Creating Place: The Role of Festival, *Kajarī* Folk Songs, and Rituals in Mirzapur

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Abstract

This article examines the role of the *Kajarī* festival and folk songs in the socio-cultural lives of rural women in Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh, India. It explores how the festival provides a unique space for rural women to assert their autonomy within a patriarchal society. Through ethnographic fieldwork, including the documentation of rituals, folk songs, and cultural activities, this study analyses the *Kajarī* festival as a place-making process. It argues that women use the performative space of *Kajarī* songs to express themselves and their experiences using strategies rooted in their traditions and rituals. The paper concludes that the *Kajarī* festival and its songs function as a critical outlet for emotional expression, social interaction, and self-expression, offering women a form of agency within their rural context.

Keywords: Kajarī festival, place-making, *Ratjagā*, rural women, self-expression

Introduction

In July 2021, I visited my uncle's village, Gaura Bisen, in Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh, India, to collect *Kajarī* folk songs from rural women. My mother and grandmother had told me stories about these songs, the women's fast during the *Kajarī* festival, and the ritual of planting barley seeds (*jaraī bonā*) in soil collected from nearby ponds or rivers. That year, I missed the ritual, but I documented it the next year in Shivpur village with the help of Jata Shankar Sharma, a renowned figure in the field of *caulara* dance who facilitated my introduction to the women of Shivpur and

Madguda; and Lalmani Devi, who further assisted in connecting me with the women in Madguda.

During my visit to Shivpur in 2022, the women were hesitant to perform in front of a male outsider. They later explained that *Kajarī* songs are traditionally sung in private, gender-segregated spaces known as *Caughaṭa*. *Caughaṭa* is a physical space, a dais-like structure that exists year-round and is reserved for women's *Kajarī* performances. Despite their initial reservations, the women later invited me to record their rituals, including the *nāga-pañcamī* (snake worship), *Ratjagā* (night vigil), as well as the *Kajarī* festival. Their willingness to involve me in their women-centric rituals and songs might have been driven by a combination of excitement about being recorded and my being similar in age to their own children.

Rural women in Eastern Uttar Pradesh and some parts of Bihar sing *Kajarī* songs throughout the monsoon months (June to September) (Jassal, 2012). In Mirzapur, the tradition is observed during the *sāvana* month (July to August). Historically, agricultural women sang *Kajarī* songs while planting paddy. However, this tradition appears to be waning due to mechanised farming, which has led to less dependency on human labour. Shankar Maurya, a male singer of *Kajarī* songs from Bandhawa village, attributes the decline to "modernisation and ready-made means of entertainment, such as television and mobile phones" (S. Maurya, personal communication, 8 September 2021). Due to these changes, the singing of *Kajarī* songs has diminished and is now primarily a festive genre.

In the villages of Mirzapur, women begin the rituals and preparations for the *Kajarī* festival on the day of *nāga-pañcamī*. The entire period spans 13 days and culminates on the festival day itself. While *nāga-pañcamī* is celebrated nationwide with offerings of milk and puffed rice to snake idols (Pradhan, 2001), it is the association of this observance with barley seed planting and the onset of *Kajarī* singing that distinguishes Mirzapur's celebration. The women's festival preparations, which include rituals, songs, and performative traditions, highlight the cultural activities tied to place-making. The primary aim of this study is to examine the *Kajarī* festival, rituals, and folk songs of rural women through an ethnographic lens. It offers a detailed analysis of the festival's socio-cultural importance and documents the relationship between cultural practices, place-making, and self-expression.

The act of place-making, rituals, and festivals are linked in the Mirzapur region during the *sāvana* month. The *Kajarī* festival, in particular, acts as a framework that highlights the ritual practices while providing rural women with a space to sing, dance, perform, and laugh freely, unencumbered by surveillance or patriarchal control. This opportunity to create their own space is essential for understanding their individual and collective ties to the region and their meaning-making processes. Cummins et al. (2007) advocate for research approaches that focus not only on "the life course of individuals, but also the social and economic trajectories of the places which they inhabit" (p. 1832). However, one must first understand *place* before comprehending the place-making process.

Conventionally, place is defined as an objective location characterised by physical attributes, but geographers and philosophers offer a more nuanced

perspective. Geographers consider place as a space inhabited by humans, emphasising the significance of human experience (Paasi, 1991; Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1974). Philosophers associate the idea of place with human dwelling in the universe (Bachelart, 1969; Heidegger, 1972; Weil, 1952). Similarly, in ancient Greece, Plato and Aristotle used the terms *chora* and *topos* for "the space" and "place," respectively. *Topos* refers to a container that must be filled with human experience. In contrast, *chora* emphasises the capacity of a place to connect with the immediate human experience through its unique energy and potency (Lane, 2001).

Stokowski (2002) opposes the notion of place as a geographical site and argues that it is a social construct shaped by place-making, ideology, power dynamics, control, conflict, dominance, and the allocation of social and physical resources. In a similar vein, Arefi (2014) and Lombard (2014) view place as a process, where the setting is a product of the user's activities: remaking a place is thus a social act involving people. The distinction between "space" and "place" is crucial for understanding place-making. Although space refers to the functional physical setting, place involves a relational understanding of space as a site of social actions by various stakeholders (Healey, 2001). When people or groups inhabit and engage with spaces, they transform them into places.

Literature Review

Scholars have studied the cultural expressions of non-literate communities to understand the relationship between oral tradition, marginalised societies, and traditional spaces. For instance, Sahai-Achuthan (1987) explored the folk songs of Uttar Pradesh, including *Kajarī* folk songs. She defined *Kajarī* as a seasonal folk song often adopted by semi-classical singers, typically focusing on themes of love, separation, and nature. Srivastava (1991), who also categorised *Kajarī* as a seasonal or festive song, associated it with the longing and separation experienced by women during the monsoon season.

Jassal (2012) examined *Kajarī* songs in the Jaunpur district of Uttar Pradesh and conceptualised them as folk songs of female agricultural labourers. She argues that the songs provide a platform for women to challenge gendered labour divisions and to express their emotional burdens, particularly in the context of male migration and limited resources. She elaborates on how women use these songs to take breaks and ease the burden of their demanding work. Singh (2019) also investigated women's folk songs in Bihar, including *Kajarī, Jatsaari, Ropani,* and *Sohani*. Her research explored how the songs convey women's experiences of being left behind due to men's migration, drawing attention to emotional, material, and social hardships, including restricted access to needs, evolving gender roles, and complex sexual dynamics. Singh (2019) concluded that the songs function as a safety valve that allows women to release animosities and repressed emotions without disrupting the social order.

While these studies offer valuable insights into how women's longing and separation are reflected in their folk songs, the area of creating alternative places through *Kajarī* folk songs and rituals remains less explored. This study aims to address this gap by highlighting the process of place-making through women's singing traditions and rituals in the festive environment of the Mirzapur region.

Why are Places Needed?

In an era where modernist approaches often view religious attachment as an obstacle to individual growth, some thinkers argue that distancing oneself from religion is a precondition for achieving individual autonomy (Halder, 2019). Within the context of the present study, this perspective raises the following questions:

1. Why do women need religious or ritual spaces to create empowered places?
2. What strategies are involved in creating such places, and how do they benefit rural women?
3. If places are needed, then how do traditional performances and place-making benefit women?

Given the broader discussion about the relationship between religion, individual autonomy, and gender empowerment, particularly for rural women in India, the controversy surrounding the Supreme Court's verdict on the Sabarimala Temple is significant. On 28 September 2018, the Supreme Court of India ruled that women of all ages can enter the Sabarimala Temple in Kerala without gender-based restrictions. The ruling, delivered by a five-judge bench headed by Chief Justice Dipak Misra, declared that the temple's policy barring women of menstruating age was unconstitutional and infringed upon their fundamental rights to equality and non-discrimination. Likewise, the controversy involving the 2018 film *Padmaavat* underscores gendered social dynamics. Karni Sena, a fringe group, and other Rajput communities—a warrior and landowning caste group that originally belonged to Rajasthan—demanded a complete ban on the movie. They argued that it distorted historical facts and negatively portrayed Padmavati/Padmini, a 13th- to 14th-century queen of Chittor, Rajasthan. Both cases discussed above illustrate that women are not seen as autonomous social beings but as a relational category shaped by social conventions.

Another rationale for studying women's religious acts and rituals is that rural women, unlike their urban counterparts, frequently lack platforms to voice their concerns. They are silenced by societal constraints or self-regulated behaviour. Their voices, language, and actions are often subject to surveillance or scrutiny by senior female family members, such as mothers-in-law or sisters-in-law. Furthermore, most public and private spaces are dominated by men, who do not need such places to express themselves. In contrast, women require free and unsupervised places to convey their bottled-up emotions and frustrations, as societal norms often stifle dissenting voices.

This article argues that rural women's traditional places, created during the *Kajarī* festival, serve as performative sites for expressing resentments and critiquing

the hegemonic ideas that control and subordinate them. This process constitutes a contested site that is significant for rural women, helping them to build community, develop networks, and forge individual and group identities. This paper explores how women's cultural practices illuminate issues of agency and identity within the context of religion.

Methodology

This study adopts an ethnographic approach to explore the socio-cultural dimensions of the *Kajarī* festival, focusing on the rituals and folk songs performed by rural women. Between 2021 and 2023, I recorded folk songs and conducted interviews with women. I also observed the performative aspects of rituals and singing practices, in particular, the spatial and communal dynamics that contribute to place-making. I carried out fieldwork in various villages of Mirzapur, such as Gaura, Shivpur, Madguda, and Bandhawa. Data transcription and translation were done manually, aided by my informants and my familiarity with English and Bhojpuri.

As a male outsider, I initially faced hesitation and suspicion from women participants. However, through multiple visits and repeated interviews, I gradually built rapport. Most participants were illiterate or semi-illiterate, and their ages ranged from 20 to 65. Data analysis involved thematic coding to identify recurring patterns and themes related to place-making, cultural identity, and strategies used by women for creating such places. The theoretical lens of place-making guided the interpretation and underscored how physical spaces are transformed into meaningful socio-symbolic settings through cultural activities. Triangulation of observational data and interview transcripts ensured the validity and richness of the findings.

Theoretical Framework

The idea of place-making offers a theoretical framework for examining the cultural activities that enable rural women to create their private performative places. Place-making is a social practice involving the congregation, interaction, and exchange of social groups in both private and public spaces. Desplat and Schulz (2012) define it as transforming abstract and empty spaces by endowing them with social and symbolic meanings. Various social constructionist scholars including Abe (2011), Basso (1996), and Relph (1976), explain place-making as the conscious and unconscious ways in which people invest places with meaning through their ongoing activities and rituals, contributing to them in ways that express their dreams, passions, needs, and values in harmony with the physical environment. Therefore, it can be inferred that geographical spaces transform into social spaces through cultural practices, rituals, and human interactions.

Place-making is also a tool for formulating social traditions and communal ties. Habibah et al. (2013) define place-making as assigning meaning and values to places through community members' socio-cultural practices and strategies. Relph (1976) affirms the strong connection between community and place, stating, "The relationship…is indeed a potent one in which each reinforces the identity of the

other and in which the landscape is very much an expression of communally held beliefs and values and interpersonal involvement" (p. 34). Religion, rituals, and surrounding places play an important role in providing an appropriate atmosphere for place-making. Religious and festive gatherings transform ordinary spaces into sites of collective identity and emotional resonance, often enabling marginalised groups to assert their agency and create informal platforms for self-expression (Cresswell, 2004). Mazumdar and Mazumdar (2009) also argue that different parts of the Hindu house become loci for women's social interactions, networking, self-identity, and community identity.

As a theoretical framework, place-making affirms how cultural practices imbue spaces with meaning through interaction, ritual, and community participation. The *Kajarī* festival exemplifies this by acting as a performative space where women subtly assert their identities and agency. Through collective singing and ritual gatherings, they engage in processes that redefine physical spaces into communal ones. These practices foster a sense of belonging and solidarity and reinforce social and personal identities while challenging societal norms. The rituals and folk songs of the *Kajarī* festival preserve communal values and provide an informal yet potent platform for self-expression and the articulation of alternative voices. By creating such spaces, rural women redefine their roles and reimagine their societal positions—they illustrate how place-making integrates community, identity, and agency within the broader cultural landscape. The *Kajarī* festival is thus a living example of how disenfranchised groups transform their environment to reflect shared beliefs and resist systemic constraints.

Kajarī Singers

To understand how rural women conceptualise and enact place-making, it is essential to consider their everyday lives and experiences. As Dundes (1966) argued, understanding context is crucial for interpreting folklore. Narayan (1993) similarly asserted that "it is imperative for the researcher to actively solicit the folklore's meaning directly from the folk" (p. 178). To gain insight into the indigenous conceptions of place-making during the *Kajarī* festival, this section will highlight the perspectives of several women—Chamela Devi, Malti Devi, and Meera Devi—from different Mirzapur villages.

During my time in Gaura village, I stayed with my paternal uncle. His mother—my grandmother—Chamela Devi, is a 95-year-old widow from the *Chauhan* caste, an upper caste. She introduced me to the *Kajarī* festival, its songs, and village women**.** My grandmother, a repository of *Kajarī* songs, learned them from older female family members and through books provided by her father. Even in her 90s, she remained active in daily chores and could sing for hours. She remembered countless songs but, due to her old age, could not sing more than three or four in a single stretch. Most of the songs she knew were about love or spirituality. She expressed concerns about the diminishing of the *Kajarī* festival and the loss of traditional rituals and folk songs. She said, "During my time, it was in full swing, but nowadays, *Kajarī* festival has disappeared" (C. Devi, personal communication, 6 September 2021). She specifically used the term *Uthan* to refer to its decline.

Malti Devi, a *Maurya* caste woman in her late 60s, is a respected figure in her Gaura village community. In rural Mirzapur, the *Maurya* caste is predominantly involved in vegetable farming, a common occupation in Gaura and nearby villages like Bandhawa, Shivpur, and Madguda. The women in her surroundings respect her due to her age, knowledge of songs and rituals, and worldly wisdom. (Her wealth, stemming from her sons' ownership of tractors used to plough the village's fields, may also contribute to her respected status.) Malti Devi's extensive knowledge of *Kajarī* songs enables her to lead most singing sessions. She was among the first women to introduce me to place-making rituals, such as planting barley seeds.

As mentioned above, the *Maurya* caste constitutes the majority of the Gaura village population. However, there are a few *Vishwakarma* families, traditionally linked with blacksmithing and carpentry. Meera Devi, a 35-year-old housewife, belongs to the *Vishwakarma* caste. Her husband is neither a blacksmith nor a carpenter but works as a daily wage labourer. Although Meera Devi is not a skilled singer, her experiences and worldview offer insights into self-censorship, female surveillance in rural settings, and the significance of folk traditions in women's lives. While singing a *Kajarī* song during an interview, she requested to lower her voice as she was in her kitchen and feared that she might be overheard by others in her household. The song Meera Devi sang expressed a woman's complaint about inflation, specifically targeting her father-in-law and brother-in-law. She worried that her male family members might consider the song inappropriate. The incident suggests that folk songs can provide an outlet for rural women to articulate perspectives that defy societal expectations of women.

The following section of the paper is divided into three parts. The first part details the performative context and rituals associated with place-making in Mirzapur. The second explains the night of *Ratjagā,* an event linked to the birth of the goddess *Vindhyācala/Vindhyavasi*, during which rural women display a conception of women's roles that contrasts with the idealised images of Sita (wife of Lord Ram and a symbol of the ideal and homely wife) or Sati (the practice of widow immolation symbolising ultimate loyalty and devotion). In the final part, I discuss strategies such as laughter, cross-dressing, and language that women use to navigate surveillance and patriarchal control. These strategies allow them to transgress and challenge the prevailing values of rural society through their performances.

Place-Making and Rituals

Ritual, as defined by Lang (1998), is "the general notion for religious acts, which are performed identically at specific occasions, of which the order has been fixed by tradition or prescription, and which may consist of gestures, words and the use of objects" (pp. 442-443). De Certeau (1984) further emphasises the foundational role of rituals in place-making: they "[provide] space" for the actions that will be undertaken and "[create] a field" that serves as their "base" and their "theatre" (p. 124). Platvoet (2006) notes that the functions of religious rituals are to sustain and solidify the community. Rituals, mainly performed by women and young girls, are integral to the *Kajarī* festival. Through song, they continue the cultural practice of invoking and worshipping village deities and goddesses. The festival, centered on women, is associated with various local sites, including the Ganges River, nearby ponds, the *Caughaṭa* (performative place), and the entire village. Each location is connected with a deity, referred to as *Ṭhaīyā*. Women's rituals and songs during the *Kajarī* deify these inanimate sites and transform them into spaces of worship and performance.

Although *Kajarī* songs are sung throughout the *sāvana* month, preparations for the festival start on the day of *nāga-pañcamī*. In 2022, I arrived in Shivpur village to observe and record the preparations for the *Kajarī* festival on *nāga-pañcamī*. As the women were occupied with daily chores and preparing to fetch soil from the Ganges, I was advised to wait. After an hour, I rejoined them, now well-groomed and ready to participate in the soil-fetching ritual. Accompanied by young girls, the women embarked on a journey to the river, singing *Kajarī* songs. Upon reaching, they dug soil to plant barley seeds. When they returned home, they spread the soil on a flat wooden board and planted the seeds. The planted barley is kept near the *Caughaṭa* (performative place) and sung to every night. To deify the *Caughaṭa*, the women touch the ground as a gesture of reverence before entering. They offer songs, grains, and puffed rice as offerings to it—they treat it as a living entity and goddess worthy of worship.

In 2023, I recorded Malti Devi, a woman from Gaura, singing a *Kajarī* song performed during soil-fetching. She told me about "bringing soil" (*mātī lānā*), which refers to the practice of collecting soil from rivers and ponds and holds significant meaning in rural contexts. Malti Devi explained that planting barley seeds in the soil serves as a symbolic prognostication of the year's crop yield. She termed the practice "*parakh*," meaning "inspection," and said, "If it grows well, then you can expect a good crop; otherwise, it gets scattered" (M. Devi, personal communication, 28 June 2023). This connection between human life, festivals, rituals, and nature hints at the principles of deep ecology—that nature and all living things deserve respect and protection.

sabakara ta beṭī jālī māṭī leve hamārī beṭī na,
tarase apane sasurava hamārī beṭī nā/
bābā ta gaye Caughaṭavā ki roye lāge nā,
mukha deyī ke rumaliyā ho ki roye ho lāge nā/
sabakara ta beṭī jāli jaraī boye hamārī beṭī nā,
tarase apane duaravā hamārī beṭī nā/
māyā ta gaye Caughaṭavā ki roye lāge nā,
mukha deyī ke rumaliyā ho ki roye ho lāge nā/

                                                                          (Malti Devi, 2023)

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

                                                                          (Translated by author)

Along with deifying the performative place (*Caughaṭa*), the women also revere the *jaraī* plant, which they call *jaraī mata* (Goddess *jaraī*). They offer water and songs as sustenance, believing that music helps the plant thrive. Rajkumari Devi personified the plant, stating, "If you do not sing, then she will be on fast" (R. Devi, personal communication, 3 August 2022). Although these rural women might not be formally acquainted with the term "music therapy," they understand the positive impact of *Kajarī* songs on the plant's growth. Therefore, they dedicate nightly performances to offer musical nourishment to *jaraī mata*. Research conducted by Bose (1902, 1926) demonstrated that plants respond to sounds, while Subramanian et al. (1969) and Coghlan (1994) have also observed that melodies can enhance plant growth.

Another ritualistic aspect that transforms the physical site into a private performative place is the opening songs of the singing session. The women explained that they start by singing five spiritual/religious songs to invoke and worship local or village deities, including *Vindhyācala*, the earth goddess, and goddess *Kālī*. Sometimes, they may begin with *devī pacarā*, another variety of women's devotional songs. *Pacarā,* devotional songs sung for folk deities, honour and welcome the seven *devīs* before any significant Bhojpuri ceremony and are sung in upper-caste and lower-caste households (Nayyar, 2024).

In 2022, I recorded Lalmani Devi singing a song (see lyrics below) about how women invoke and deify the place before a singing session. She stressed that the space is not merely physical but inhabited by goddesses, and offerings of songs, flowers, and grains are made to ensure that they leave contentedly, preventing any negative impact on family members. Manta Devi also underscored the significance of the *Caughaṭa*—she said that it cannot be shifted as it is a sacred and reserved area.

Dhan ethiyan ki ṭhaīyā re bhuinya, dhan ethiyan devhar loy|
Chali maliniya ṭhaīyā manave le delahin bhar phool ho|
Dalahin-dalahin phhol chadhave dhabavan-dhabvan pan loy|
Le ta na letu mai hamari manauti hasat-khelat ghar jayi loy|
Ekkau bar jo bakai bhawani mai nauaa na lebu tohar loy|

<div align="right">(Lalmani Devi, 2022)</div>

Oh, lady, here is *ṭhaīyā* (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.

<div align="right">(Translated by author)</div>

The following section examines *Ratjagā* night, a lively celebration featuring traditional performances and cultural activities. In my observation, this event fosters a supportive environment for women and enables them to immerse themselves in cultural practices and strengthen communal bonds.

The Night of *Ratjagā* as an Unserveilled Place

Ratjagā, a common practice in Indian villages, involves women singing and dancing in private spaces during significant life events such as childbirth, marriage, as well as the *Kajarī* festival (Prasad, 2010). In Mirzapur, *Ratjagā* is celebrated on the twelfth day of *nāga-pañcamī*, which coincides with the auspicious birth date of the goddess *Vindhyavāsinī*. When I asked about her perception of the *Ratjagā* night, Rajkumari Devi, a housewife and owner of a small shop in Shivpur, explained, "Women sing *Kajarī* throughout the night. Women assume the roles such as of bride, groom, washerman, and roam around the village" (R. Devi, personal communication, 13 August 2022). Her remark suggested a private theatrical tradition associated with *Kajarī* folk songs on the night of *Ratjagā*.

In 2022, I visited the *Vindhyavāsinī* temple on *Ratjagā*. I observed a massive crowd of devotees seeking *darshan* (the act of seeing the deity). At the rear of the temple, renowned singers performed devotional *Kajarī* songs with professional lighting, instrumental accompaniment, and an enthusiastic crowd. Upon returning to Shivpur village, I saw a contrasting scenario unfold. Women started their performance at the *Caughaṭa* after completing their routine duties of cooking and serving family members. They gathered at the *Caughaṭa*, where each woman touched the earth as a gesture of reverence and worship, before joining the group or singing a song; when they concluded their performance, they again performed a similar act.

Another important aspect of this designated sacred space (*Caughaṭa*) is its status as an empowered female space. It is "gender-secluded" (Halder, 2019, p. 71), a place where "no men can enter," according to Manta Devi (personal communication, 13 August 2022). The *Caughaṭa* is entirely free from male oversight, though men's presence may be indirectly felt. This place enables them to perform on the night of *Ratjagā* without any reserve, suggesting non-conformist

self-imaginings during the performance. Typically the women's performances abide by the "Akam" and "Puram" divisions proposed by Ramanujan (1986), as *Caughaṭa* is located within the village confines, near a house or courtyard. Akam refers to the interior (domestic) genres performed by women in or around homes, while Puram genres are performed by men in public spaces.

On *Ratjagā,* women also observe a rite called *ganv gothana*, which translates to "encircling the village." This practice signifies women's marking of the village's inner and outer boundaries and challenges the notion that men dominate public spaces in Indian society. After the all-night *Kajarī* performance, girls and women, acting as both performers and audience members, engage in this ritual, singing as they circle the village at dawn before returning to the *Caughaṭa* to touch the earth and conclude the performance. It is believed that this practice also appeases evil spirits and malevolent entities.

While conducting fieldwork in 2022, I witnessed women's performances shifting to the marketplace on the next day of *Ratjagā*, celebrated as the *Kajarī* festival. The women accompanied young girls to submerge barley plants in the *Kajarahava* pond, named after the festival. The procession-like activity involved singing, dancing, and demanding money from every man around them. Women's participation in the annual fair at *Kajarahava* pond during the *Kajarī* festival marked the culmination of this nearly two-week-long performative tradition.

The festive occasion, ritual frame, and celebratory mood provide an appropriate atmosphere for women to create their own empowering and accessible space, traditionally available as a physical site for innovation and improvisation. However, in a modern and globalised world, male-dominated societal structures often compromise and occupy these spaces. Therefore, the process of place-making becomes sociologically essential for understanding women's sense of place, the potential of their subcultures, and their identity constructions. These created sites enable them to temporarily step out of patriarchal constraints, challenge gender norms, and experience catharsis.

Women's Strategies for Place-Making

Women's subcultures often feature bawdy humour, laughter, obscene language, and transvestism, as exemplified by various Uttar Pradesh genres such as *Gari*, *Natka* and *Kajarī. Gari,* a folk song performed during weddings, involves the bride's party hurling insults at the groom's, including the groom himself. These songs, filled with abusive content and jokes, elicit hearty laughter (Gupta, 2001). Similarly, *Nakta* is entirely owned by women, who serve as both audience and performers. This genre explicitly explores marital intimacy, household challenges, and issues faced by married women (Srivastava, 1991). It is also characterised by hysterical laughter and humourous digressions. Laughter and humour are understood as healing and communal acts that tame anxiety and unify the audience (Dougher, 2010).

Kajarī songs also employ humour, laughter, and mockery as standard features. Women's clever use of language disrupts traditional conventions and targets male members of their marital families. These songs critique male authority and challenge traditional rules against derogatory speech about husbands or elders in

rural societies by depicting the natal-affinal brother outsmarting the husband. Thus, *Kajarī* songs are both entertaining and subtly subversive of traditional gender roles. Below is an example of one of these songs, as sung by Lalmani Devi in 2022.

> *bhaīyā morā chaila-chabīlā nebulā bina-bina khāye loya,*
> *hayī bakacodavā mahādallidara chekalā bina-bina khāye loya|*

<div align="right">(Lalmani Devi, 2022)</div>

> My beautiful young brother picks up a lemon and eats it,
> Whereas this idiot and miser picks up the peel and eats it.

<div align="right">(Translated by author)</div>

Moreover, women strategically use obscene and abusive language and insulting tones toward men to lessen the seriousness of the otherwise controlled space. These tactics help them attain the status of unfiltered and free social beings, allowing them to use mockery, uncontrolled body movements, and unrestricted speech during the performance. In 2022, while documenting the night of *Ratjagā*, I observed that the women's laughter initially remained restrained during humorous moments. However, as the performance intensified, it became so frequent and loud that it obscured the lyrics of their songs. During my 2022 fieldwork, I recorded Rajkumari Devi singing a song that demonstrates the type of language women use when singing *Kajarī* songs. The song, which mocked the husband while praising other household members, reveals women's ability to subvert traditional gender roles and express their desires and frustrations.

> *koī boyelā dhāna dhanaīyā koī bolyela masūrī,*
> *morā saīyā bakacodavā boyelā titalī|*

<div align="right">(Rajkumari Devi, 2022)</div>

> Father-in-law sows paddy, and husband's elder brother sows Titli (wild grass),
> My husband is a senseless/idiot fellow who sows red lentils.

<div align="right">(Translated by author)</div>

Language is a social practice shaped and controlled by societal and historical forces beyond individual prerogative, particularly for women in rural contexts. Spender (1985) argues that the dominant group constructs the world/reality through sexist language to serve their interests. Additionally, normative behavioural patterns or self-regulated attitudes often control women's language use. However, the question of language becomes significant when considering its use in folk songs, proverbs, riddles, and stories. It can be argued that women's language use during singing and performance differs markedly from their daily language. Their folk speech is replete with abuses, derogatory tones, and symbols, permitting them to voice their desires, challenge the idea of masculinity, and sometimes even poke fun at their own bodies.

Women in rural settings often lack the social mobility enjoyed by their urban counterparts. In Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, cross-dressing emerges as a key element in women-centered folk performances—it allows for greater mobility, albeit

temporarily. However, this transvestism is seen as a threat to gender and class order and is associated with social upheaval (Ramet, 1996). Performers in folk theatrical performances use this strategy of transvestism. During *Kajarī* performances, women assume various male roles, including groom, *Seth* (wealthy man), and son, particularly on the night of *Ratjagā*. On the *Kajarī* festival day, they impersonate police officers, Sai baba (an Indian saint), and young city lads, mocking male attire and masculine traits. By adopting male dress, women exercise agency in an androcentric world that restricts their movements both inside and outside the home. This transvestism empowers them to perform in marketplaces and other public spaces—in front of male onlookers and passers-by—without adhering to established norms. Therefore, women's folk speech, marked by symbols, metaphors, obscene and abusive language, humour, and hysterical laughter, along with cross-dressing, function as strategic devices to create and maintain places, while also alleviating the seriousness and formality of these spaces.

Conclusion

This paper examines how the *Kajarī* festival and its associated rituals and folk songs collectively contribute to the construction of empowered places for women's networking and recreational activities. It explores the act of place-making and sheds light on alternative places available to rural women, enabling them to create a free and gender-segregated environment for conveying their repressed thoughts and animosities. The paper emphasises how women use festive frames, language, and laughter to deny societal control and reduce male surveillance in both public and private places. My fieldwork highlights the strong sense of collectiveness and camaraderie among women during their leisure hours, as they perform in groups rather than sing solo. The *Kajarī* festival, rituals, singing sessions, and everyday experiences forge emotional and performative places where women can construct, express, and affirm their sense of belonging (Jassal, 2012). The locale, characterised by the absence of filters and male presence during the night vigil (*Ratjagā*), facilitates women's engagement in subversive performances, which warrants further study.

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