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EPISTEMIC HOOLIGANISM: DECOLONIZING COLONIAL ETHNOGRAPHIES OF MUSLIM BANJARAS

Abstract

This paper critically interrogates colonial knowledge production by examining how British administrators and anthropologists represented a marginalized community known as Muslim Banjaras in India. Through a deconstructive reading of colonial ethnographies and archival texts, the study challenges the objectivity and reliability of Western-centric epistemologies that historically essentialized and marginalized subaltern communities.

The study underscores the importance of oral narratives as vital epistemological tools that challenge colonial archives and recover subjugated knowledges. It calls upon anthropologists and social scientists to focus on oral histories, everyday lived experiences, and community memory in their research, especially when working with historically marginalized groups. Emphasizing decolonizing methodologies, the paper advocates for more reflexive, inclusive, and accountable forms of knowledge production.

By interrogating the politics of representation and dissenting voices of marginals, this paper contributes to ongoing debates around knowledge, power, and voice. It concludes by raising a critical question: Is there a need to decolonize colonial literature?

Keywords: *Epistemic violence, Muslim Banjaras, scepticism, deconstruction, marginalized, Othering*

“Where the European has trod, death seems to pursue the aboriginal”

—Charles Darwin (cited in Bauman 2004:38)

Introduction

While it is important to acknowledge the significant contributions of Western academia, it is equally essential to critically evaluate the perspectives and methodologies that are often encouraged within the social sciences. Western ideas, particularly those originating from colonial scholars, have long dominated academic discourse. Although their contributions are not to be outright dismissed, the accuracy and reliability of data collected by these thinkers warrant scrutiny. Scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have underscored the notion that knowledge is never innocent, it is invariably produced to serve interests, often aligning with the priorities of those in power¹. Despite this, there appears to be limited attention given to the reliability and validity of their findings, especially in the context of marginalized and colonized communities.

The colonial project was not merely territorial, but it was deeply epistemic. Through classification, documentation, and representation, British colonial administrators and anthropologists constructed a knowledge system that reinforced imperial domination. Among the many communities subjected to this representational violence were the Banjaras, a historically nomadic group who, when Muslim, occupied an even more precarious position in the colonial imagination. Muslim Banjaras are a community who hitherto remain unexplored. As Abdul Waheed highlights in his doctoral work, the community continues to be under-researched.²

This paper further interrogates the structural and epistemic reasons behind this neglect, raising a critical question: why has this community been persistently overlooked within both colonial and postcolonial knowledge formations?

Additionally, this paper seeks to interrogate the ways in which British colonial and anthropological literature represented Muslim Banjaras, how the knowledge about them is produced and to produce that “knowledge,” what gets left out or silenced? Why British ethnography lacks oral narratives methodology? What does the counter narrative has to offer? Does the knowledge produced about Muslim Banjaras reflect the voices and lived experiences of the community itself? Or do these narratives diverge? And if they differ, what does it tell us about the epistemic authority behind such representations?

The concept of epistemic violence, as theorized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, refers to the silencing or misrepresentation of the subaltern in dominant discourses.³ It is not merely about what is said, but about who gets to speak, and how certain groups are denied subjectivity through representational strategies. A lack of observation, discussion, and contemplation leads to violations of academic propriety and undermines the

knowledge formation process. John Dewey argues in his work, "Social as a Category," that these three elements together form the basis of the category of Social. Dewey also emphasized the importance of the category social act as a lens to maintain academic integrity.

Spivak's seminal essay "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*" (1988) developed Michel Foucault's concept of epistemic violence to describe the systemic silencing of subaltern groups through dominant modes of knowledge production. For Spivak, colonial discourse did not merely exclude subaltern voices, but it actively constructed them as voiceless, rendering their subjectivity invisible or illegible within colonial frameworks. In the context of British India, official documents, anthropological records, and administrative categories became sites where native communities were inscribed not as speaking subjects but as objects of rule.

Focusing on two foundational colonial texts—*The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, Volume 1 (1896) by W. Crooke and *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India*, Volume II (1916) by R.V. Russell and Hira Lal, this study undertakes a critical deconstruction of the ways in which Muslim Banjaras were portrayed. These texts, while often cited as ethnographic records, are in fact ideological documents that encode the colonial gaze, constructing the Banjara identity in service of administrative legibility and social control. So, the paper addressed how British have perceived of this community found in various parts of India. However, most of them have settled down in the terai belt of Uttar Pradesh, stretching out from the district of Saharanpur in the west through the districts of Moradabad, Rampur, Bareilly and Pilibhit to the eastern districts of Gorakhpur and Bahraich. Bareilly is one of the biggest settlements of Muslim Banjaras.

The paper is structured as follows: the next section focuses on the theoretical frameworks used in this paper, drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's views and Edward Said's concept of Orientalism. The methodology section explains the textual and interpretive approach employed and discusses the relevance of the Banjaras' narratives.

The analysis section offers a deconstructive reading of the selected colonial texts, and finally, the discussion and conclusion reflect on the implications of these findings for contemporary sociological inquiry.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in the critical insights of postcolonial theory, with specific reference to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of epistemic violence and Edward Said's critique of Orientalism. These theoretical tools

enable a deconstruction of colonial knowledge systems and reveal how representation is tied to structures of power, marginality, and exclusion.

Postcolonialism and the concept of Epistemic Violence

Post-colonialism or post-colonial theory talks about the cultural, political, social and economic consequences of colonialism and imperialism. It is an ideological response to colonialism. The use of the prefix “post” is not limited to describe the era after colonialism, but to question and rethink the reliability and authenticity of knowledge produced about East as addressed by Edward Said. The discourse is relevant to the question of power structures that exist in epistemology and therefore, it talks about decolonization of literature, especially of colonial era. The concept of epistemic violence is thereby an important outcome of this discourse as it questions the reliability and validity of knowledge. The term Epistemic violence has been used in the era of contemporary social theories like postcolonialism. Many scholars have talked about epistemic violence but the very first among them was Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In 1988, in her nominal work, *Can the Subaltern Speak*, she said,

“The clearest available example of such epistemic violence is the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other. This project is also the asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of that Other in its precarious Subject-ivity. It is well known that Foucault locates epistemic violence, a complete overhaul of the episteme, in the redefinition of sanity at the end of the European eighteenth century. But what if that particular redefinition was only a part of the narrative of history in Europe as well as in the colonies? What if the two projects of epistemic overhaul worked as dislocated and unacknowledged parts of a vast two-handed engine?”

Here, the main argument of Spivak is about the destruction of knowledge systems by the colonial power. Beyond physical destruction, destruction can be done in academia as well. Failing to give due credit to deserving individuals, such as writers, thinkers and authors is an act of epistemic violence. She raised critical concerns about how colonizers did not merely colonize physical territories but also dissented voices of natives and erased local ways of thinking, knowing, and understanding reality.

Orientalism – Edward Said

Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) critiques the West’s production of the “Orient” as an imagined geography, constructed through texts, art, and scholarly work. This Orient was not a real place but a discursive formation through which the West asserted its superiority. Orientalism was not only cultural stereotyping but a form of epistemological domination—a way to define and control the non-Western world by constructing its people as exotic, backward, and uncivilized.

In the context of the British colonial gaze upon Muslim Banjaras, Orientalism operated through a dual logic: first, by depicting Islam as a “foreign” and “suspect” element in India; second, by representing mobile communities like the Banjaras as inherently disorderly. The convergence of religion and mobility thus intensified their marginalization. British anthropological writings, while claiming scientific neutrality, were steeped in orientalist logic, producing Muslim Banjaras as a deviant population that required surveillance and reform.

Deconstruction as Method

Deconstruction is a critical tool used to unveil dominant meta-narratives and grand theories, allowing for a deeper understanding of marginalized perspectives and the underlying realities they obscure. Deconstruction as developed by Jacques Derrida talks about binary oppositions. It reveals how categories like “civilized or uncivilized,” “lawful or criminal,” or “settled or nomadic” are constructed not as objective realities but as ideological fictions serving the colonial project.

Postcolonial scholars believe that it is extremely crucial to deconstruct existing literature, particularly that which stems from colonial academic frameworks, and to critically interrogate the assumptions underpinning these works. Just as the colonial period witnessed an epistemic overhaul, as observed by numerous postcolonial thinkers, a similar phenomenon can be seen among the Muslim Banjaras. A critical deconstruction of the colonial works on the history and castes of the Banjaras reveals the extent to which colonial discourse has shaped knowledge production about this community.

Through deconstructing the texts *Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Central Provinces*, volume 1 (1896) by William Crooke, and *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India*, Volume II (1916) by R.V. Russell and Hira Lal, the paper uncovers the unstable meanings, internal contradictions, and power-laden assumptions that structure colonial representations of Muslim Banjaras. It challenges the taken-for-granted status of these texts as ethnographic truths and repositions them as instruments of epistemic violence.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in critical discourse analysis and postcolonial deconstruction. The objective is not to validate historical “facts” but to critically examine the discursive construction of the Muslim Banjara identity in colonial literature, specifically within British ethnographic and administrative texts. The methodology is

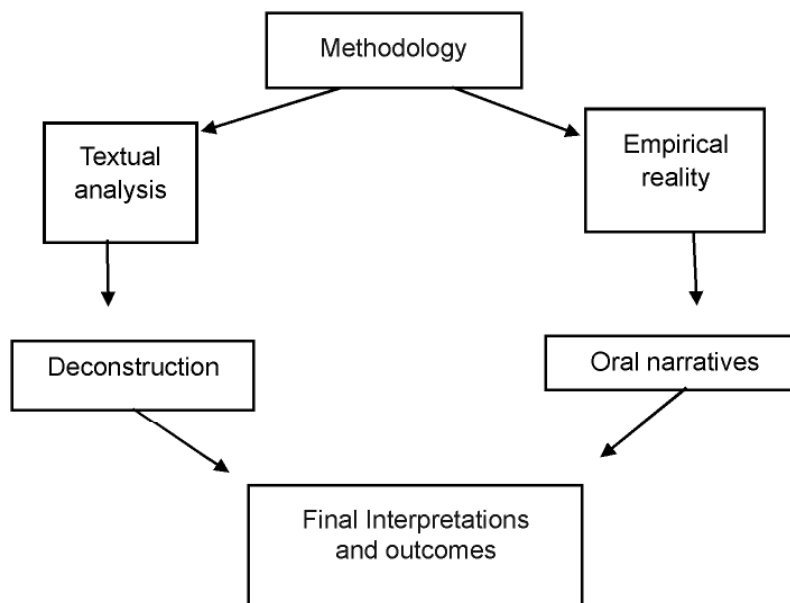
framed by a hermeneutic understanding of texts as social products that reflect and reinforce power relations, particularly in colonial contexts.

To unveil and deconstruct existing colonial ethnographies, it is essential to undertake a close and critical re-reading of these works. This process was carried out in the present study. A key limitation identified in colonial ethnographic traditions is the absence of indigenous voices, which this research seeks to address by placing those voices at the center of analysis.

The methodology is therefore divided into two parts. The first part involves textual analysis, where the selected works were systematically deconstructed to reveal the underlying colonial assumptions, discursive strategies, and silences that shaped their production. The second part employs oral narrative techniques in order to foreground indigenous perspectives that were historically marginalized. Respondents for oral narratives were identified through snowball sampling, a method that facilitates the inclusion of community members who serve as key knowledge holders.

By combining textual deconstruction with oral narratives, this methodological framework not only challenges the authority of colonial ethnographies but also re-centers indigenous knowledge systems and lived experiences within the scholarly discourse.

Below is a flow chart to understand the methodology applied in this paper.



Selection of Texts

The two primary sources for this analysis are: *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, volume I (1896) by William Crooke and *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India*, Volume II (1916) by R.V. Russell and Hira Lal.

These texts were chosen because they are classical examples of British colonial ethnography and are frequently cited in both colonial and postcolonial writings about Indian tribes and castes. They are representative of the broader body of knowledge produced under colonial rule that sought to classify, categorize, and control native populations.

Relevance of oral narratives

When a community or society has no written record, or it is under explored, then oral narratives technique is used. Muslim Banjaras is one such community who have no written record about them. The Muslim Banjara community is one such example, with little to no archival material available that reflects their lived realities or historical consciousness. In the absence of written records, oral testimonies serve not only as sources of cultural memory but also as vehicles for articulating indigenous perspectives.

Employing oral narratives in this study allows for the recovery and amplification of marginalized voices, which are often silenced or distorted in dominant discourses. This approach becomes particularly significant in addressing the erasure of subaltern experiences and in challenging the authority of colonial or mainstream texts that lack counter-narratives.

Selection of oral narratives and respondents

The oral narratives presented in this paper were collected during ethnographic fieldwork. Snowball sampling technique was employed to select respondents. Initial respondents were identified through personal networks, and subsequent participants were accessed through referrals provided by those already interviewed, allowing for a more organic and trust-based engagement with the community. Among the many oral narratives collected, only those that directly engaged with the central research question were carefully selected for inclusion in this paper.

Criteria for Respondent Selection

Respondents were selected based on the following criteria:

1. **Oral memory and lived experience:** Preference was given to elder members (above 60 years) who could recall community

transformations across generations and share insights absent from written records.

2. **Gender inclusivity:** Voices of both men and women were included to reflect the gendered dimensions of colonial representation, which often neglect women's perspectives.
3. **Community recognition:** Individuals recognized as oral historians, or respected elders were prioritized to ensure culturally grounded narratives.
4. **Willingness and trust:** Respondents were chosen based on their willingness to share, comfort with the researcher (aided by my familial ties), and familiarity with local cultural idioms and language.

Analysis

In tracing the historical representation of the Banjaras, this study engages with two significant colonial-era ethnographic works—Robert Vane Russell's *Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India* (1916) and William Crooke's *Tribes and Castes of the Northwestern Provinces and Oudh*. These texts have been deliberately selected not only for their detailed documentation of nomadic and tribal communities, including the Banjaras, but also because they exemplify the colonial lens through which indigenous knowledge was categorized, essentialized, and often distorted. Examining these works allows for a critical understanding of how early colonial narratives contributed to the epistemic marginalization of communities like the Muslim Banjaras and how such representations continue to influence contemporary scholarship.

Robert Vane Russell, a British civil servant and anthropologist, is known for his extensive research on the tribes and castes of Central India. His 1916 ethnographic survey remains one of the most detailed accounts of various communities' social structures, customs, and practices in early 20th-century India. However, modern scholars critique Russell's work for its colonial perspective and the potential misrepresentation or oversimplification of the communities he described.

Similarly, William Crooke's *Tribes and Castes of the Northwestern Provinces and Oudh* provide an extensive account of the communities inhabiting this region. This work remains a valuable resource for researchers, historians, and anthropologists interested in India's social and cultural history. Divided into several chapters, the book examines different tribes and castes, detailing their customs, traditions, beliefs, and social status. Crooke also contextualizes these communities within the broader historical and political transformations brought about by British colonial rule. His analysis

underscores how colonialism disrupted traditional structures, reinforced social hierarchies, and shaped perceptions of these communities in ways that continue to influence contemporary discourse.

Both works emerged from the colonial state's broader project of codifying and classifying Indian society for administrative control. They reflect a distinctly colonial gaze that sought to "fix" fluid, mobile, and hybrid identities into rigid taxonomies of caste, tribe, and religion. These colonial texts are thus approached in this study not as objective repositories of ethnographic fact, but as discursive formations that both constructed and regulated knowledge about communities like the Banjaras.

Anthropometry and the Colonial Construction of Caste: A Critique of Racialized Knowledge

In William Crooke's ethnographic writings, there are clear references to the use of anthropometry, a study that involves the measurement of physical features such as skull size, nose shape, and facial structure, as a tool for classifying castes and communities. (figure 1)

Table of Facial Angles.

CASTE.	Average Index.	CASTE.	Average Index.
Mánjhi	70	Banjára }	66
Dhángar	69	Barhai }	
Arakh		Bráhmañ }	
Bauriya		Rájput }	65
Agariya		Chamáñ }	
Bhúiyâr		Etc., etc. . . . }	
Bhurtiya	68	Pási }	...
Chero		* }	* * *
Kharwâr		Musahar }	62
Fanka			
Kahâr			
Darzi			
Nâli	67		
Kol			

Figure 1: Taken from pg. No xxxiii, Vol I, Tribe and Caste of Northwestern Provinces and Oudh, (1896) W. Crooke

This approach, grounded in the racial science of the 19th century, sought to link physical attributes with social hierarchy. However, such methods are now widely discredited within contemporary anthropology, as they rest on reductionist and essentialist assumptions about human differences. The idea that caste identity can be objectively known through bodily features reflects not only a flawed scientific framework but also a deeper colonial anxiety to

rationalize and control Indian society through supposedly empirical tools. These physical typologies were neither neutral nor benign; rather, they were deeply ideological, reinforcing a vision of social order that justified British dominance. By attempting to read caste through the body, Crooke's work exemplifies a form of epistemic violence, where Indigenous social categories were overwritten by racialized logic that denied the fluidity and complexity of lived identities.

Misrepresentation of Banjaras: Labelling of Banjaras as "Criminals"

"in former times the Banjaras especially in Gorakhpur and the neighbouring districts, had an evil reputation for dakaiti and similar offences...In recent years they have come under the notice of the police in connection with the kidnapping of the girls. There can be little doubt that most, if not all of them, occasionally introduce girls of other castes into the tribe. Quite recently the police in the Agra district have found reason to suspect that some of them in the guise of Commissariat contractors carry on an extensive trade in stolen cattle..."- para no. 21, pg. No. 164, *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, Volume I (1896)

This excerpt from William Crooke's *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, Volume I, exemplifies the colonial gaze through which the Banjaras, particularly the Muslim Banjaras, were systematically misrepresented and criminalized. The narrative is saturated with suspicion, moral panic, and generalizations that present the community as inherently deviant. By stating that they had an "*evil reputation for dakaiti*" and linking them with activities such as kidnapping and cattle theft, Crooke effectively frames the Banjaras as a threat to social order and security. What is particularly troubling is how this accusation is not grounded in rigorous empirical evidence, but in police suspicion, hearsay, and anecdotal remarks, which are then elevated to the status of ethnographic truth. This conflation of colonial administrative discourse with anthropological observation demonstrates how colonial ethnography functioned less as a neutral study of communities and more as a tool of surveillance and control. The emphasis on crimes such as girl kidnapping and cattle theft further racializes and moralizes the Banjaras' identity, positioning them as violators of caste, property, and gender norms—core anxieties of both colonial and upper-caste Hindu moral orders.

Moreover, the phrase "*in the guise of Commissariat contractors*" reveals a deep colonial paranoia: even when the Banjaras were engaged in legitimate labour (such as supplying goods to the military), their presence was viewed with mistrust. This reflects the colonial state's fear of mobility and autonomy among nomadic groups, who, by virtue of their movement and independence, resisted easy categorization and governance.

In sum, Crooke's representation is not merely descriptive but deeply prescriptive as it constructs the Banjaras as a criminal caste whose very social reproduction (marriage, labour, mobility) is suspect. Such portrayals contributed directly to their stigmatization under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, illustrating the intersection of colonial knowledge production and legal-institutional violence. This is a clear instance of what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak terms epistemic violence. This epistemic violence was not simply described, but it **produced** the Banjara as criminal, as other, and as politically irrelevant. In this sense, knowledge itself became a tool of governance, and anthropology a discipline of control.

Similarly, Russell also presents examples that cannot be universally applied to all Banjara communities. Such false generalizations are therefore open to serious scrutiny.

"Major Gunthorpe states that the Banjaras are accustomed to drink before setting out for a dacoity or robbery and, as they smoke after drinking, the remains of leaf-pipes lying about the scene of action may indicate their handiwork."- Para no. 19, Social Customs, Pg. No. 186 The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India, Vol II (1916) by R.V. Russell and Hira Lal.

In 1871, the British colonial government enacted the Criminal Tribes Act targeting certain communities characterized by their nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyles, poverty, and tribal identities. British Government during the colonial period labelled some entire communities as 'criminals' because of their involvement with some marauding activities. Were they criminals? What were their alleged criminality? Labelling their entire generations as criminals is not an act of othering them?

Many scholars have reached similar conclusions and marshaled evidence to support them. Birinder Pal Singh, in *Criminal Tribes of Punjab* (2010), argues that colonial authorities fundamentally misapprehended nomadism—not merely as an occupation or lifestyle but as a coherent philosophy oriented toward mobility, non-attachment to place, and skepticism toward property. Unable or unwilling to recognize the social rationality of mobile lifeways, imperial administrators cast nomadic groups as uncivilized, culturally deficient, even "savage," and therefore presumptively dangerous to public order. This epistemic framing, combined with the economic precarity of many itinerant communities and their limited access to fixed means of production, facilitated a presumption of criminality (thievery, dacoity) that hardened into categorical designation. In Singh's reading, the label "criminal" functioned less as a descriptor of demonstrable conduct than as a state-produced identity that pathologized mobility and legitimized surveillance and coercion (Singh, 2010).

Scepticism

“It seems improbable, therefore, that the Banjaras accompanied the different Muhammadan invaders of India, as might have been inferred from the fact that they came into the Deccan in the train of the forces of Aurangzeb. The caste has indeed two Muhammadan sections, the Turkia and Mukeri. But both of these have the same Rajput clan names as the Hindu branch of the caste, and it seems possible that they may have embraced Islam under the proselytising influence of Aurangzeb, or simply owing to their having been employed with the Muhammadan troops. The great bulk of the caste in southern India are Hindus, and there seems no reason for assuming that its origin was Muhammadan.” Para no 1, Pg. 163

Here Russell is trying to argue that all Banjaras were Hindus and not Muslims and they were forced to conversion of their religion to Islam.

On this Irfan Habib in his work, *Merchant communities in Precolonial India, in The Rise of Merchant Empires: Long-Distance Trade in the Early Modern World, 1350-1750*, said that Banjaras were not Hindus, and these colonial writings hold several inaccuracies. There is no doubt that Tavernier’s account, though essentially correct, has many inaccuracies.

*“Not all Banjaras were Hindus. Muslims constituted an important segment of the Banjaras in northern India. Although some Banjara communities were traditionally associated with trade in certain commodities, like the Labanas with salt, the Multanis with grain, and the Mukeris with wood and timber, it is clear that most of them had no inhibitions about carrying anything that yielded a profit. Nineteenth-century British anthropological research has provided us with much information about the Banjaras. The tendency to accept a common origin for all Banjara communities – for example, from the Bhats and Charans of Rajasthan – may, however, invite scepticism.”*²⁴ Although Irfan Habib has addressed the historical origins of the Banjaras, his analysis largely relies on the earlier works of colonial ethnographers such as Crooke and Russell. Habib’s work reflecting systemic biases of 19th century British ethnographers who were keen to create simple classifications about Muslim Banjaras and to “other” them.

Decolonizing Identity: Muslim Banjaras’ Resistance to Colonial Ethnographic Frameworks

Narrative 1: A 49-year-old male respondent

During one of the field visits, the researcher had an engaging conversation with a middle-aged male respondent, worked as a trader of rice grains, shared an oral account of his community’s history and origin. With a tone of quiet pride, he stated:

“Hum Bani Jarham ke qabile se aate hain... hame Sheikh Tajjar kaha jata tha Pehle hum Saudia Arab me hi the, hamare abba (dadaji) bataya karte the ke kuch log tijarat ke silsile me yahan aaye the—naaj (anaaj) ka kaarobaar karte the—aur phir yahi bass gaye. Kuch log hamare gaon ko aur uske aaspaas ke ilaaqe ko chawal nagri ke naam se bhi jaante hain.”

(Translation: “We belong to the Bani Jarham tribe... we were known as Sheikh Tajjar. Earlier, we lived in Saudi Arabia. My grandfather used to say that some people came

here for trading—especially food grains—and eventually settled here. Some people even refer to our village and its surrounding areas as ‘Chawal Nagri’ (land of rice).”

From the above response, it can be observed that Muslim Banjaras are denying the facts presented by colonial ethnographers that is related to religion and origin of these Banjaras.

Constructing the ‘Other’: Racialized Analogies and the Gypsification of Banjaras

Another sceptical and problematic portrayal can be found in William Crooke’s observation that “*to European observers, the Banjaras often seemed to recall the Gypsies...*”, even citing an improbable claim that a Hungarian nobleman once conversed with them in the “Zingari” language. Furthermore, Crooke adds that the Banjaras’ “*superstitions of all kinds, including suspected witch killings and sacrifices, reinforced the Gypsy image of the class*” (Crooke 1896:166). These views are further echoed by R.V. Russell and Hira Lal (Russell & Lal 1916:179–182), who similarly represent Banjaras through the lens of mystery, primitivism, and criminal suspicion.

Colonial texts by William Crooke (1896) and later by R.V. Russell and Hira Lal (1916) contain highly **orientalist and exoticized portrayals** of the Banjaras. Crooke equates the community with European Gypsies, even referencing a dubious anecdote about a Hungarian nobleman allegedly speaking to Banjaras in “Zingari.” He further reinforces this parallel by attributing to the community a belief in “witch killings and sacrifices,” thereby essentialising them through a lens of **superstition and cultural primitivism**.

Narrative 2: A 66-year-old widow respondent

In sharp contrast, an oral account collected from a 66-year-old widow respondent offers a **harsh critique** of such representations:

“Unse (Britishers) kaho ke kabhi aaye ho yhan? Hamare yahan ka taur tareeka dekha bhi hai.. Hum Musalman hain, ye jaadu tone hamara kya lena dena.. hamari jabaan to aap jaan hi rahe ho jaise apki bhaasa waise hi hamari bhasa..zaroor unhone kisi or qabile ke baare me kaha hoga hum banjara to tijarat ke alawa kisi baat se matlab nahi rakhte ji..”

(Translation: “Ask them (the British) — have they ever even come here? Have they seen our customs and way of life? We are Muslims, what do we have to do with magic and superstition? You can understand our language — just like your language, ours is no different. They must have been talking about some other tribe. We Banjaras are only concerned with trade and nothing else.”)

This statement presents a clear rebuttal to colonial narratives, exposing their detachment from lived reality. Her assertion “have they even

come here?” reveals the spatial and cultural distance between the knowledge producer and the subject, highlighting a process of knowledge fabrication rather than ethnographic engagement.

The claim that Banjaras have no connection with superstition, and their identity as Muslims, directly contradicts colonial depictions rooted in mysticism. The speaker’s self-identification as a trader further dissolves the notion of a criminal or “gypsy-like” identity, presenting instead a community invested in commerce and structured social norms.

One can reach to the conclusion by the above response that this analogy with European “Gypsies” (Roma) is neither neutral nor accidental. It is rooted in a colonial discourse of racial typology, where groups perceived as mobile, non-sedentary, or culturally distinct were categorized as exotic, uncivilized, or even dangerous. By comparing Banjaras to Gypsies, colonial ethnographers were not merely drawing a superficial cultural parallel but were actively deploying a racialized framework that pathologized mobility and framed certain communities as inherently deviant or suspicious.

Absences and Silences: The Marginalization of Muslim Banjaras in Colonial Ethnography

One of the most striking patterns that emerged during the analysis of British colonial literature is the systematic marginalization of Muslim Banjaras within ethnographic and administrative accounts. Despite the expansive documentation of tribal and caste communities in India during colonial rule, Muslim Banjaras are notably absent or only briefly mentioned in the foundational texts of the period.

For example, in William Crooke’s influential ethnographic compilation, the term “Muhammadan Banjaras” is rarely mentioned and that too in a single paragraph (para 21) comprising just four lines. This minimal reference is insufficient in capturing the complex realities of the Muslim Banjaras as a distinct socio-religious group. In contrast, Hindu Banjaras receive significantly more detailed descriptions, indicating a clear imbalance in representation.

Similarly, ethnographic accounts such as those by Russell, the representation of Banjaras remains narrowly constructed, with disproportionate emphasis on themes such as human sacrifice, criminal tendencies, and witchcraft. This selective portrayal not only reinforces orientalist stereotypes of nomadic and tribal communities as inherently deviant but also reflects the epistemic violence embedded in colonial knowledge production. Most significantly, Russell’s account offers scant mention of Muslim Banjaras, thereby erasing their distinct religious, cultural, and historical experiences. This conspicuous absence raises a critical question:

Why has the cultural and social life of Muslim Banjaras been systematically overlooked? The neglect may be understood as part of a broader colonial and postcolonial ethnographic silence surrounding marginalized subgroups who do not fit neatly into dominant caste or religious taxonomies. From a decolonial and subaltern standpoint, such omission reflects the ways in which knowledge about communities is filtered through the lens of power, what is documented, whose voices are heard, and whose lives are rendered invisible. This calls for a rethinking of ethnographic categories and a conscious effort to recover the silenced histories of communities like the Muslim Banjaras, whose hybrid identities challenge the binary frameworks often employed in mainstream sociology and anthropology.

The postcolonial sociological tradition, though more critical of colonial knowledge systems, has often reproduced similar exclusions. Imtiaz Ahmad, in his foundational work *Caste and Social Stratification Among the Muslims* (1973), acknowledges this disciplinary neglect. He notes that although caste structures are present among Indian Muslims, they have not received the same scholarly attention as caste among Hindus. As a result, sociological inquiry into Muslim social hierarchies remains underdeveloped, leaving significant gaps in understanding the diversity of stratification systems in Indian society.

This double marginalization, first by colonial ethnographers and later by even Indian sociologists and anthropologists have contributed to the silencing of Muslim Banjaras within academic discourse. Their distinct historical trajectories, kinship structures, occupational patterns, and religious identities remain obscured under generalized depictions of Banjaras, most of which refer exclusively to their Hindu counterparts.

Voices Against the Archive: Oral Testimonies Challenging the Colonial Ethnography

In order to challenge and deconstruct the colonial ethnographic representations that marked Muslim Banjaras as inherently criminal, below testimony not only question the authenticity of colonial texts but also assert indigenous subjectivity and voice.

Narrative 3: A 73-Year-Old Male Respondent

As a part of ethnographic data collection, the researcher gathered this information from a 73-year-old respondent. This oral narrative of a 73-year-old man offered a powerful resistance.

“Mai 73 saal ka hoon ji. Aap dekh hi rahi ho hamare yahan kaise rehti hain aurten.. ja ke aap Kahin se bhi pata karlo k koi bhi banjari bina naqaab ke bahar jaati ho ya hmari

qaum me kisi ne bhi kisi aurat ke saath kuch galat kiya ho.. chori dakaiti ke kisse to har jagah hote hain hain aise to humare baare me koi kuch galat chhaap raha hai to ye thodi ke hum wahi ho gaye.. hum to sheikh tajjar hain. Tijarat ke alawa hamne kabhi kuch nahi kiya bus yhi hamari pehchaan hai ji baki sab galt hai.”

(Translation: “I am 73 years old. You yourself can see how our women live here... Go and find out from anywhere whether any Banjara woman steps out without a veil, or if anyone in our community has ever done anything wrong to a woman. Stories of theft and robbery exist everywhere—just because someone has written something wrong about us does not mean we are like that. We are Sheikh Tajjar—honourable traders. Apart from trade, we have never done anything else. This is our identity, and everything else is false.”)

This testimony contests the colonial construction of Banjaras as deviant or criminal. The speaker asserts moral discipline, respect for women, and trading as an ancestral occupation—a clear departure from the ethnographic accounts that labelled the community as thieves or outlaws. The insistence on “*Sheikh Tajjar*” (honourable traders) is not just a rejection of the criminal tag but a powerful act of self-identification rooted in dignity, tradition, and commerce.

Moreover, the mention of gender norms and the strict moral conduct around women dismantles the trope of cultural inferiority that was often projected in British texts. It points towards epistemic violence wherein entire communities were misrepresented without understanding or acknowledging their ethical frameworks and social codes.

Narrative 4: An 84-Year-Old Female Respondent

On the question of representation as criminals, an 84-year-old woman responded (with confidence on her face),

“Dekho ji angrejon ne to sirf hume barbaad hi kiya hai, unki jisne ghulami kari wahi sahi baki sab gunde dakait. Hum banjaron ne kabhi nahi unke agey sar jhukaya isiliye hamare bare aisa kaha hoga, kehne do ji... Allah dekh raha hai..”

(Translation: “Look, the British have only ruined us. Those who worked for them were considered good, and the rest were called thieves and robbers. We Banjaras never bowed down to them, so they must have spoken about us like this. Let them say whatever they want... Allah is watching.”)

This account reflects a historical-political consciousness that views colonial knowledge as strategically constructed. It underscores that subservience to colonial authority was a condition for recognition, while refusal to submit resulted in vilification. Her assertion, “*Allah is watching*,” reflects a spiritual form of resistance, suggesting that moral judgment lies beyond the colonial gaze.

Her response also subtly exposes the politics of inclusion and exclusion in colonial representations where loyalty was rewarded with legitimacy, and

non-compliance was met with criminalization. The binary between “those who obeyed” and “those who resisted” is central to understanding how epistemic violence operates not just through omission but through misrepresentation.

Limitations of the study

This study is limited to Muslim Banjaras of Western Uttar Pradesh and not from other parts and other Banjara communities of South Asia. However, by focusing on colonial texts, it seeks to uncover the historical roots of epistemic violence that continue to influence the marginality of this community today. Future research could incorporate counter-**narratives** from other communities across South Asia and draw on field-based knowledge to deepen this critique. Apart from this, the study relies on only two colonial texts, which constrains the breadth of archival perspectives and may amplify source-specific biases.

Conclusion

British academics have portrayed the Banjaras in a negative light, aiming to tarnish their image in front of mainstream society. Epistemic Violence was observed in their writings, and they have failed to understand the meaning and significance of nomadism. It has been observed that these ethnographies lack oral testimonies raising critical question of methodology used by them.

The analysis pays special attention to the use of labels such as *criminal*, *nomadic*, *uncivilized*, and *fanatic* to “other” them (what Gayatri Spivak argued in her work, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*) The Muslim Banjaras were described, labelled, and categorized in the absence of their own voices, and their lived experiences were filtered through a colonial lens that rewrote them into a narrative useful for the empire. This epistemic hooliganism is not just a misrepresentation, but it is a form of narrative dispossession that reinforces the power of the colonizer as the only legitimate speaking subject. The narrative constructed by Crooke and Russell is a textbook case of what bell hooks critiques as the colonizer’s tendency to speak “*about you better than you can speak about yourself.*”

By embedding these narratives within the broader framework of postcolonial critique and deconstruction, the study not only challenges dominant narratives but also affirms that oral histories are not merely supplements to written records but also emphasized that they are epistemological tools in themselves. The narratives as acts of resistance, exposing how representation is tied to power, and how communities such as the Muslim Banjaras actively resist erasure through memory, language, and everyday ethics.

In both *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh* and *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India*, the

Banjaras, particularly those identified as Muslims, are consistently depicted through the lens of criminality, suspicion, and deviance. This construction served the broader colonial logic of governance, whereby nomadic and mobile populations were perceived as threats to the order, surveillance, and fixity required by the state.

In these texts, criminality is racialized, communalized, and essentialized. The British authors not only framed the Banjaras' nomadic lifestyle as incompatible with civilization but also emphasized their Muslim identity as a further marker of deviance. The Muslim Banjara, thus, became a double other, both as a mobile subject and as a member of a religious minority that was already viewed with suspicion in the post-1857 colonial state.

Through deconstructive analysis of British colonial sources alongside contemporary oral narratives from Western Uttar Pradesh, the research reveals the profound disjuncture between colonial knowledge production and lived community experiences.

The analysis exposes several critical patterns of colonial representation: the analogical linking of Banjaras to European "Gypsies" as part of a broader discourse of racial typology; the systematic erasure of Muslim Banjaras from ethnographic accounts that privileged Hindu variants; and the construction of nomadism itself as inherently suspicious, uncivilized, and criminal. These representational strategies were not merely descriptive but constitutive, creating categories of deviance that legitimized surveillance, control, and exclusion.

Most significantly, the oral testimonies collected reveal how Muslim Banjaras construct alternative histories that directly challenge colonial characterizations. Their self-identification as "Sheikh Tassar" (honorable traders) with Arab lineage, emphasis on Islamic moral frameworks, and assertions of commercial rather than criminal identity represent powerful acts of epistemic resistance. These counter-narratives do not simply correct colonial "errors" but expose the fundamental violence of imposing external categories onto communities who possessed their own coherent systems of meaning, identity, and social organization.

The systematic absence of Muslim Banjaras from foundational ethnographic texts like those of Crooke and Russell reflects not mere oversight but the active operation of colonial knowledge systems that rendered certain communities invisible when they failed to conform to expected taxonomies. This pattern of erasure extends into postcolonial scholarship, where even critical sociologists have reproduced similar exclusions in their analyses of caste and community in India.

The testimonies of elderly community members provide crucial evidence for understanding how marginalized groups maintain agency in the

face of representational violence. Their insistence on moral discipline, trading identity, and spiritual authority challenges not only specific colonial claims but the entire epistemological framework that positioned European observers as authoritative interpreters of Indian social life.

However, this study also illuminates the complex dynamics of resistance and accommodation within colonial contexts. The observation that communities perceived as loyal received more favorable treatment while those who “never bowed down” faced criminalization reveals how colonial knowledge production was intimately connected to political control and administrative convenience.

Moving forward, this research contributes to decolonial scholarship by demonstrating how textual deconstruction combined with indigenous oral traditions can restore suppressed histories and challenge dominant narratives. It underscores the necessity of centering marginalized voices not merely as correctives to colonial distortions but as valid knowledge systems that offer alternative frameworks for understanding identity, mobility, and social organization.

The study calls for a fundamental reconceptualization of ethnographic practice that moves beyond extractive documentation toward collaborative knowledge production that respects community epistemologies. It suggests that true decolonization requires not only critiquing colonial texts but actively supporting communities in articulating their own histories, identities, and futures on their own terms.

Ultimately, this research reveals that the colonial archive’s silences are as significant as its assertions. The marginalization of Muslim Banjaras within ethnographic discourse reflects broader patterns of how power operates through knowledge production, determining whose voices are heard, whose experiences matter, and whose identities are deemed worthy of scholarly attention. By foregrounding the oral testimonies of Muslim Banjaras alongside critical analysis of colonial texts, this study contributes to the ongoing project of recovering suppressed histories and challenging the epistemic foundations of continued marginalization.

Decolonization and Need of Epistemic Vigilance

The persistence of colonial categories in contemporary academic and administrative discourse demonstrates that decolonization remains an incomplete project. This study suggests that meaningful progress requires not only historical critique but active engagement with communities to support their own knowledge production and self-representation. Only through such collaborative approaches can scholarship move beyond reproducing colonial

violences toward genuinely transformative understanding of India's diverse social landscapes. Epistemic vigilance serves as a vanguard of justice. One must adopt the lens of epistemic vigilance and critically ask: Is this piece of knowledge trustworthy, and whose interests does it serve?

There is a thrust need to re-examine the history, not just of Banjaras, but of other communities as well and support with evidence to correlate said theories and stories. We must be grateful to postcolonial discourse for recognizing the importance of deconstructing existing literature and emphasizing decolonizing methodologies. It is essential to remain vigilant and wakeful!

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Notes

1. Spivak, (1988) critically examines how Western intellectuals often speak for marginalized subjects, reinforcing colonial power structures.
2. Waheed (2000) conducted a doctoral study on the social structure and economy of Muslim Banjaras in Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh.
3. Spivak's essay develop the concept of epistemic violence to describe the systemic silencing of subaltern groups in dominant discourses.
4. Habib Irfan defined "Banjaras" as long-distance transporters of grains as distinguished from "*Banyas*" as village merchants.

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