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Dance Geography and Uneven Geographies of Livelihood Shift among the Kalbelia Community in Rajasthan

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the transformation of livelihood among Kalbelia women of Rajasthan, tracing their shift from the historically stigmatized practice of snake charming to the globally recognized domain of folk dance performance. Grounded in the framework of Dance Geography, the study argues that this shift was not a uniform cultural evolution but a spatially contingent reconstitution of identity and economy, made possible through specific institutional, touristic, and representational geographies. Drawing on ethnographic insights, archival references, and spatial theory, the paper identifies key milestones—such as the state's tourism interventions, the influence of folklore scholars, cinematic mediations, and the 2010 UNESCO inscription—that enabled Kalbelia dance to emerge as a sustainable livelihood in select districts. It also interrogates the unevenness of this transition, revealing how regions with strong institutional density and tourism circuits acted as spatial thresholds, while others with significant Kalbelia populations remained excluded from this reconfiguration. By analysing Kalbelia women's performative mobility across Pushkar, Jaipur, Jodhpur, and Jaisalmer, the study demonstrates how embodied cultural practices are choreographed into economic forms through the politics of place, visibility, and heritage economies. In doing so, the paper contributes to broader debates in cultural geography, performance studies, and livelihood transformation by foregrounding how marginalised communities negotiate identity, mobility, and resilience through the spatial politics of dance.

Keywords: Kalbelia women, Dance geography, Cultural livelihood, Spatial transformation

INTRODUCTION

The transformation of Kalbelia women's livelihood from snake charming to professional dance performance is not merely a shift in occupation, but a profound rearticulation of identity, spatial practice, and cultural capital. Historically categorized under the colonial label of "criminal tribes" and later denotified, Kalbelia communities have long negotiated marginality through their mobility, ritual knowledge, and public performance. With the passing of the Wildlife Protection Act in 1972, which criminalised the capture and display of snakes, Kalbelia communities lost access to a key ecological resource that had sustained their traditional livelihoods for generations. This legislative rupture, combined with the earlier abolition of princely patronage systems post-1947, dismantled the twin pillars—ecological and social—that had legitimised snake charming as a caste-based occupation.

Out of this rupture, Kalbelia dance gradually emerged as a new form of cultural livelihood. However, its emergence was not spontaneous or evenly distributed. Instead, it unfolded through spatially contingent milestones—moments shaped by tourism policy, folklore documentation, cinematic representation, and heritage recognition. The role of institutional actors, such as the Rajasthan Tourism Department, cultural brokers like Komal Kothari, and international platforms such as UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage listing in 2010, played a significant part in reshaping Kalbelia dance from a stigmatized practice into a globally circulated form of "folk art."

This paper examines the uneven geography of this transformation, arguing that the emergence of Kalbelia

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dance as livelihood depended not simply on cultural adaptation, but on the availability of enabling geographies—urban proximity, tourism circuits, state infrastructures, and symbolic platforms. While districts such as Ajmer, Jaipur, Jodhpur, and Jaisalmer became epicentres of visibility and performance economy, other regions with sizeable Kalbelia populations did not experience similar transitions. These disparities point to the central role of space in shaping access to cultural capital.

Framed through the lens of Dance Geography, this study treats Kalbelia dance not only as aesthetic movement, but as an embodied negotiation with space, identity, and survival. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, archival references, and spatial theory, the paper explores how Kalbelia women's bodies became sites of cultural labour—making place, making livelihood, and making visible a reimagined form of belonging in contemporary Rajasthan.

Conceptual Framework:

Understanding the uneven emergence of Kalbelia dance as a livelihood requires a conceptual approach that recognizes livelihood as something more than economic substitution. It is a spatially mediated process through which identities, bodies, and opportunities are reorganized within shifting landscapes of power. Theories from cultural geography, performance studies, and social theory together provide a lens through which to examine how Kalbelia dance took root in some districts of Rajasthan while remaining absent in others.

At the heart of this framework is Henri Lefebvre's argument that space is socially produced rather than passively given. Space, in this sense, is shaped by institutional arrangements, cultural imaginaries, economic interests, and everyday practices. This perspective enables us to understand why certain locations develop as cultural or economic hubs: they are not simply physical settings, but spaces actively crafted through festivals, tourism infrastructures, state-sponsored cultural projects, and the expectations of audiences. When applied to the Kalbelia transformation, this idea suggests that the emergence of dance was made possible not by population density or cultural continuity, but by the character of the spaces that surrounded Kalbelias—spaces that invited visibility, curated heritage, or offered platforms for performance.

Complementing this spatial lens is the field of dance geography, which conceptualizes dance as a spatial practice that produces meanings, affects, and relations through embodied movement. Scholars such as Thrift and McCormack argue that performance does not merely take place in space—it helps create space, imbuing landscapes with atmosphere, rhythm, and social significance. Through this lens, the Kalbelia shift can be understood as a reorientation of embodied knowledge: from intimate, ritualized engagements with snakes to choreographed public performances oriented toward spectators. Dance geography also emphasizes that not all spaces afford equal opportunities for performance. Performance is shaped by the sensory qualities of place, the density of cultural infrastructures, and the presence of audiences whose gaze can transform movement into livelihood. Thus, this perspective deepens our ability to analyze why only certain districts evolved into performance ecologies suitable for reconstituting Kalbelia livelihood.

A third conceptual strand comes from Bourdieu's theory of fields and capital, which provides tools to understand how communities navigate shifting structures of value and legitimacy. As traditional forms of symbolic and cultural capital associated with snake charming collapsed, Kalbelias entered new fields—tourism, folklore, cultural festivals, and heritage economies—where different forms of capital were recognized. Bourdieu's framework highlights that access to these fields is uneven, dependent on networks, recognition, and the ability to perform in ways that align with the expectations of those who dominate the field. It also illuminates how cultural practices must be made legible within specific institutional logics in order to generate value. This perspective helps explain why livelihood opportunities appeared unevenly across Rajasthan: certain locations offered access to fields where Kalbelia performance could be valued, while others remained disconnected from these circuits of recognition.

Integrating these strands allows the study to approach the Kalbelia transformation as a geographically uneven process shaped by the production of space, the spatiality of embodied performance, and the distribution of institutional and symbolic capital. Together, they offer a framework that does not treat Kalbelia dance as a natural cultural evolution but as a situated and contingent response to structural rupture—one that unfolded differently across districts because the spatial, institutional, and cultural conditions that make performance valuable are themselves unevenly distributed. This conceptual grounding guides the

analysis that follows and provides the lens through which the milestones of livelihood change are interpreted.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative and interpretive research design suited to understanding livelihood transformation as a spatial and embodied process. Fieldwork was conducted across four districts of Rajasthan through semi-structured interviews with Kalbelia women dancers, male ex-snake charmers, musicians, and cultural intermediaries. These conversations explored personal histories, spatial trajectories, and the ways participants negotiated changing forms of visibility and opportunity.

Ethnographic observation in performance settings—such as fairs, cultural festivals, and tourist sites—allowed attention to atmosphere, embodied practice, and the material textures of performance spaces. This approach aligns with dance geography's emphasis on movement, affect, and the spatiality of cultural expression.

Archival sources, including cultural policy documents, folklore archives, media representations, and tourism publications, were examined to situate participants' experiences within broader institutional and historical contexts.

Data analysis followed an inductive, iterative process influenced by grounded theory principles without seeking to construct a formal grounded theory. Open and interpretive coding allowed themes to emerge organically from fieldnotes, interviews, and archival material, while concepts from Lefebvre, Bourdieu, and dance geography served as sensitizing lenses that enriched rather than predetermined the analysis.

Ethical considerations were central to the research, with informed consent obtained from all participants and particular care taken in working with Kalbelia women, whose performance labour is often intertwined with vulnerability and public visibility.

This methodological approach supports a nuanced reading of Kalbelia livelihood shifts as spatially uneven and embedded in embodied, institutional, and cultural processes.

Historical Background: Mythic Origins, Criminalization, and the Collapse of Snake Charming:

The historical trajectory of the Kalbelia community is inseparable from the intersections of mythic ancestry, caste-based itinerancy, colonial criminalization, and ecological regulation. Kalbelias of Rajasthan are popularly associated with snake charming, but this identity has deeper roots in a composite repertoire of ritual work, ecological expertise, bodily performance, and mobility (Higgins, 2010). Their transformation from snake handlers to stage performers must be understood not as a simple occupational shift, but as the consequence of layered historical ruptures that destabilized their traditional resource systems and social legitimacy.

Kalbelias trace their ancestry to Kanifnath, a saintly figure of the Nath yogic tradition, and situate their knowledge of snakes within divine cosmologies that associate their practices with Lord Shiva and serpent worship. These mythic genealogies, far from being decorative, form the basis of ritual legitimacy in rural Rajasthan, where the Kalbelia's role as snake handlers was once revered during festivals, field rituals, and healing practices (Narayan, 1997). Their work was not only technical but symbolic—mediating between danger and protection, death and healing.

Historically, Kalbelias lived itinerant lives, moving seasonally through villages, performing snake displays, extracting venom, offering herbal antidotes, and engaging in ritualized begging. According to Carter Higgins' (2010) ethnographic thesis at Cornell University, such practices were understood by Kalbelias not as marginal survival strategies but as "conjoined repertoires" of bodily knowledge, ritual memory, and caste labour. Their mobility was central to their livelihood—moving with monsoons, snake migrations, and village festival cycles. This resonates with Berland's (1982) wider theory of peripatetic service communities, which shows how nomadic castes across South Asia developed highly specialised ecological and ritual functions that required constant movement.

However, the colonial state profoundly disrupted this mobile world. Under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, many peripatetic and performing communities were labelled as "hereditarily criminal," including groups associated with snake charming, animal display, and itinerant trade. Although the Act was repealed in 1952, Kalbelias became part of the Denotified Tribes, who continued to face social stigma, police surveillance, and exclusion from welfare programs. As Radhakrishna (2007) notes, colonial constructions of criminality embedded a logic of suspicion into postcolonial

governance structures, and the Renke Commission Report (Government of India, 2008) documented how Denotified and Nomadic Tribes (DNTs) remained trapped in cycles of exclusion, even decades after the Act's repeal.

In Rajasthan, this stigma combined with the erosion of ritual patronage after the abolition of princely states in 1947, which removed the Kalbelias' symbolic clients and ritual sponsors. Earlier, royal courts had engaged snake charmers for performances, festivals, and symbolic displays, thus embedding them into circuits of prestige and ritual economy.

The decisive blow came with the enactment of the Wildlife Protection Act (1972). While necessary for conservation, the law criminalised the capture, possession, and display of snakes, rendering the Kalbelias' main occupation illegal overnight. This law, while ecological in intent, led to a sudden delegitimization of embodied, generational knowledge. For Kalbelias, the snake was not merely an animal—it was both a ritual partner and an ecological livelihood asset. With its removal, they lost access to their primary natural capital.

As a result, Kalbelias entered the late 20th century facing a layered crisis:

- Their knowledge was criminalised,
- Their ritual identity was delegitimised,
- Their movement was suspect,
- And their social and spatial field of work had collapsed.

As Higgins (2010) recounts in oral narratives, this period was not one of linear transition but of rupture, in which some families "hid their snakes," others "turned to begging," and still others began experimenting with dance as a new way of being seen, respected, and paid. These transformations laid the foundation for Kalbelia dance to emerge—initially as improvisation, later as professional performance.

Thus, the decline of snake charming was not simply an occupational shift, but a deep displacement of cultural capital, spiritual memory, and ecological practice. The dance that emerged later must be seen as a resilient response to exclusion, not a folkloric continuation. Understanding this history is essential to grasping why Kalbelia dance did not evolve uniformly across regions, and why certain districts—like Jaipur, Jodhpur, Jaisalmer, and Ajmer—emerged as new spatial anchors of livelihood, while others did not.

Findings: Milestones in the Transition to Kalbelia Dance

Structural Rupture: Loss of Field, Territory, and Visibility

Conversations with elder Kalbelia snake charmers and younger dancers make one truth unmistakably clear: the collapse of their traditional livelihood was not just economic — it was existential. Two key ruptures — the withdrawal of princely patronage and the banning of snake-handling under wildlife law — uprooted their identity from the social and ecological fields in which it once held meaning.

Under Bourdieu's theory of capital and field, Kalbelia snake-charming practices once functioned as cultural capital, legitimised within a symbolic field structured by princely courts, seasonal rituals, and caste-based patronage. Their embodied knowledge had value because it was situated within these socio-symbolic spaces. With the dissolution of princely states and the end of courtly systems after independence, that field collapsed — and with it, the ability to convert cultural capital into livelihood (Bourdieu, 1986).

This was followed by a second rupture: the criminalisation of snake-handling under the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972. The law, though rooted in ecological concern, made Kalbelia practices illegal overnight. Generational knowledge of snake ecology and ritual performance became criminalised. This represents what political ecologists describe as conservation dispossession, where state-led environmental regulation displaces Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and the communities that depend on it, without any rehabilitation (Peluso, 1993).

Together, these ruptures enacted what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) term deterritorialization — a process through which cultural practice is stripped of the spatial and social territories that once gave it meaning. The Kalbelia's mobility, once tied to seasonal performance, local patronage, and ritual cycles, now carried the risk of arrest, humiliation, or invisibility. Their presence became unwelcome, their work legally and socially unrecognised.

And yet, even within this erasure, Kalbelia women began to carve new possibilities. As Butler's (1993) theory of performativity reminds us, subjectivity is not just narrated but enacted – often under constraint. For Kalbelia women, dance became an emergent script for survival — not just aesthetic, but political. Their bodies, no longer allowed to perform with snakes, began to re-

choreograph visibility through movement, costume, and presence. This shift did not begin with tourism or recognition. It began in the in-between — the space between exclusion and adaptation.

Uneven Geographies shaping the livelihood opportunities for the Kalbelia community:

Ajmer–Jaipur: Visibility, Tourism, and the Performance of Folk Identity

The initial reconfiguration of Kalbelia livelihood through dance was neither spontaneous nor uniformly distributed across Rajasthan. Instead, it emerged first through a spatial and institutional synergy between Ajmer and Jaipur, where state-led tourism, infrastructural proximity, and cultural branding converged to offer Kalbelia women dancers their earliest stages of public performance.

The Pushkar Camel Fair, located near Ajmer, served as the initial site of visibility. In the early 1980s, the Rajasthan Tourism Department began repositioning the fair from a religious and cattle-trading event into an international cultural spectacle. This curatorial shift involved staging performances that could align with global imaginaries of "Rajasthani folk." It was in this context that Gulabo Sapera, a young Kalbelia girl dancing informally at the margins of the fair, was noticed by tourism officials and invited to perform on formal platforms. Her rise to recognition marked the first symbolic rupture from snake charming to staged dance, and more crucially, the beginning of institutional mediation of Kalbelia identity.

Following her discovery, Gulabo relocated to Jaipur, where she became embedded within the capital's expanding network of cultural festivals, heritage shows, and NGO circuits. Jaipur, as the administrative and tourism epicentre of Rajasthan, offered Kalbelia dancers both symbolic legitimacy and logistical access to performance work. Its status within the Golden Triangle tourism circuit (Delhi–Agra–Jaipur) ensured high tourist footfall and constant demand for staged folk performances, which increasingly incorporated Kalbelia dance for its distinctive aesthetic appeal — black swirling skirts, silver jewellery, and serpentine body movements that resonated with both exoticism and visual spectacle.

The allocation of housing to Kalbelia families in Jaipur's Kalakar Colony further grounded this shift spatially. While modest in infrastructure, the colony facilitated proximity to booking agents, cultural institutions, and event organisers, allowing many women to move from itinerant, marginalised lives into structured performance work. Similarly, in Ganahera village near the Pushkar fairground, another group of Kalbelia families were settled, anchoring their presence at the very site where their dance had first entered public view. These two spatial nodes—Kalakar Colony in Jaipur and Ganahera in Ajmer district—thus became important hubs for Kalbelia dancers navigating the circuits of cultural performance and tourism work.

Field interviews with Kalbelia dancers suggest that the transition was uneven — access often depended on prior visibility, kinship networks, or affiliation with recognised artists like Gulabo. Nonetheless, Jaipur and Pushkar together offered a stable geography of opportunity, where Kalbelia dance could evolve from sporadic fairground acts into a repeatable livelihood resource.

From a theoretical standpoint, this transition reflects what Cresswell (2006) terms the "politics of mobility": Kalbelia women could now move — but only through curated channels of state festivals and tourist entertainment. Their visibility was conditional on conforming to the aesthetic codes of folkness, not on their own cultural narratives. Similarly, using Bourdieu's (1986) theory, the Kalbelia community was able to convert its embodied cultural capital—once criminalised under wildlife law—into symbolic capital via institutional recognition, though often within restrictive frameworks.

In effect, Ajmer and Jaipur served as the first spatial nodes where Kalbelia dance was rendered not only performable but also marketable, visible, and temporally continuous. These cities did not create Kalbelia dance, but they provided the enabling geography for its transformation from outlawed ritual to staged tradition.

Jodhpur–Jaisalmer: Heritage Revival, Desert Tourism, and the Global Aesthetic of Kalbelia

While Ajmer and Jaipur marked the institutional entry of Kalbelia dance into state-curated performance circuits, the western desert districts of Jodhpur and Jaisalmer enabled its consolidation as both heritage spectacle and touristic labour. Together, these regions offered contrasting but complementary trajectories: Jodhpur through the archiving and institutional valorisation of Kalbelia music and dance, and Jaisalmer through the seasonal commodification of desert aesthetics and the everyday performance economy.

In Jodhpur, the transformation began in the 1980s with the work of Komal Kothari, co-founder of Rupayan Sansthan, whose documentation of marginalised communities brought Kalbelia artists such as Kalunath Sapera and Mohini Devi into institutional view. Their music was recorded for All India Radio and later featured in folklore festivals, effectively recoding Kalbelia knowledge from itinerant ritual labour to intangible heritage. The Mehrangarh Museum Trust, along with other documentation and festival initiatives, extended this visibility. As Bourdieu (1993) notes, such institutional consecration of cultural forms marks a shift in legitimacy — though often mediated by dominant representational frameworks.

This shift became most tangible in Jaisalmer, where desert tourism rapidly expanded in the 1990s and 2000s. The city's transformation into a winter destination coincided with a rising global demand for "authentic" desert experiences. Kalbelia women became central to this imaginary: their performances—marked by fluidity, ornamented black ghaghras, and rhythmic precision—were seamlessly woven into the choreography of bonfire-lit evenings in desert camps at Sam, Khuri, and Kanoi.

A key moment in shaping this aesthetic was the release of the 1991 Bollywood film *Lamhe*, directed by Yash Chopra. In the now-iconic sequence "Morni Baga Ma Bole," Sridevi performs against the backdrop of sand dunes in Jaisalmer, surrounded by dancers in black traditional Rajasthani attire—among them Ila Arun and other local artists, enacting the desert "gypsy" aesthetic around a bonfire. This visualisation did more than entertain: it established a cinematic vocabulary for what desert tourism should look like. Kalbelia women, with their costuming, presence, and movements, became central to delivering this imagined authenticity for both domestic and international tourists.

The post-*Latcho Drom* (1993) moment only deepened this process. Tony Gatlif's film, featuring Suwa Devi, placed Kalbelia performance within a global Romani framework, attracting Western tourists who sought "gypsy culture" in Rajasthan. Tourist villages near Osian and Bishnoi settlements also began offering curated rural performances, further expanding seasonal opportunities for Kalbelia women.

Yet, while desert tourism provided months-long seasonal employment, it also led to forms of cultural and economic precarity. Performers worked without contracts, artistic control, or formal protection, even as their image became central to Rajasthan's global cultural branding.

In sum, Jodhpur and Jaisalmer represent twin axes in Kalbelia livelihood transformation: the former through institutional consecration, the latter through performative commodification. Together, they reterritorialised Kalbelia identity—shifting it from ritual secrecy and stigma to public visibility and marketable tradition, albeit through uneven and often gendered pathways.

UNESCO Inscription and Global Recognition:

The UNESCO inscription of Kalbelia folk songs and dance in 2010 as part of the *Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity* marked a significant symbolic turning point. It formalised Kalbelia performance as not only culturally valuable within India, but also as part of the global patrimony of humanity. This recognition elevated Kalbelia dance from the margins of caste-based itinerancy into an international emblem of Rajasthan's heritage.

Following the inscription, Kalbelia dance was incorporated into state-sponsored cultural diplomacy, featured in international festivals, and taught in global workshops. The form gained symbolic capital in the sense described by Bourdieu (1993)—legitimated through its listing and increasingly mobilised by tourism departments and NGOs. For some prominent artists, particularly those already connected to institutional networks, the inscription opened new avenues for foreign travel, visibility, and funding.

Yet, as field interviews and Higgins (2010) note, the material benefits of this recognition remained highly uneven. Many Kalbelia women performers in local circuits were unaware of the listing or unable to access its advantages. Their work remained precarious, dependent on seasonal tourism, and shaped by aesthetic expectations defined externally.

The UNESCO listing, then, reflects what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004) calls the "heritage effect"—where living traditions are reframed for external consumption. While the label elevated Kalbelia's image on the global stage, it did not dismantle the hierarchies and exclusions embedded within local performance economies.

Uneven Geographies of Transformation: Spatial Gaps in Cultural Transition:

The transformation of Kalbelia livelihood from snake

charming to dance-based performance was not uniformly distributed across Rajasthan. Despite the presence of significant Kalbelia populations in many regions, not all localities underwent this cultural and economic transition. This spatial unevenness reflects deeper structural conditions—particularly the absence of institutional density, lack of tourism infrastructure, and weak integration into heritage economies.

In areas that remained outside the transformation arc, Kalbelia communities often encountered limited access to performance platforms, cultural festivals, or heritage circuits. These geographies lacked the institutional scaffolding—such as state-sponsored academies, artist colonies, or folklore documentation initiatives—that played a pivotal role in more visible regions. Without these infrastructures, the reconstitution of Kalbelia identity through dance could not gain either momentum or visibility.

Moreover, the tourism economies in these regions tended to be either underdeveloped or oriented around narratives and aesthetics that did not include nomadic or peripatetic communities. Where tourism existed, it was often shaped by elite or royal heritage imaginaries, with little space for marginalized caste-based performers. Consequently, Kalbelia dancers had fewer opportunities to enter commercial performance circuits or to benefit from cultural mediation by NGOs, filmmakers, or tourism officials.

From a dance geography perspective, the emergence of Kalbelia dance as livelihood depended on the presence of what Cresswell (2006) and McCormack (2008) term "spatial thresholds"—sites where bodies, spaces, and institutions intersect to produce recognition. In their absence, the transformation did not materialize, not due to lack of cultural capacity, but due to the absence of performative infrastructure and audience-facing geographies.

This unevenness is therefore a cartographic insight: it reminds us that cultural transitions are not solely the result of community agency but are mediated by place-specific assemblages of visibility, value, and institutional proximity.

Discussion and Analysis:

Dance Geography and the Spatial Emergence of Kalbelia Performance

The shift from snake charming to Kalbelia dance as a viable livelihood strategy reflects not only a cultural transformation but a distinctly spatial phenomenon. Through the lens of Dance Geography, it becomes evident that this transition was shaped by the geographies of opportunity, institutional presence, and touristic flow—factors that made some locations fertile grounds for performance-based visibility, while others remained outside the trajectory of transformation.

As Cresswell (2006) and McCormack (2008) suggest, space is not simply a container in which movement happens; it is produced through embodied practices, institutional interactions, and socio-political narratives. Kalbelia dance, in this context, must be seen as a mobile cultural form, emerging in regions where bodies, audiences, and institutions intersected. Cities like Ajmer, Jaipur, Jodhpur, and Jaisalmer became spatial thresholds—sites where Kalbelia women could convert their embodied knowledge into livelihood, largely because these places offered tourism circuits, state cultural infrastructures, and festival economies.

These were not just destinations with high tourist footfall; they were performative landscapes, already coded through festivals (Pushkar Fair), heritage branding (Mehrangarh, Jaisalmer Fort), and cinematic representations (*Lamhe*, *Latcho Drom*). These spaces invited performance, allowing Kalbelia dance to be publicly staged, circulated, and increasingly institutionalised.

Conversely, regions without such circuits—those lacking proximity to cultural nodes or infrastructural networks—did not experience the same shift. This is not to suggest failure or backwardness, but to highlight how opportunity in dance-based livelihoods is spatially mediated. As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004) argues, heritage becomes viable when it is curated for circulation, and that curation is often place-specific. Not all spaces carry the same capacity to host, project, or monetise cultural performance.

What emerges, then, is a geography of cultural emergence—where Kalbelia dance flourished not merely due to internal community initiative, but because certain locations allowed that initiative to gain momentum, recognition, and material traction. These spaces functioned as platforms, amplifying visibility through their institutional density, touristic aesthetics, and representational infrastructures.

In this way, Dance Geography helps us understand Kalbelia livelihood transition not just as cultural adaptation, but as a spatial choreography of access—where

movement, visibility, and capital are possible when space itself becomes enabling.

Conclusion:

The shift from snake charming to Kalbelia dance as a sustainable livelihood among Kalbelia women is not merely a narrative of cultural reinvention—it is a geography of movement, mediation, and spatial enablement. Through this study, it becomes clear that Kalbelia dance did not emerge as livelihood uniformly across Rajasthan, but rather through milestones embedded in specific spatial contexts, shaped by tourism economies, institutional density, and cultural infrastructures.

Ajmer, Jaipur, Jodhpur, and Jaisalmer functioned as spatial thresholds, where Kalbelia women could enter new circuits of visibility—whether through state festivals, urban cultural programming, heritage tourism, or global media imaginaries. These districts provided not only platforms for performance but also symbolic and economic capital, enabling Kalbelia women to negotiate caste-based marginality through embodied cultural expression. In contrast, regions lacking such infrastructural affordances did not experience the same transformation, highlighting the critical role of space in determining the trajectory of cultural livelihoods.

By framing this analysis within Dance Geography, the paper underscores how bodies in motion are not just expressive but strategic—dancing across landscapes of stigma, aspiration, and opportunity. Kalbelia performance is not simply staged for the tourist or the camera; it is also choreographed in response to the material and symbolic geographies that permit or constrain visibility.

This paper therefore contributes to broader debates in cultural geography, performance studies, and heritage politics by demonstrating how space is not a backdrop to cultural change, but a participant in its making. In the case of Kalbelia women artists, the dance is not just about movement—it is about making place, making livelihood, and making history visible.

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