Their folk speech is replete with abuses, improvised additions, and symbols from the different domains to voice their desires, challenge the idea of masculinity, and sometimes mockery of their own body, which will be thoroughly discussed in the upcoming chapters.

Women in rural settings do not have social mobility compared to those in urban spaces. Therefore, cross-dressing and role-reversals, integral parts of their performative culture, become essential tools for women-oriented folk performances to achieve a more significant movement in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Moreover, this transvestism is seen as a threat to gender and class order and is also associated with social upheaval (Ramet, 1996). Performers associated with the folk

theatrical performances use this strategy of transvestism as they perform in the middle of a rural crowd. In *Natka*, cross-dressing is a strategic performative device, wherein a girl dressed as a bride occupies the domestic space in the total absence of men. This deliberate exclusion of male presence underscores the performance's subversion of gender norms within a controlled environment. Similarly, in *Kajarī* performances, women actively assume multiple identities, such as bride, groom, Seth[6], and son, particularly during the *Ratjagā* night. However, the performative scope expands further during the *Kajarī* festival itself, where women take on more authoritative or culturally significant roles, impersonating figures such as a police officer, the revered saint Sai Baba, and even a caricatured representation of a young urban male. This shifting spectrum of impersonation highlights the fluidity of identity and the performative agency of women within these ritualistic spaces. The male attire helped them exercise agency in the androcentric world that controlled the women's movement inside and outside the home. Moreover, this transvestism enabled them to perform in the marketplace and in front of male onlookers and passers-by without having the obligation of adhering to the established norms. Therefore, women's folk speech, i.e., symbols and metaphors, obscene and abusive content, funny digressions, resulting hysterical laughter, and cross-dressing function as strategic devices that collectively help them create their autonomous places, sustain the marginalised voices and lighten the serious and controlled atmosphere of the created places.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has explored how women's participation in *Kajarī* festivals, rituals, and folk performances functions as a powerful act of place-making, allowing them to carve out autonomous spaces within a rigid patriarchal framework. These performances do more than

[6] The word Seth is a local term used for wealthy person or a merchant in Indian context.

provide recreation—they serve as strategic platforms for building networks, fostering solidarity, and articulating otherwise repressed emotions and grievances. By transforming festive settings into gender-segregated sites, women momentarily escape societal control, using language, laughter, and ritualistic expressions to subvert male surveillance in both public and private spheres. Despite the relative tolerance from the broader society due to the traditional and festive framing of these acts, the underlying resistance remains potent. My fieldwork highlights how women's collectivity, evident in their preference for group performances over solitary singing, reinforces a shared sense of belonging and agency. These communal interactions, rooted in everyday experiences and rituals, construct an emotional and performative counter-space that challenges dominant structures. Notably, the *Ratjagā* night vigils, characterised by the absence of male presence and social filtration, offer a subversive terrain where women's voices gain amplified force. In the following chapter, I will examine how these nocturnal performances become sites of resistance and reimagination within patriarchal constraints.