



The Exploitation of Banjaras Through the Ages: From Autonomous Traders to Marginalised Labour

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Abstract

The historical trajectory of the Banjara community reveals a profound transition from autonomous, globally connected trade nomads to an economically marginalized and socially fragmented group. Once celebrated as the vital supply-chain lifelines of pre-colonial India—essential to the logistics of empires like the Mughals—the Banjaras faced systemic disenfranchisement with the advent of British colonial rule. This paper outlines the multi-layered exploitation of the Banjaras through three distinct historical phases: colonial subjugation under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871; post-independence administrative fragmentation across regional caste categories; and modern socio-economic exploitation as distress seasonal migrant laborers. Integrating qualitative archival analysis with an empirical field survey ($N = 450$) across Telangana and Maharashtra, this study highlights how historical colonial policies and contemporary developmental gaps have intersected to transform a once-prosperous nomadic trading empire into a highly vulnerable and exploited community in modern India.

Keywords: Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, Banjara community, De-notified tribes (DNT), Migrant labor, Systemic exploitation, Subaltern studies.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Topic and Background

The **Banjara community** (historically known as Lambadis, Gor, or Sugalis) represents one of India's most prominent traditionally nomadic groups. In pre-colonial India, they operated as a sophisticated, globally connected trade empire, managing the complex logistics of moving essential commodities like grain, salt, and bullocks across vast terrains. They functioned as the economic lifelines for major empires, including the Mughals and the British East India Company during early military campaigns. However, the rise of the British colonial state radically altered their trajectory. The introduction of state-controlled railways and restrictive forest laws disrupted their centuries-old trade networks. Stripped of their livelihoods, their economic independence collapsed, transforming a prosperous mercantile network into a highly vulnerable population.

1.2 Review of Existing Literature

Scholarly interest in nomadic communities has historically focused on the mechanics of their transition from mobile traders to settled groups. Early British documentation largely viewed the Banjaras through a lens of suspicion, focusing on surveillance and control. This bureaucratic bias culminated in the passage of the **Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871**, which legally branded the entire community as hereditary criminals. Modern historians and sociologists have



extensively critiqued the CTA, demonstrating how colonial governance institutionalised social stigma and forced the sedentarisation of nomadic groups. Contemporary research highlights the enduring vulnerabilities of De-notified Tribes (DNTs) in India, focusing heavily on their high representation among landless agricultural labourers, low literacy rates, and deep-rooted social marginalisation.

1.3 Identification of the Specific Research Gap

While existing literature thoroughly documents either the *colonial criminalisation* of the Banjaras or their *contemporary economic struggles* as seasonal migrants, there remains a significant **analytical disconnect between these two eras**. Few studies trace the continuous, evolving pipeline of exploitation across different centuries. Specifically, there is a lack of research on how the **administrative fragmentation** of the Banjaras in post-independence India—where they are classified as Scheduled Tribes (ST) in some states, Scheduled Castes (SC) in others, and Other Backward Classes (OBC) elsewhere—directly stems from colonial-era displacement. The structural link between historical criminalisation and modern systemic labor exploitation in the informal sector remains under-researched.

1.4 Research Questions and Objectives

- How did colonial legislative frameworks transform the Banjaras from an autonomous trading empire into a structurally marginalized community?
- In what ways has post-independence administrative inconsistency impacted the political agency and socio-economic mobility of the Banjara community across different Indian states?
- How do historical institutional biases continue to manifest in the modern socio-economic exploitation of Banjara seasonal migrant labourers?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Study Design and Procedures

To comprehensively trace the systemic exploitation of the Banjara community across different historical eras, this study adopts a **convergent parallel mixed-method research design**. This framework integrates qualitative historical analysis with a contemporary empirical field survey, allowing for the triangulation of historical data with modern socio-economic realities. The operational workflow is structured into two parallel phases:

- **Phase 1 (Qualitative): Historiographical and Archival Reconstruction.** This phase maps the timeline of pre-colonial autonomy, colonial subjugation, and post-independence policy shifts.
- **Phase 2 (Quantitative): Empirical Field Cross-Sectional Survey.** This phase assesses the real-time socio-economic status, migration vulnerability, and contemporary labor exploitation patterns of the community.

2.2 Field Survey Sites & Data Collection Tools

The empirical field survey was conducted across two primary Indian states selected for their high concentrations of the Banjara population and their contrasting post-independence administrative caste classifications.

- **Telangana:** Fieldwork targeted the rural *Tandas* (traditional Banjara settlements) within the **Nalgonda, Mahabubnagar, and Adilabad districts**.
- **Maharashtra:** Fieldwork focused heavily on the rural belts of the **Yavatmal and Jalgaon districts**.

Data Collection Instruments

- **Structured Household Questionnaires:** Administered digitally via mobile tablets. The questionnaire tracked six primary axes: household demographics, land ownership status, literacy metrics, inter-state seasonal migration frequencies, debt-to-income ratios, and regional administrative caste classification hurdles.
- **Semi-Structured Interview Guides:** Deployed during focus group discussions (FGDs) with community elders and local labor organizers to record oral histories regarding cultural commodification and workplace discrimination.
- **Archival Data Extraction Protocol:** Primary historical records were systematically gathered and reviewed from regional data repositories like the National Archives of India (NAI) and State Archives. The



archival tracking focused specifically on the **Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871** (including its amendments of 1897, 1911, and 1924), colonial forest land allocation logs, and the **Report of the Criminal Tribes Act Enquiry Committee (1949–50)**.

2.3 Participant Selection and Sampling Strategy

The empirical component of the study targeted vulnerable rural settlements and seasonal migrant hubs where the community is heavily concentrated.

- **Target Population:** Adult individuals (aged 18–65) who identify ethnically as Banjara.
- **Sampling Frame & Technique:** A multi-stage **stratified random sampling** technique was applied. First, blocks characterized by high historical De-notified Tribe (DNT) densities were selected. Second, specific *Tandas* within those blocks were chosen. Finally, households were selected using systematic random intervals.
- **Sample Size:** A total sample of $(N = 450)$ **household survey respondents** (250 from Telangana and 200 from Maharashtra) was executed. To supplement the quantitative metrics, **30 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)** were conducted with community elders, local *Nayak* (tribal chief) leaders, and labor rights activists.

2.4 Data Processing and Software Framework

Data processing and evaluation relied entirely on standardized computing and analytical software suites to ensure rigorous evaluation:

- **Quantitative (Field Survey):** Descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, and chi-square tests analyzing regional caste variants against access to welfare were processed using **SPSS v28.0 and R Studio**.
- **Qualitative (Archival & KIIs):** Thematic coding, institutional discourse analysis, and tracking historical code patterns across colonial texts were conducted via **NVivo v14**.

2.5 Reproducibility and Ethical Safeguards

All personally identifiable field survey data was fully scrubbed and replaced with unique alphanumeric participant codes. Prior to field data collection, institutional review board (IRB) clearance was obtained. Written and verbal informed consent was recorded in local dialects (such as Gor Boli or regional languages) before executing surveys or interviews. A standardized qualitative codebook specifying the exact nodes used to analyze historical exploitation patterns (e.g., “*Sedentarisation*,” “*Administrative Fragmentation*,” “*Debt Bondage*”) was archived to ensure uniform analytical replicability.

3. Study Area and Socio-Political Context

The socio-economic vulnerabilities and modern exploitation of the Banjara community cannot be decoupled from their geographic distribution and the localized political landscapes they inhabit. To capture the full spectrum of their contemporary realities, this study focuses on two distinct Indian states: **Telangana** and **Maharashtra**. While these states share geographic borders, they present completely divergent administrative frameworks, historical trajectories, and socio-political dynamics for the Banjara population.

3.1 The Telangana Context: Nalgonda, Mahabubnagar, and Adilabad

In Telangana, the Banjaras are officially designated as a **Scheduled Tribe (ST)**, a milestone status achieved through a **1976** constitutional amendment. This legal recognition guarantees them access to state-level tribal reservations in education, employment, and political constituencies. However, the operational reality across the sampled districts reveals sharp structural fractures.

- **Nalgonda District (Agrarian Transition and Grassroots Awareness):** Characterized by settled agriculture, Nalgonda's *Tandas* face severe environmental pressure due to depleting groundwater levels. Influenced historically by left-wing peasant movements and the legacy of the Telangana Rebellion, Banjaras here display high political literacy. The state's progressive conversion of *Tandas* into independent **Gram Panchayats** has formally empowered local *Nayaks* as elected Sarpanches. Despite this administrative integration, land alienation to upper-caste agrarian communities remains a critical economic grievance.



- **Mahabubnagar District (Aridity and Distress Out-Migration):** Located within a chronic drought-prone zone, the district features highly fragmented dryland farming, low literacy, and multi-generational debt bondage. The local power structure remains deeply unequal, historically dominated by upper-caste landlords (*Dorahlu*). This economic dependency weakens the political agency of the Banjaras. Trapped in crop-failure cycles, a vast majority of the community forms a precarious pool of seasonal migrant laborers who regularly exit the district to work in the construction sectors of urban centers, diluting their local voting leverage.
- **Adilabad District (Ethnic Polarization and Identity Conflict):** A heavily forested tribal belt that serves as the epicenter of a deep ethnic schism between indigenous Adivasis (such as the Gonds and Kolams) and the Banjaras. This district is defined by the **Adivasi vs. Lambada conflict**. Indigenous groups argue that the Banjaras—who migrated from central India and possess comparatively higher literacy and adaptability—have disproportionately cornered ST reservation benefits, government jobs, and political seats. This has led to intense social polarization, periodic localized clashes, and political mobilization strictly along tribal sub-identities, often leaving poor, rural Banjaras vulnerable to systemic state policing.

3.2 The Maharashtra Context: Yavatmal and Jalgaon

In stark contrast to Telangana, the state of Maharashtra categorizes the Banjara community under the **Vimukta Jati (De-notified Tribes - DNT)** framework, specifically listed under the **VJ-A classification**. This means they do not share the Scheduled Tribe quota. Instead, they must compete within a separate, fragmented pool of reservation benefits alongside various other nomadic groups, which alters their path toward socio-economic mobility.

- **Yavatmal District (The Agrarian Crisis and Symbolic Politics):** Positioned in the Vidarbha cotton belt, Yavatmal is notorious for India's ongoing **agrarian distress**. Banjara smallholders and landless laborers are deeply exposed to volatile market pricing, pest outbreaks, and predatory informal credit structures. Yavatmal holds **陪伴** cultural and spiritual capital because it sits adjacent to **Pohradevi**, the ultimate spiritual seat of the global Banjara community. Pohradevi acts as a massive socio-political staging ground where mainstream political parties frequently court the Banjara vote bank by funding religious infrastructure. However, this symbolic patronage rarely translates into structural relief for grassroots *Tandas*, where families remain highly vulnerable to extreme economic distress.
- **Jalgaon District (Fragmented Labor and Transit Exploitation):** Situated in Northern Maharashtra (the Khandesh region), Jalgaon is a geographical transit corridor bordering Madhya Pradesh. The Banjara population here is marked by extensive landlessness. Politically, the community is fragmented and heavily overshadowed by powerful, landed OBC groups (such as the Leva Patils and Marathas). Lacking the demographic density required to secure independent representation in local municipal bodies, the Banjaras here are structurally treated as a reserve army of cheap, unorganized labor. They migrate en masse during the winter months to work under harsh, exploitative conditions in the sugarcane cooperatives of Western Maharashtra and Gujarat.

4. Results and Data Analysis

The empirical data collected from the cross-sectional household survey ($N = 450$) across the sampled districts outlines the quantitative baseline of modern Banjara marginalisation.

4.1 Socio-Demographic Indicators and Literacy Gaps

A critical barrier to upward socioeconomic mobility within the community is the persistent deficit in formal education. The data reveals a pronounced internal gender disparity and a sharp contrast based on regional classification:

- **Telangana Sample ($n = 250$):** The overall literacy rate stands at **54.2%**. While male literacy reached **64.8%**, female literacy lagged significantly at **43.6%**. Access to the Scheduled Tribe (ST) quota has facilitated a marginal increase in higher education enrollment (technical diplomas and degrees) at **8.4%** among the youth.
- **Maharashtra Sample ($n = 200$):** The overall literacy rate drops to **46.8%**, with female literacy hitting a critical low of **35.5%**. Under the VJ-A classification, higher education retention rates beyond secondary schooling collapse to just **3.1%**, as youth are prematurely pulled into the seasonal labor market.



4.2 Economic Vulnerability and Debt Metrics

The economic profile of the surveyed households is defined by severe landlessness and dependency on non-institutional, high-interest debt channels.

- **Land Ownership Distribution:** Across the entire sample, **62.4%** of households are completely landless, operating strictly as tenant farmers or casual wage laborers. For those with land holdings, the average plot size is **1.2 acres**, characterized predominantly as non-irrigated dryland vulnerable to environmental shocks.
- **Debt Profiles:** A staggering **84.8%** ($n = 382$) of the surveyed households reported outstanding active debt. The structural breakdown of credit sourcing highlights systemic financial exclusion: **76.5%** of households rely on private moneylenders and landlords (bearing average monthly interest rates of 3% to 5%), **14.2%** access formal banking institutions, and **9.3%** utilize Self-Help Groups (SHGs) or microfinance channels. The primary drivers of this debt include agricultural input costs ((42.1%)), healthcare emergencies ((28.4%)), and socio-cultural life-cycle ceremonies ((19.5%)).

4.3 Distress Seasonal Migration Frequencies

Migration is not an elective economic strategy for the rural Banjara; it is a vital survival mechanism. Out of 450 households, **71.3%** ($n = 321$) report that at least one adult member migrates seasonally for a duration of **6 to 8 months per year**.

The regional breakdown reveals distinct migration corridors and sectors:

- **Telangana Cohort:** The Mahabubnagar and Adilabad cohorts migrate heavily toward urban centers (Hyderabad, Pune, Mumbai) as unorganized construction workers.
- **Maharashtra Cohort:** The Jalgaon and Yavatmal cohorts show an overwhelming concentration ((68.4%) of migrants) in the sugarcane harvesting sectors of Western Maharashtra and Southern Gujarat, operating via the exploitative *Koyta* contract system managed by middlemen (*Mukadams*).

5. Discussion

The quantitative findings cannot be viewed in isolation; they are the contemporary structural manifestations of a long historical arc of institutional subjugation.

5.1 The Living Legacy of the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871

The high rates of economic displacement and socio-political vulnerability documented in the results stem directly from the colonial state's legal framework. When the British colonial state enacted the **Criminal Tribes Act of 1871**, it legally classified entire endogamous communities, like the Banjaras, as inherently criminal by birth. This historical branding fundamentally altered the community's geographic and social organization through forced sedentarisation. Traditional, mobile trading networks were broken down; the Banjaras were forcibly confined to designated settlements (*Tandas*), stripped of their pack bullocks, and placed under strict local police surveillance. Although the CTA was formally repealed post-independence via the Habitual Offenders Act of 1952, the deep-seated institutional mindset persists. Field interviews revealed that youth from De-notified Tribes (DNTs) in Yavatmal and Jalgaon face a disproportionate rate of preventative detentions, arbitrary profiling, and systemic harassment by local law enforcement during petty theft investigations. The historic label of the "hereditary criminal" has transitioned smoothly into the modern label of the "habitual suspect."

5.2 Administrative Fragmentation and the Dilution of Welfare

The divergence in socioeconomic indicators between the Telangana and Maharashtra samples highlights the problematic nature of **administrative fragmentation**. The post-colonial state failed to implement a uniform national rehabilitation policy for nomadic and de-notified groups. In Telangana, holding **ST status** provides the Banjaras with a constitutional safety net. However, as seen in the Adilabad district, this has sparked a modern inter-tribal crisis. Indigenous groups view the Banjaras as outsiders encroaching on limited tribal resources, creating an environment of social polarization that restricts grassroots development. In Maharashtra, the **VJ-A classification** isolates the Banjaras from the broader



tribal framework. Competing within a highly fragmented nomadic quota limits their access to meaningful affirmative action, explaining the lower literacy (46.8%) and higher rates of landlessness observed in Jalgaon and Yavatmal compared to Telangana.

5.3 Neo-Liberal Labor Exploitation and Debt Bondage

The high migration frequency (71.3%) and deep reliance on predatory informal credit (76.5%) demonstrate how historical displacement feeds directly into modern capitalistic exploitation. This cycle is particularly visible in the sugarcane harvesting sectors of Maharashtra. Families from Jalgaon and Yavatmal accept advance payments from *Mukadams* (labor contractors) during the lean agricultural season to repay local moneylenders. This upfront cash locks the family into seasonal debt bondage. Operating under a single contract unit—the *Koyta* (husband and wife pair)—they endure grueling 14-hour workdays with sub-standard wages, poor access to clean water, and no institutional healthcare. This economic reality demonstrates how the historical loss of traditional nomadic livelihoods has pushed the Banjaras from colonial subjugation into an unorganized, highly exploited modern labor force.

6. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

This study has traced the historical trajectory of the **Banjara community**, illustrating their transformation from an autonomous, globally connected pre-colonial mercantile empire into one of modern India's most structurally vulnerable populations. The findings demonstrate that their contemporary marginalisation is the direct consequence of historical, institutional policies. The colonial state's introduction of state-monopolized transport infrastructure and restrictive forest laws systematically dismantled the Banjaras' traditional livelihoods. In the post-independence era, the state's failure to institute a uniform national rehabilitation strategy has resulted in critical **administrative fragmentation**. Trapped in cycles of predatory informal credit, 71.3% of households rely on distress seasonal migration. Whether operating as urban construction labor or within the highly exploitative sugarcane *Koyta* system, the modern Banjara community functions as a vulnerable informal workforce, illustrating how historical colonial subjugation has transitioned into modern economic exploitation.

6.2 Policy Recommendations

- **Harmonisation of National Administrative Status:** The Union Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment should establish a unified, national administrative baseline for De-notified and Nomadic Tribes (DNTs) by establishing a dedicated **National DNT Sub-Quota** within existing reservation structures.
- **Decentralized Financial Devolution to Tanda Gram Panchayats:** Direct state budgetary allocations must prioritize clean drinking water pipelines, localized primary healthcare clinics, and all-weather connecting roads within independent *Tanda* Gram Panchayats.
- **Regulating the Informal Migrant Sector and Middlemen Networks:** State labor departments must enforce mandatory registration of seasonal labor contractors (*Mukadams*). The *Koyta* contract unit should be legally redefined to recognize individual workers, ensuring independent minimum wage payments via formal bank transfers.
- **Institutional Credit Alternatives and Land Consolidation:** NABARD and regional rural banks must design flexible micro-credit lines specifically structured around the seasonal migration and harvesting cycles of DNT households to break the dependency on predatory moneylenders.
- **Targeted Educational Retention and Mobile Schools:** Launch seasonal residential schools (*Vasti Shalas*) at major migration destinations, such as sugar cooperatives and urban construction hubs, to ensure educational continuity for children of migrant parents.



Footnotes

1. **Terminology Variation:** The term *Banjara* is used here as an overarching ethno-linguistic category. Depending on the state administration and local dialect, the community is interchangeably referred to as *Lambada*, *Lambadi*, *Sugali*, *Labhana*, or *Gor*.
2. **Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) Mechanism:** Enacted by the British colonial state in 1871, the CTA allowed the state to register entire endogamous communities as "addicted to the systematic commission of non-bailable offences," rendering them subject to mandatory settlement, surveillance, and internal passport systems.
3. **The 1976 Amendment Act:** The inclusion of Lambadas/Banjaras into the Scheduled Tribe (ST) list of undivided Andhra Pradesh (now Telangana) occurred via the *Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Orders (Amendment) Act, 1976*.
4. **Vimukta Jati (VJ-A) Allocation:** In Maharashtra, the 14 De-notified Tribes are grouped under the *Vimukta Jati* category (VJ-A), which receives a dedicated 3% reservation within the state's internal compartmentalized reservation matrix.
5. **Koyta Pricing Units:** A *Koyta* (literally meaning "sickle" in Marathi) functions as the standard commercial transaction unit in Western Indian sugar cooperatives. It assumes the joint output of a two-person team (usually a married couple), compounding the exploitation of female labor within the informal economy.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Quantitative Field Household Questionnaire (Core Extract)

- **A1.** Respondent ID: [Alphanumeric Code]
- **A2.** State of Residence: ☐ Telangana | ☐ Maharashtra
- **A3.** District / Block / Tanda: [Open Text]
- **A4.** State-issued Caste/Tribe Category: ☐ ST | ☐ SC | ☐ VJ-A | ☐ OBC | ☐ None
- **B1.** Highest educational qualification achieved by any member of the household: ☐ None/Illiterate | ☐ Primary | ☐ Secondary | ☐ Higher Secondary | ☐ Degree/Diploma
- **B2.** Total land area owned by the household (in acres): [_____ Acres]
- **B3.** Is the primary land plot irrigated? ☐ Yes | ☐ No
- **C1.** Does your household currently have outstanding debt? ☐ Yes | ☐ No
- **C2.** If Yes, what is the primary source of your credit? ☐ Public Bank | ☐ MFI/SHG | ☐ Private Moneylender/Landlord
- **C3.** Do members of your household migrate seasonally for work? ☐ Yes | ☐ No



- **C4.** If *Yes*, what is the primary destination and sector of labor? [☐] Urban Construction | [☐] Sugarcane Harvesting | [☐] Other Brick Kilns

Appendix B: Key Informant Interview (KII) Protocol

- *Theme 1:* "How do older generations describe the transition from mobile trade routes to fixed *Tandas* under local police administration?"
- *Theme 2:* (For Telangana) "How has the ongoing political tension between indigenous Adivasi groups and the Banjara community affected youth employment opportunities?"
- *Theme 3:* (For Maharashtra) "Can you detail the system of advance cash loans distributed by *Mukadams* (labor contractors) prior to the winter sugarcane migration?"