

# History of the Bazigar Banjara Tribe

Paper Submission: 10/11/2021, Date of Acceptance: 23/11/2021, Date of Publication: 24/11/2021

## Abstract

The present paper focuses on the history of the Bazigar tribe. The survey of available literature indicates that a number of studies have been produced on the history of the tribe. But there is a lack of unanimity among various scholars regarding the origin and history of the tribe. The ambiguous explanations have further complicated the understanding of their origin. It is difficult to know their origin and history merely on the basis of their mythology and folktales. Basically two instruments are used while writing about any ancient history. One of them is physical i.e. archeological source and the other one is oral or unwritten. I have used both the instruments to study the history of Bazigar Banjara. The chapter is divided into two parts. First part is based on oral accounts, mythology, fictions, and folklore written with the help of Dhadis, Bhatts. Second is based on the physical sources, that is, researches that are done on the bases of archeological findings and actual facts.

**Keywords:** Bazigar, History, Origin.

### Introduction

The name Bazigar is derived from the Urdu word *bazi*, which means an acrobat. B. P. Singh wrote, 'In Punjab, the Bazigar Banjara is a community of brave though shy, well -built and strong people. Their name owes to their specialization in performing *bazi* (*bazi Pauna*), that is, giving a demonstration of acrobatics. Bazi in Persian means "play". It is also indicative of their martial character and Rajput lineage. They had been good horsemen and fighters' (2010: 29).

'The term /bāzī-gar/ is a word of Persian derivation meaning "one who performs *bāzī*." *Bāzī*, which connotes "play," refers in this context to a kind of entertaining performance based on physical acts' (Gibb Schreffler, 2011: 219).

The community derives its name from the word *baji*, meaning rope-dancing and acrobatics. They wander from place to place and especially visit fairs to display their various acrobatic skills and to perform magic tricks. In some of the states they are notified as a scheduled caste (K. S. Singh, 1998: 339).

The Bazigar Banjaras are known by different names in different parts of India. As Nagaveni put forth, 'there is no unanimity among the scholars regarding the nomenclature of this community. Collection of data regarding its semantics derives one to identify various terms by which it is called in common parlance. The vocabulary of this community study indicates that there are 27 terms that have been used to label and characterize the Banjara community. Therefore, the term "Banjara" defies a clear cut definition. Its conceptualization however depends upon the context of its local specific characterization' (2015: 11).

K.S. Singh has identified them with the names: Bhanjara, Lambani / Lambana, Vanara, Guwaria, Labana, lavana, Labhan, Laman, Lambada, Banjari, Gour, Sirkibandetc (Singh, 1996:1107). Thurston (1909) mentions that 'the Lambadis are also called Lambani, Brinjari or Banjari, Boipari, Sugali or Sukali' (cited in K. S. Singh, 1999: 123). 'Banjaras, Grierson writes, are the well-known tribe of carriers who are found all over western and southern India' (ibid).

But all these communities identify themselves with the name Goaar. Goaar is the broader term under which all the other categories of names fall. When they meet each other they say, *jai goaar*, *jai gopal*. Moti Raj also mentions, 'actually those referred to as Banjara, Lamani or Lambada are Gors' (Moti Raj, 2014).

### Aim of the Study

The aim of the study is to analyze the origin and historical background of the Bazigar Banjara tribe and to study the present scenario of the tribe so that appropriate measures can be taken to improve their social and economic conditions.

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**History Based on myths**

There are certain myths regarding the origin of Bazigar Banjara. According to B.P. Singh, 'some trace it to Lord Shiva while others take it to Lord Krishna. Mota and Mola were two brothers who tended Lord Krishna's cows. From Mota descended the ancestors of the modern Marvaris, Mathuras and Labanas. Mola had no progeny. Once he visited a prince's court with his beautiful wife Radha and displayed acrobatic feats in which he was adept. The jubilant prince gave him three infant boys of different castes to be adopted as sons. Their progeny is collectively known as Charan Banjaras who have five exogamous sections called Rathod, Panwar, Chavan, Badiya or Vadiya and Tori' (2010 :26).

According to Y. RuplaNaik all the Goals accept Radha and Mola as their ancestors. According to Goaar dhadis Radha the devotee of lord Krishna and Mola, Krishna's herdsman were the ancestors of Goaar community. The couple adopted three boys Parmar, Chauhan, Rathod and brought them up. Afterwards the off -springs of these three came to be known as Goals (cited in Valjot, 2009: 30, 31).

Further Valjot writes that the views of Y. Rupla Naik that Radha and Mola adopted three boys and brought them up seems exaggeration nevertheless it seems to be based on certain facts that Radha and Mola had nurtured the ancestors of Goaar Banjaras. Because Radha and Mola are from the genealogy of *Gawalas*, which afterwards due to changes in pronunciation became as *Goaar / Gor*. According to Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha the meaning of *Goaar* is *Gaal / Gwaal*. Under these discussions Y. Rupla Naik's view that Radha and Mola have nurtured the ancestors of Goaars, seems right (ibid: 35).

Suresh Lal regarding the origin of Banjaras admitted that 'the epic Ramayana reveals another instance that when Vali died his wife was married to Sugriva. This custom is prevalent among the Banjaras in various parts of the country even today. The legends regarding the origin of Banjaras to the epic tribal heroes Krishna and Vali Sugriva appear to be conscious efforts to link with popular personality of the epics. All the authors on the origin of Banjaras did not critically examine and their writings simply based on the legendary stories told by the ignorant and illiterate elders, Naiks, Bhats and Dhadis of the Banjara community. Thurston also expressed the similar views that Banjaras were the descendants of Vali and Sugriva, who were two monkey chiefs in the Ramayana (Thurston 1975). Finally they say that Mola was the descendant of Sugriva. Above all they approve the popular story that Radha and Mola adopted three sons from three different regions. The origin of Banjaras is linked with the ancient period or Lord Krishna's time. It may not be true because there was no Lambada or Banjara community in India till 1192 A.D.' (Suresh Lal, 2016: 40263)

The above discussion shows that it is not enough to trace the origin and history of a community only on the bases of its mythology. It is equally important to analyze certain facts to trace the origin of any community. The following section deals with this.

**History Based on physical sources Ancient Period**

Indus valley civilization is one of the ancient civilizations of the world. Gor Banjara culture is related to this civilization. As mentioned earlier the Gor Banjara tribe is found all over India with different names. For the origin and history of the Bazigar Banjara we have to look into the history of the Gor Banjaras. The Gor Banjara history traces back to ancient times to Harappan civilization. It remained unknown to the world as no written documents were available about the tribe. The history has been unearthed using fictions, stories, folklores, mythologies and excavations.

Moti Raj Rathod mentions that Gor Banjara were one of the ancient community dating back to 5-6 thousand years BCE and there are references about Banjara in Greek civilization leading up to Harappa and Mohenjo Daro civilization and it is probable that Gor must have been the possible originators of Indus valley civilization to which documents are available ([www.sintroma.org](http://www.sintroma.org), on 13/6/19).

Writing about their history Nagaveni said, 'the Banjaras share the same culture, language, customs, traditions and other practices across the country even though they are called by different names. The banjaras had lived in ancient times (6<sup>th</sup> century BC) and migrated to Khyber and Bolan passes between 600

BC and 350 BC. The Banjaras have their own mythology and historical account which suggests that their homeland was somewhere in North Western India. The Banjaras were supposed to be inhabitants of Pakistan and Baluchistan, the regions which formed an integral part of India' (Nagaveni, 2014: 04, cited in Mahesh and Shabeena, 2017: 565).

Motiraj mentions that the tribe which was known as Lambada, Lamani, Banjara till 20<sup>th</sup> century, are now being proven as Kshatriya Gorvamshiya tribe. Pundit Gorishankar Oza did a pioneering work in unearthing their unknown history. During the course of these findings it came to light that Gor culture of Gorvamshiyas is responsible for the origin of Indus culture. Gor culture has made an impact on the ancient cultures of the world. Even today tribes like Gorvamshiyas are found in some 60 countries. Their world body is known as Roma Gypsies. There is almost 90% similarity in regards their language, customs, lifestyle and food habits. They treat Gorvamshiya Banjara as their Brethrens. Further Moti Raj mentions that the place of origin of Gor civilization might have been Afghanistan. The references regarding lifestyle and food habits found right from Kathiawad, Punjab, Sindh, Kandahar, Kabul to Makran can be found in Gor Tandas today ([www.goarbanjara.com](http://www.goarbanjara.com) on 12/6/19).

Giving a brief introduction to the history of Bazigar Banjara B.P. Singh quotes Moti Raj Rathod, 'Banjaras are natives of Afghanistan. East of Kabul there used to be a Gaur river, a valley, a city and a state by that name' (Rathod, 2003: 19, cited in Singh, 2010: 27). He also mentioned that these people were the first ones to offer food to Mahatma Buddha after enlightenment when he encountered a tanda of 500 bullocks coming from Utkal region to Vindhya Pradesh (ibid: 20, cited in ibid).

After going through various available references about the religious and cultural life in the Gor region, Moti Raj predicted that the kingdom of Gor tribe must have been there before Christ. He mentions that the kingdom of Gorvamshiya groups was extended up to Kabul Gajni's mountainous region in North South of Hirat for many years before Christ. Hence the mountain ranges in the region are known as Gor region even today. Gorvamshiya tribals still live in this region. The costumes of women here are also like the Banjara women. A river named For flows through the region. And also a city named Gor is situated in the Gor province ([www.goarbanjara.com](http://www.goarbanjara.com), on 12/6/19).

Colonel Tod remarks of this dynasty, 'the Gaur tribe was once respected in Rajasthan, though they never attained to any considerable eminence. The ancient kings of Bengal were of this race and gave their name to the capital, Lakhnauty' (Valjot, 2009:29). This town of Bengal and their kingdom, of which it was the capital, were known as Gaur and it has been conjectured that they were named after it (ibid).

The second surge of the Muslim aggression began in 980 AD and lasted till 1020 AD. This was the time when the Shahi Kings of Punjab grappled with the invaders. By the year 1020 Muslim rule had been established in Afghanistan, Paktoonistan (NWFP) and west Punjab. These Muslim invasions were led by Mahmud of Ghazni. The Rajputs ruling North India resisted further Muslim aggression. The third wave of a successful Muslim invasion led by Mahmud Shahabuddin Ghaury took place between 1191 AD and 1255 AD. This was the time when the Muslims extended their occupation to Delhi. The lead role in resisting this invasion was played by Prithvi Raj Chouhan. This Muslim surge brought East Punjab, the Ganges Valley (Uttar Pradesh and Bihar) and Bengal under Muslim occupation. This invasion reached up to Bengal where the last Hindu Gaur Kingdom ruled by LaxmanSena was overrun by the Muslims (Bazigar Karamchari Sangh). Panini, an ancient historian, mentions this kingdom in his writings as Purpura (Valjot, 2009: 29).

From the above discussion it can be concluded that the Goar dynasty is a very ancient dynasty having its origin much earlier than 3000 years. They are originators of Indus Valley Civilization, they ruled Afghanistan, entered India in the 1st century and established their kingdom there. They ruled India up to the arrival of Muslims. They lost their kingdom with the advent of Muslims and continued their traditional occupation of trade.

**Medieval Period**

When the major kingdom of Gor Banjaras was vanished by the Mughals, they took to transportation of goods for their livelihood. Although they were traders in the ancient period, in the medieval period it originated out of the very need for survival. They are traditionally known as transporters of goods. They have served many Mughal rulers in India. By looking into their history we find that the community is engaged in trading and transportation of food grains, arms and ammunition and essential commodities from one place to another. They were considered as suppliers of grains to the armies. K. S. Singh mentions 'their traditional occupation is trading. According to him, their main occupation was buying and selling of cattle by taking them to another place, but this has become a subsidiary trade for them. This subsidiary trade is also known as lodinalodna. In the past they also acted as king's messengers, commissariats and suppliers of grocery articles to the army' (K.S. Singh, 1999:132). 'Crooke (1896) mentions that they are a tribe whose primary occupation is, or rather used to be, to act as grain carriers and suppliers to armies in the field' (cited in *ibid*:127).

The Banjaras were also known as 'karwaniyas' since they transported the food grains from the countryside to the city. They had settled on the banks of Yamuna with their families. Trade and commerce flourished during the Mughal period. The Banjaras had traded in caravans and were continuously on the move carrying goods from one place to another (Russel and Hiralal, 1975:11, cited in Mahesh and Shabeena, 2017:565). They had earned the trust and goodwill of the Mughal emperors and army when fighting in the Deccans and down south by their speedy transportation through the difficult and trackless terrain (Halbar, 1986:02, cited in *ibid*).

The Banjaras had actively participated in the inter-local trade in the medieval period and supplied food grains, raw material, textiles, silks, mules and other commodities to the people. They were specialized in carrying bulk goods. They also moved with their families over long distances, sometimes with thousands of oxen carrying food grains and other essential commodities for the bigger merchants (*ibid*: 566).

The Banjaras had played a crucial role in the promotion of trade before the advent of railways and roadways. Their trade flourished in the Mughal period from the north-west to the South because they supplied essential commodities to the armies in the field. When these traders and transporters went to the south while accompanying the Mughal rulers they settled there and did not come back to their homes in the North.

**Colonial Period**

The economic and social position of the Banjaras became all the more worse with the advent of British rule. They were facing challenges in all walks of life. Their traditional occupation of transportation of goods came to an end with the arrival of the colonial powers. Kamala Manohar Rao (1850) says that with the advent of British rule, the Banjaras gradually lost much of the trade because of the introduction of the Railways. The Railways had destructive repercussions on their trade and livelihood. Further, he states that they were forced to abandon their professions and seek fresh means of livelihood (cited in Suresh Lal, 2016: 40265)

'The Banjaras of Delhi claim that with the introduction of railways and other modern means of transport, they were forced to leave their traditional occupation and adopt a settled way of life which brought them face-to-face with the difficulties of earning a living from fixed occupations' ( K.S. Singh, 1999:132). Roy Burman expressed the same view that, 'the Banjaras could not continue for long with their trading marches as the British objected to their movements and supplying their wares to the local armies fighting against them. The trading activities of the Lamans also came to a halt with the introduction of the railways and roadways. By a pronouncement in 1793 the British put restrictions on movement on the Banjaras (Roy Burman, 2010: 19).

Varady also wrote, 'the British authorities ill-treated the Banjaras and deprived them of their chief livelihood. Subsequently, the Banjaras had become financially vulnerable. The development of infrastructure and modern civic

amenities had practically undermined the Banjaras economy (cited in Mahesh and Shabeena, 2017: 566).

The Banjaras had also suffered economically because of implementation of forest protection measures and declaration of forests as reserved. The Banjaras had to depend on the sale of forest produce and pastoralists for their livelihood during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. All their means of livelihood were taken away by the Britishers. Their economic situation was made worse by the British as the latter snatched all their means of livelihood whether it be their occupation of transportation or forest resources, on which the Banjaras depended. All doors were closed for them in the economic sphere. Later they were labeled as criminals. "Since they were poor and lacked definite means of production to earn a living, they were assumed to be thieves and dacoits. Thus they were dubbed 'criminals'." (B.P. Singh, 2010: xiv).

So the condition of Bazigar Banjara was very bad in the colonial period.

### **Post-independence Period**

The Criminal Tribes Act remained active even after the country won independence in 1947. It shows the lackadaisical attitude of the Indian political elite to not let these large sections of our population taste freedom, thus forcing them to launch their own struggle in Independent India. Finally they got 'independence' on 31 August 1952 when the tag of criminality was removed from all the criminal tribes of the country. Now they are called Denotified Tribes or Vimukta Jatis. It is ironical that these communities celebrate this day as the day of their independence and not 15 August. They have ever since then been struggling to get themselves included in the list of Schedule Tribes (B.P. Singh: xvii).

He further wrote, 'their main argument is that these communities had hitherto been called 'tribes' and had been declared as Denotified Tribes, why then had they suddenly been clubbed with the Schedule Castes'? He further wrote, 'they lament that since they have been clubbed with Scheduled Castes, the creamy layer – Balmiks and Chamars – takes all the benefits and they are left with nothing' (2010: xix).

According to the 11<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan, 'Unfortunately, these groups still continue to be marginalized and their specific needs even today are neither adequately understood nor catered to. A report by National Commission for De-notified Tribes, Nomadic Tribes and Semi- Nomadic Tribes subsequently stated that there are roughly 110 million denotified, nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes and that these communities are typically reduced to landlessness and face systematic violence and discrimination by mainstream society' (cited in LuchieMaranan, 2010:15).

The Bazigar's traditional profession is becoming redundant due to modern avenues of entertainment. Economic constraints and compulsions have made them diversify into new areas of employment (K.S. Singh, 1998:340). Their traditional occupation of performing acrobatics has practically ceased to exist. At present the Bazigar earn their livelihood by begging or as hawkers, drum beaters and agricultural and casual labourers (ibid: 341).

The Bazigar Banjaras are excluded from the mainstream of national life even after 70 years of national independence. A small minority of them have received education, employment and entered in small scale business. But the majority of the people who live in *tandas* are backward in all the spheres of life. They do not have infrastructural facilities, civic amenities and other opportunities for their overall development.

Analyzing their social and economic situation B.P. Singh wrote, 'Vimukt Jatis had been struggling since India's independence, first to remove the tag of criminality attached to them during the colonial regime and, subsequently to acquire the status of Schedule Tribes'(2010 :x|j).

They filed a civil writ petition in Punjab and Haryana high court to get a Schedule tribe status and the presiding judge after examining the government criteria for defining Schedule Castes and Scheduled Tribes also concluded that they should be included in the list of Schedule Tribes. B. P. Singh writes, 'Despite political mobilization and the High Court judgment in their favor, these

tribes could not achieve their goal due to illiteracy and poverty. Moreover, their small and scattered population is unable to influence the electoral results' (2010: 73). So it can be said that a tribe who started its journey from trade and kingdoms was first suffered at the hands of Mughals then in the hand of Britishers then faced marginalization and economic deprivation in its own independent country

**Conclusion**

So from the above discussion it can be said that the tribe once known as Gor in ancient India came to be known as Banjara in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and the Gor Banjaras with the course of time came to be known as Bazigars. It is also possible that during this transition when Guar became to be known as Banjara and later appeared in history as Bazigars, there might be certain groups of Gaur Banjaras after adopting different occupations came to be known by those names. This possibly can be the reason that the community is known by different names.

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