

Changing Lives of Kalbelia Women Folk Dancers: Demographic Transition, Mobility, Livelihood and Cultural Identity in Contemporary India

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Abstract: This research paper examines the changing social, economic, and cultural lives of Kalbelia women folk dancers in contemporary India through the interconnected dimensions of demographic transition, migration, livelihood, and cultural identity. The study adopts a qualitative research approach, drawing upon secondary literature, published studies, relevant documentary sources, and the lived experience of Asha Sapera as an illustrative case. The traditional livelihood of the Kalbelia community has been associated with snake catching, snake exhibition, and a mobile way of life. With the decline of these traditional occupations due to legal restrictions and wider socio-economic changes, Kalbelia dance and music have emerged as important alternative sources of livelihood and cultural representation. The study particularly examines how professional engagement with dance influences women's economic participation, social visibility, mobility, and decision-making capacities. The lived experience of Asha Sapera highlights the interconnections between marriage, motherhood, education, livelihood, and professional mobility. The study also considers the younger generation's education, engagement with modern communication technologies, and changing cultural aspirations in relation to the reconfiguration of Kalbelia identity. It argues that demographic transition should not be understood only in terms of population-related changes, but also as a broader transformation in family, occupation, mobility, gender relations, and cultural identity. Finally, the paper emphasizes the need for fair remuneration, safe working conditions, educational opportunities, social security, digital opportunities, and women's participation in cultural decision-making for the sustainable livelihood and cultural preservation of folk artists.

Keywords: Kalbelia Women, Demographic Transition, Migration, Folk Dance, Livelihood, Cultural Identity, Women's Empowerment, Rajasthan

Introduction

India is a country characterized by immense social, cultural, and demographic diversity, where different social groups have continuously adapted their distinctive occupational traditions, cultural practices, and livelihood patterns to changing social and economic circumstances.

Processes such as modernization, urbanization, the expansion of education, changing employment opportunities, tourism, the development of communication technologies, and increasing mobility have brought significant changes in traditional occupations, family structures, gender relations, and cultural practices. These transformations are particularly important for communities whose social identity and livelihoods have historically been associated with mobility and specific occupations. For such communities, changing circumstances raise broader questions about how demographic and socio-economic transformations are influencing women's roles, livelihood strategies, and cultural identities in contemporary India.

The Kalbelia community of Rajasthan provides an important context for examining these processes. Traditionally associated with a mobile way of life, the Kalbelia community has historical links with the Nath-Jogi tradition and with activities related to snake-catching, snake exhibition, and associated forms of performance. The *Ethnographic Atlas of Rajasthan* describes the Kalbelia community as followers of the Nath tradition and refers to traditional occupations associated with snakes as well as the use of musical instruments such as the *poongi* or *been* (Mathur, 1969, pp. 75–76). In this context, mobility was not merely geographical movement; it was deeply connected with livelihood, occupational organization, and community life.

The cultural identity of the Kalbelia community is also rooted in the broader Nath tradition. Figures such as Gorakhnath, Matsyendranath, Jalandharnath, and Kanifnath occupy an important place in Nath cultural memory, while narratives associated with Bharthari and Gopichand have been preserved within North Indian oral traditions (Gold, 1992, pp. 35–57). Such traditions are important for understanding how cultural identities are transmitted across generations. At the same time, cultural identity cannot be understood as a static inheritance, because social and economic changes continuously influence the ways in which communities represent themselves.

Transformation within the Kalbelia community is particularly visible in the changing nature of its traditional occupations. Legal restrictions, environmental concerns, and broader socio-economic changes contributed to the decline of occupations associated with snakes, making it increasingly difficult to sustain livelihoods through these traditional activities. The Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972, along with changing social perceptions regarding snake-catching and snake exhibition, played a role in the decline of these traditional occupational practices. Under such circumstances, music and dance acquired increasing importance both as alternative sources of livelihood and as means of cultural representation. Consequently, Kalbelia dance moved beyond its earlier community context and became increasingly associated with tourism, cultural programmes, and professional performances (Angelillo, 2012, pp. 203–208).

This transformation is particularly significant from a gender perspective. Kalbelia women have become increasingly visible as performers, and dance has created opportunities for them to earn income, travel, perform in public, and interact with audiences beyond their community.

However, economic participation does not automatically translate into empowerment. Women's experiences continue to be influenced by marriage, family responsibilities, childcare, social expectations, and the social acceptance of women's public performances (Angelillo, 2012, pp. 201–203, 210). Therefore, an important question is the extent to which participation in cultural work enhances women's agency, economic independence, and decision-making capacity.

These transformations need to be understood within the broader context of demographic transition. Demographic transition is generally associated with changes in fertility, mortality, and population structure, but its social implications also extend to changes in family, marriage, education, occupation, mobility, and women's economic participation. For a traditionally mobile community such as the Kalbelia, demographic and occupational transformations are particularly interconnected. Demographic transition therefore provides a useful framework not only for understanding population change but also for examining the restructuring of social relationships and everyday life.

Migration and mobility constitute another important dimension of this transformation. In the Kalbelia community, earlier forms of mobility were associated with traditional occupations and the movement of families and groups from one place to another in search of livelihood opportunities. In contrast, contemporary mobility also includes travelling for cultural performances, tourism, festivals, wedding ceremonies, and other public events. Professional dance has therefore generated new forms of mobility that differ from traditional occupational movement (Angelillo, 2012, pp. 201, 208). While such mobility creates new opportunities, it also requires new forms of negotiation between family responsibilities, professional aspirations, and cultural expectations.

The changing position of Kalbelia women also demonstrates that cultural identity is not static but dynamic. The identity of the community, historically associated with mobility and occupations related to snakes, is now increasingly represented through music, dance, dress, and performance. The growing recognition of Kalbelia dance has created new possibilities for cultural visibility and livelihood, while its increasing connection with tourism and commercial performances has also raised questions concerning authenticity, cultural ownership, and market-oriented presentation (Angelillo, 2012, pp. 207–210). Dance therefore performs a complex role as cultural heritage, public representation, and an ongoing process of identity reconstruction.

Against this background, the changing lives of Kalbelia women folk dancers become significant for understanding the relationship between demographic and cultural transformation in contemporary India. Their experiences bring together changes in family and marriage, education, occupation, migration and mobility, women's economic participation, gender relations, and cultural identity. Examining these dimensions together helps explain how broader demographic and socio-economic transformations are experienced at the level of everyday life.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine the changing socioeconomic and cultural lives of Kalbelia women folk dancers. The analysis draws upon secondary literature, published academic studies, documentary sources, field observations, and a personal interview.

The field component focused on understanding the experiences of Kalbelia women in relation to livelihood, family life, education, migration and mobility, dance, and cultural identity. A personal interview with Asha Sopera in Jodhpur, Rajasthan, was used as an illustrative case to examine the relationship between folk dance, livelihood, economic participation, motherhood, education, mobility, and cultural identity.

The study also incorporates field observations of performances and the working conditions of Kalbelia women folk artists. Observations relating to performance venues, mobility, accommodation, remuneration, and working conditions are used to complement the documentary and interview-based evidence.

The case of Asha Sopera is not presented as representative of all Kalbelia women. Rather, it provides a lived-experience perspective through which broader processes of social and demographic transformation can be examined.

Personal Interview: Asha Sopera, Jodhpur, Rajasthan; interviewer: Dr.Rimjhim Sinha, 2026.

Research Problem

Existing studies have examined various aspects of the history of the Kalbelia community, Nath traditions, occupational practices, folk dance, tourism, and the social position of women performers. However, these dimensions have not been sufficiently integrated to understand the changing lives of Kalbelia women within the interconnected contexts of demographic transition, migration, livelihood transformation, and cultural identity. This perspective is important because the transformation of Kalbelia dance is part of a broader restructuring of social and economic life.

The central research problem of this study is therefore to understand how changing demographic and socio-economic conditions are affecting the lives of Kalbelia women folk dancers. The study asks how changes in family and marriage, education, occupation, and lifestyle influence women's participation in dance; how new forms of mobility affect their livelihoods and social opportunities; and whether the commercialization of dance contributes to economic and social empowerment. It also examines how women negotiate inherited cultural traditions with contemporary aspirations, particularly as cultural performance becomes increasingly connected with tourism and commercial markets.

Thus, rather than viewing Kalbelia women merely as carriers of traditional art or as performers, the study attempts to understand them as active participants in processes of demographic transition, occupational transformation, migration, economic adaptation, and cultural change.

Objectives of the Study

The objective of this study is to examine the relationship between the changing demographic and socio-economic conditions of Kalbelia women folk dancers and transformations in family, occupation, mobility, and cultural life. It seeks to analyse the role of migration and occupational mobility in shaping women's livelihood opportunities and to examine the transformation of Kalbelia dance from a traditional community activity into an important means of livelihood and cultural representation.

The study also seeks to understand the relationship between dance, women's economic participation, social visibility, and empowerment, while taking into account the continuing influence of marriage, family responsibilities, childcare, and gender expectations. In addition, the study examines how the younger generation of Kalbelia women is responding to changing educational opportunities, occupational aspirations, and contemporary forms of cultural expression. Finally, it seeks to understand how these transformations are affecting Kalbelia cultural identity and what policy measures may be necessary to strengthen women's livelihoods, socio-economic empowerment, and the sustainable preservation of cultural heritage.

Demographic Transition and Changing Social Structure

In India, demographic transition cannot be understood only on the basis of changes in population size, fertility rates, and mortality rates. It also includes transformations in family structure, patterns of marriage, educational attainment, occupational patterns, mobility, gender relations, and everyday life. Such changes are particularly significant for communities whose traditional livelihoods and cultural identities have been associated with specific occupations and forms of mobility. The Kalbelia community of Rajasthan provides an important opportunity to understand these processes through the changing social and economic experiences of women. As traditional occupational structures change and new opportunities emerge in education, economic activity, and cultural fields, the position of Kalbelia women within the family, community, and wider society is also being renegotiated.

Changes in Family, Marriage, Education, Occupation, and Lifestyle

Family and marriage have historically been important foundations for understanding the social position of Kalbelia women. Within traditional social structures, women's roles were closely connected with domestic responsibilities, family needs, and community expectations. Dependence on husbands and family members for economic and social security after marriage also influenced women's autonomy and decision-making capacity. However, changing socio-

economic conditions, the expansion of education, and the emergence of new occupational and cultural spaces have created possibilities for the restructuring of these traditional roles.

Education is an important dimension of this social transformation. It influences women's aspirations, social awareness, occupational choices, and understanding of future possibilities. Education can enable women to consider alternative forms of social and economic participation while negotiating with traditional expectations. In the context of Kalbelia women, education can establish new relationships between cultural heritage and contemporary aspirations. An educated woman does not necessarily have to abandon her cultural traditions; rather, she may redefine and establish them within new social contexts. Education and tradition should therefore not necessarily be viewed as opposing forces.

Changes in lifestyle are also connected with transformations in family, education, occupation, and mobility. Communication technologies, social media, travel, urban interaction, and wider social communication have created new social and cultural spaces, particularly for younger women. These processes have influenced their aspirations, forms of self-representation, and attitudes towards cultural performance. Modernity and traditional culture should not necessarily be viewed as contradictory conditions. Kalbelia women may use contemporary communication technologies and cultural platforms to present their traditional artistic practices in new forms. Lifestyle transformation can therefore be understood as a process of cultural adaptation, reinterpretation, and negotiation.

Asha Sapera: Dance, Livelihood, and Intergenerational Transformation

The changing social and economic position of Kalbelia women can be understood more clearly through the lived experience of Asha Sapera. Asha currently lives with her daughter in Jodhpur, and Kalbelia dance is an important source of her livelihood. Through dance performances, she travels to different parts of India and participates in cultural programmes and other public performances. Her experience demonstrates how traditional cultural skills can acquire new economic and professional meanings under contemporary conditions.

The significance of this transformation becomes clearer when Asha's present circumstances are compared with her earlier life. After marriage, her livelihood was largely dependent on her husband. Her present circumstances reflect a different form of economic participation. She has transformed her cultural skills into a source of livelihood and, through professional activities associated with Kalbelia dance, supports herself and her daughter. Her experience raises an important analytical question: can the commercialization of traditional cultural practices provide a basis for women's economic participation and autonomy?

Another important aspect of Asha's experience concerns her daughter's education and future. She has prioritized her daughter's education and has sought to provide her with better opportunities in life. Her daughter is currently receiving an education while also developing her abilities in dance and singing. This reflects an important intergenerational transformation

in which cultural participation coexists with formal education, artistic development, and broader professional aspirations.

However, Asha's experience should not be regarded as representative of all Kalbelia women. It is an illustrative lived experience that helps in understanding emerging possibilities and complexities within a changing social structure. Her life brings together marriage, motherhood, occupation, education, mobility, and cultural identity, and thus illustrates how demographic and social changes can intersect in everyday life.



Figure 1: Asha Sapera Performing the Traditional Kalbelia Dance source: Asha 2024.

The Position of the Younger Generation of Kalbelia Women

The position of the younger generation of Kalbelia women is an important means of understanding changing social structures. The present generation is growing up in an environment where access to education, digital communication, professional opportunities, and wider social mobility is increasing alongside traditional cultural heritage. Their relationship with tradition therefore cannot be understood simply in terms of preservation or abandonment. Instead, young Kalbelia women are actively participating in processes of reinterpretation and reconstruction of cultural identity.

An important analytical question arises here: Are young Kalbelia women merely preserving their cultural traditions, or are they also transforming the social and economic meanings associated with those traditions? When dance is understood both as an artistic skill and as a form of cultural identity, young women may remain connected with traditional dance while pursuing education and seeking contemporary professional opportunities.

For the younger generation, cultural identity is increasingly becoming a dynamic and continuously redefined process. Traditional dance, music, dress, and performance practices are becoming connected with contemporary cultural spaces, digital platforms, and new audiences. In this process, it is not necessary to maintain tradition in an unchanged form; its interpretation, presentation, and social significance can be reorganized within new contexts. Young Kalbelia women are therefore playing an active role in the contemporary presentation of their culture.

Nevertheless, the emergence of new opportunities does not eliminate structural constraints. Expectations related to family and marriage, domestic responsibilities, gender norms, and

concerns regarding social status may continue to influence women's mobility and occupational choices. Their experiences are therefore shaped by continuous interaction between opportunity and constraint, tradition and modernity, and livelihood and aspiration.

Migration and Mobility

Mobility has historically been an important characteristic of the social and economic life of the Kalbelia community, as traditional occupational activities were closely associated with movement from one place to another. For the Kalbelia community, mobility was not merely geographical movement but also a livelihood strategy through which occupational skills, social relationships, and cultural practices were sustained. Changes in traditional occupations therefore also affected the meaning and function of mobility within the community (Mathur, 1969, pp. 75–76; Angelillo, 2012, pp. 193–203).

Figure 2: Asha Sapera with her daughter source :Asha 2025.

Changes in state regulations and the broader socio-economic environment, together with the decline of traditional occupations associated with snakes created circumstances in which cultural performance increasingly became an alternative source of livelihood. As a result, Kalbelia dance provided artists with opportunities to move beyond their immediate communities and participate in festivals, tourism-related activities, public cultural programmes, and other performance spaces (Government of India, 1972; Angelillo, 2012, pp. 203–208).

For Kalbelia women, entering public performance spaces creates new opportunities beyond traditional domestic and community spheres. Travelling for professional performances may provide access to new audiences, cultural networks, and income-generating opportunities. At the same time, such mobility requires negotiation with family responsibilities, social expectations, and gender norms. Women's mobility therefore reflects the broader process through which occupational roles and social status are being redefined (Angelillo, 2012, pp. 201–203, 208–210).

Asha Sapera's lived experience provides an example of the changing relationship between mobility and livelihood. Her travel for performances in different places reflects contemporary professional mobility associated with cultural work. Unlike traditional occupational movements, this mobility is shaped by performance networks and cultural programmes.

Thus, the changing nature of mobility within the Kalbelia community reflects broader socio-economic transformation. Movement that was once closely associated with traditional livelihood is increasingly being reorganized as professional, cultural, and occupational mobility.



Kalbelia Women, Folk Dance, and Livelihood Transformation

The development of Kalbelia dance from a community-based cultural activity into a recognized professional folk performance represents an important transformation in the livelihood structure of the Kalbelia community. Traditionally, the social and occupational life of the Kalbelia community was associated with snake-catching, snake

exhibition, and related forms of itinerant livelihood activity. Over time, changes in state regulations, occupational opportunities, and socio-economic conditions contributed to a decline in these traditional activities (Mathur, 1969, pp. 75–76; Government of India, 1972). In this changing context, music and dance acquired economic as well as cultural significance for Kalbelia artists.

Kalbelia dance is significant because it connects cultural continuity with changing livelihood opportunities. An activity that was earlier performed mainly within community and traditional cultural contexts has now entered the wider public sphere through tourism, festivals, cultural programmes, and professional performances. This transformation has increased the economic value of artistic skills and provided artists with opportunities to transform cultural knowledge into a source of income (Angelillo, 2012, pp. 203–208).

For Kalbelia women, adopting dance as a livelihood has created a distinctive sphere of economic participation. Their participation in public performances enables them to earn income through their artistic abilities while also representing their community and cultural heritage. An important analytical question arises here: Can the commercialization of folk dance transform traditional cultural skills into a sustainable basis for women's economic participation? Answering this question requires attention not only to participation but also to income, control over earnings, occupational decision-making, and social recognition.

Asha Sopera's experience provides an example of this transformation in livelihood. Her professional engagement with Kalbelia dance demonstrates how cultural performance can become a source of economic participation and professional identity. However, her experience should not be regarded as representative of all Kalbelia women.

The growing visibility of Kalbelia women as professional performers has contributed to wider recognition of Kalbelia dance as an important form of cultural expression. Angelillo (2012, pp. 207–210) demonstrates how dance became connected with the transformation of Kalbelia caste identity and its representation within broader cultural contexts. Dance therefore operates at two

interconnected levels: it provides economic resources for performers while also contributing to the construction and redefinition of Kalbelia cultural identity in the public sphere.

Nevertheless, the transformation of cultural activity into livelihood should not be viewed simply as a straightforward process of empowerment. Professional performance may provide income and identity, but women may still have to negotiate domestic responsibilities, social expectations, and unequal working conditions. The ability to sustain dance as a livelihood may also depend on performance networks, tourism markets, cultural institutions, and changing audience interests. Livelihood transformation therefore involves both new opportunities and continuing structural constraints.

Cultural Identity and Its Reconfiguration

Kalbelia cultural identity is not static; the community continuously transforms its identity in response to changing social, economic, and cultural conditions. Kalbelia dance, traditionally associated with the cultural expression of the community, has gained wider recognition through public performances, tourism, festivals, and other cultural platforms. This expansion has brought Kalbelia cultural practices into new social contexts and has influenced their representation beyond the traditional community setting (Angelillo, 2012, pp. 207–210).

For Kalbelia women, dance is an important means of expressing and presenting their cultural heritage. Their dress, music, dance movements, and performance styles present distinctive elements of Kalbelia culture before wider audiences. At the same time, performing within contemporary cultural spaces requires certain forms of adaptation according to different audiences and circumstances. Cultural continuity does not necessarily mean maintaining tradition in an unchanged form; adapting traditional practices to changing circumstances while retaining their cultural significance can also be part of cultural continuity.

An important question arises here: When the social context and audience of a traditional cultural practice change, how does it maintain its identity? In the case of Kalbelia dance, continuity can be understood through the preservation of core cultural elements that remain present even when the location, purpose, and form of performance change. Dance therefore represents both cultural continuity and cultural adaptation.

The younger generation also contributes to this reconfiguration of cultural identity. Greater access to education, digital communication, and contemporary cultural spaces has provided young Kalbelia women with new ways of connecting with their heritage. Tradition and modernity therefore do not necessarily need to be viewed as opposing conditions. Cultural identity can be maintained while being reinterpreted according to changing aspirations and social circumstances.

Kalbelia women should not be viewed merely as custodians of inherited traditions. They also play an active role in determining how those traditions are presented, understood, and expressed in contemporary India.

Gender, Agency, and Empowerment

The changing occupational position of Kalbelia women also affects gender relations within the community. Participation in paid cultural work can increase women's contribution to household income and provide them with a more visible role in the public sphere. However, the actual extent of empowerment depends on the degree of freedom women possess in making decisions regarding their work, income, mobility, and personal lives.

For Kalbelia women, participation in professional cultural work may create opportunities for autonomy that could previously have been relatively limited when economic security depended heavily on family or marital relationships. At the same time, increased participation in public performance does not eliminate existing gender expectations. Domestic responsibilities, family expectations, social norms, and unequal working conditions may continue to influence women's choices and opportunities.

Thus, the experience of Kalbelia women demonstrates that agency and decision-making capacity can develop through changing economic and occupational circumstances, while structural constraints do not necessarily disappear. Gender is therefore an essential dimension for understanding the social implications of demographic and occupational transformation within the Kalbelia community.

Policy Perspectives

The changing lives of Kalbelia women indicate the need for policies that address livelihood security, education, working conditions, and cultural preservation together. When Kalbelia women travel for cultural performances, professional participation may also involve inadequate accommodation, low remuneration, and limited institutional support. Therefore, recognizing folk art alone is not sufficient; artists must also be provided with dignified and safe working conditions.

A practical policy measure could be to establish clear standards for remuneration and accommodation for folk artists participating in government cultural programmes, festivals, and tourism events. Organizers should provide predetermined payments, safe accommodation, local transportation, and other necessary facilities. This could help reduce unequal treatment among different categories of performing artists.

Education is another important area of intervention. Asha Sopera's experience highlights the importance of educational opportunities for the children of folk artists. Scholarships, educational assistance, and skill-development programmes can help members of the younger generation pursue formal education while remaining connected with their cultural heritage.

Similarly, digital training and access to online cultural platforms can create new opportunities for young Kalbelia women. Training in digital promotion, recording, social media, and online cultural presentation can help artists reach audiences beyond local performance spaces and develop additional sources of income.

Social security measures are also important. The income of folk artists may depend on performance opportunities that are not regular. Access to appropriate welfare schemes, health assistance, insurance, and financial support during periods of limited employment can provide artists with greater livelihood security.

Finally, cultural policy should ensure that Kalbelia women are not viewed merely as performers representing a “traditional” community. Their participation in decisions concerning the presentation, promotion, and commercial use of their cultural practices is important. Cultural institutions and tourism programmes can involve experienced Kalbelia artists in designing performances, training young artists, and determining how cultural traditions are presented to audiences. This would connect cultural preservation with the economic rights, dignity, and agency of artists.

Thus, policy for the Kalbelia community should not be limited to cultural preservation. A more inclusive approach should simultaneously address fair remuneration, safe working conditions, education, digital skills, social security, and meaningful participation of women in cultural decision-making.

Conclusion

The changing lives of Kalbelia women folk dancers reveal an important dimension of ongoing demographic and social transformation in India. Their experiences demonstrate that demographic change is not limited to transformations in population structure but is also expressed through changes in family, education, occupation, mobility, gender roles, and cultural identity.

The experience of the Kalbelia community demonstrates that social change does not necessarily require a complete break from tradition. Instead, traditional cultural practices can acquire new meanings in response to changing economic, educational, and social circumstances. Kalbelia women are therefore not merely passive carriers of tradition; they are active participants in shaping their social and cultural identities. At the same time, the opportunities created by social and occupational transformation are not equally available to all, as family responsibilities, gender norms, and insecure professional conditions continue to influence women’s choices.

The experiences of the younger generation also demonstrate that cultural identity can be maintained while being transformed according to contemporary circumstances. Education, artistic development, and engagement with new cultural spaces can coexist with cultural

continuity. This suggests that Kalbelia identity is not a static inheritance but a living process of continuous reinterpretation and negotiation.

The policy implications of this transformation are equally important. Cultural preservation needs to be connected with the dignity, security, and opportunities of the artists who sustain cultural traditions. Therefore, appropriate working conditions, educational opportunities, social security, and meaningful participation of women in cultural decision-making are essential components of more inclusive cultural development.

Ultimately, the experience of the Kalbelia community broadens our understanding of demographic transition. It demonstrates that demographic change is deeply connected with the ways in which people reorganize family, occupation, aspirations, mobility, gender relations, and cultural identity. Studying these processes through the lived experiences of Kalbelia women makes it clear that demographic transition is not merely a matter of population statistics; it is also a process that transforms human lives, social relationships, and cultural worlds

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