Visualizing Vigilance in the Generalized Representation of the Nomad
Reflections on the Banjara Community in Rajasthan, India

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**ABSTRACT:** Reflecting on the generic construction of the nomad through discursive imaginaries and regulatory forms of control, this work engages in the interpretation of vigilance through the acknowledgment of its connectedness to the politics and practice of visuality. Based on essentialized interpretations of identity, ahistorical accounts of mobility, and stereotypical representations of difference, generalized nomadic representations legitimize measures of vigilance and subject formation. By reflecting on the representation of the Banjara community in Rajasthan, India, and their contexts of socioeconomic discrimination, the article thus emphasizes how acts of vigilance in the form of measures of classification and discipline operate in relation to imaginaries of normative order and social distinction, to engage in the structural reproduction of distance, difference and (in)visibility.

**KEYWORDS:** Banjara, colonial, invisibility, nomad, Othering, vigilance, visuality

Visuality is intricately connected to the politics of power. Visualization—here defined as the act by which powerful actors render a subaltern group visible in particular ways—reflects the practice of authority and partakes in the establishment of authenticity, presence, appearance, and truth (*Foster 1988; *Foucault 1977; *Mirzoeff 2011). Often, the process of rendering visible is asymmetrical in terms of reciprocity, and engages in the production of difference that leaves individuals, communities, and social memory as invisible, while normalizing their discrimination and marginalization in society. Practices through which dominant groups depict the (in)visible also remain crucially connected to ideas of morality, maintaining hierarchy, and the reproduction of relations of power and inequality. Through hegemonic frameworks of knowledge production and visuality, the visible become authorized as authentic, and the marginalized perpetually remain invisible, except for their stereotypical representation. These dominant practices of visualization, through the classification of bodies and identities within territorialized spaces, thus ensure the validation and effectiveness of moral authority. The act of seeing, in this sense, involving observation and recognition, contributes toward not only the structuring of experience but also the constitution of a priori difference and selective visualization that engenders Othering. Normative constructions of social existence and imaginaries can then be recognized as processes of subjectivation, constituted through a hierarchical representation of the difference between the visible and the invisible. These categories of representation remain intrinsically connected to processes of knowledge production, the distribution of bodies and
boundaries in perception and lived space, the legitimization of discrimination and violence, and the production of social invisibility and difference.

The peripatetic lifestyle of the Banjara community in Rajasthan, India, along with their ascribed ritual impurity in local caste hierarchies, contributed to their visualization as the non-sedentary subject with criminal dispositions under colonial law. As of now, it is their identification as the Banjara, with the colonial residual tag of their supposedly hereditary proclivity for crime that affirms their continued distinction as the nomad, authenticating measures of discipline against them. Persisting stereotypical notions about their lifestyle and its alleged connection to criminality, and their lack of belongingness that stands intricately related to their perpetual categorization as the nomad, legitimizes their subjection to measures of vigilance as carried out by state authorities to ensure their control and integration.

This article engages in the interpretation of vigilance as involving the practice and politics of visuality, through social imaginaries of Othering and regulatory forms of control, resulting in the generalized representation of the nomad, with reference to the Banjara community in Rajasthan. It examines the colonial imposition of criminalized identity on the Banjara in relation to their historical practices of mobility, their ascribed caste identities, and their socio-economic marginalization as the inherent offender in contemporary times. By means of interconnected frameworks of control, differentiation and (in)visibility, vigilance creates subjects of subservience and subordination through processes of generic Othering that participate in not only the homogenization of the subjective histories and narratives of the Banjara but also their reduction into the problematic, anachronistic, and oversimplified category of the “dangerous” nomad. Difference is maintained through the normative, sensorial, and territorial distanciation of the nomadic subject from productive full citizens through the justification of measures of security and surveillance over the former. Analyzing the relation between their essentialized representations of Othering and the existing measures of vigilance in the discrimination of the Banjara as nomadic, this article therefore argues for the reinterpretation of vigilance in terms of its connectedness to visuality, the production of (in)visibility, and the construction of difference and distance.

The central argument of this article, building on the visualization of the Banjara as the nomad, does not imply describing or advancing their representation as vagabonds or peripatetic in an essentialist sense. Mobility among the Banjara community in contemporary times explains their engagement in seasonal or casual labor and their forced displacement, and not their precolonial itinerant lifestyle. Rather, this work focuses on their stigmatization as nomadic and irregular subjects due to continuing legal frameworks of colonial representation, caste-based imaginaries of differentiation, and institutionalized measures of security, resulting in their perpetual nomadization through decentralized and exclusionary practices of vigilance. I begin by elaborating on the connection between notions of collective crime and mobility in colonial India, the criminalization of Banjara identity, their denotification in independent India, and their challenging socioeconomic conditions of existence within the context of the postcolonial nation-state, through literature review and ethnographic descriptions arrived at through observation and interviews carried out with Banjara interlocutors in Rajasthan. Next, I analyze the existing linkages between caste, mobility, colonial laws of criminality, and postcolonial contexts of discrimination in the visualization of the Banjara as the inherent criminal with a nomadic past, to demonstrate how legitimizing measures of domination affirm their distanciation as the Other. Drawing on the case of the Banjara in Rajasthan, I then engage in the conceptual discussion of the interconnectedness of visuality and vigilance, so as to reflect on how visualization results in the structural production of difference, the legitimization of authority, and in this context in particular, in the anachronistic representation of the community through colonial and contem-
porary interpretations of the figure of the nomad. Inferring from the legal classification of the Banjara and their instances of social distanciation, the article hence establishes how vigilance participates in the production of subordinated subjects of control that further entrenches their essentialized distinction as the perpetually outlawed nomadic and the “invisibilized” Other.

**Nomadism and Inherent Criminality: The Banjara Community in Rajasthan**

Moralized representations of the body in popular narratives and frameworks of the gaze position it within existing relationalities of dominance and subordination, influencing its experience and its interpretation as a social entity. Seeing, hence, has epistemological consequences on the production of bodies as moral subjects and on the reproduction of difference in the material social world. This visualization of difference entails a territorial construction of the subject within bounded connotations of value, presence, and regularity that are attached to bodies and action. It is with this backdrop that this section demonstrates the connection between frameworks of colonialist visuality and practices of vigilance in relation to the Banjara community in Rajasthan to reflect on how their visualization as the wandering nomad justified their surveillance in colonial contexts and how such measures of vigilance and imaginaries of nomadism continue to explain their socioeconomic marginalization in contemporary times. With descriptions from the field that highlight instances of surveillance, discrimination, and deprevial, the section builds up to reflect on visualization as a process of subject construction and generalization, not only limited to acts of seeing, gaze, and representation but premised on the recognition of the entanglement of bodies, social imaginaries, and state apparatuses involved in the reproduction of the existing relations of power and subordination.

Any attempt to decipher the categorical imposition of “nomad” on communities across India would reveal the presence of diverse groups identified as nomadic broadly on grounds of their unusual lifestyle or their occupations (*Rana 2011: 1). Bhangya *Bhukya and Sujatha Surepally (2021) describe nomadic communities in India as pastoral communities, travelers and wandering groups, and communities engaged in hunting and diverse practices involving basket weaving, storytelling, and so on. Nomadic groups cover 10 percent of India’s total population today. The term Banjara was used in the sixteenth century to refer to “communities of carriers” (*Habib 1990: 374) involved in the transportation of food grains, sugar, salt, and other goods to other regions (*Habib 1964: 400) and the supply of bullock and horse carts to Mughal armies (*Varady 1979: 2–3). The nature of their professional activities led them to live a non-sedentary life, residing in makeshift camps known as *tanda* at different places (*Kerr 2006: 91; *Satya 1997: 320). The introduction of railways and roads under colonial rule in nineteenth-century India, and the increasingly unpleasant encounters of the Banjara with military and toll collectors while on their journey, gradually brought their traditional occupations to an end (*Varady 1979: 5).

For the colonial state, the mobility of the Banjara interfered with the possibility of imposing colonial taxes on them, and in general was also perceived as a challenge to imperial authority. This resulted in the creation of colonial legal policies in the nineteenth century, to control the movement of all itinerant communities and those engaged in non-agricultural practices and predict their possible acts of resistance against the state (*Satya 1997: 325–328). Surveys and census data served to distinguish between castes and tribes and to delineate the nomadic communities on whom the tag of criminality was imposed (*Arora 2014: 13). The Thuggee and Dacoity Department was set up to deal with these itinerant communities. Thuggee referred to the act of robbery and murder by the indigenous “bandits” and “criminals.” Alongside the introduction of the Thuggee and Dacoity Department, testimonial evidence from informants
belonging to these communities and statistical reports began to be collected. This corpus of information was compiled in a way that facilitated the identification of an entire community of people as having similar characteristics, and their collective categorization as criminal. With the distinction of “extraordinary crime” from individual crimes, the connection between caste and its correlating codes of conduct became increasingly significant in defining particular castes as criminals (*Freitag 1991). The department’s superintendent was informed about the nomadic communities identified as hereditary criminals, and landowners in those regions were asked to be vigilant and update the authorities accordingly (*Nigam 1990: 136).

This imposition of the idea of collective criminality on itinerant communities in India, however, was neither purely the effect of colonial intervention nor the result of developments in the fields of criminology made in the West. The delineation of criminal castes and tribes in colonial India only facilitated the official enumeration and classification of particular communities as criminals, who were also differentiated in precolonial times through cultural and moral constructions concerning the relative impurity and inferiority of their caste-affiliated sociopolitical lives. Caste-based stereotypical representations of criminality in precolonial cultural narratives pictured the so-called robber tribes living at the rim of civilization symbolized by the jungle, and having wholly different ethics. In some cases, criminality was identified as a generational “quality” (*Piliavsky 2015: 330–334). Connections were traced not only between criminal dispositions and caste but also between criminality and mobility, which led to the classification of wandering groups such as the Banjara as criminals or thugees, involved in highway robbery and murder. For the landed aristocratic classes as well as the colonial administration, the “mobility” of these peripatetic communities posed a challenge to authority. Colonial power was ensured not only through the visualization of the native as the inferior Other but also through control over economic production and the spaces of distribution within the territory of the colony. And this meant controlling the mobility of ideas, commodities, and people. Mobility as such posed a challenge to the process of revenue collection by the colonial state and interfered with the distribution of commodities in the colonial territory, which was also associated with the Banjara (*Sinha 2008: 12). The precondition of the mobility of peripatetic groups, as Nitin Sinha notes, not only became significant after its connection with certain criminal activities was established, but in the very definition of criminality itself (14). With the criminalization of the nomadic communities, mobility itself was constituted as an offence, legitimizing the imposition of colonial surveillance. Grounded in race theory and Eurocentrism and connected to ideas of caste (*Brown 2001: 352), native criminality was recognized as habitual on account of caste reputation and ritual (im)purity.

The classification of crime, hence, became central to the establishment of colonial authority. This classification was complementary to the maintenance of a sense of social order and discipline in the colonies, which in turn was crucially connected to the development of mercantile capitalism in the empire. In the development of criminal law in colonial India, since the 1830s, the distinction of the category of collective crime led to the classification of an increasing number of itinerant communities as having hereditary criminal dispositions. This collective criminalization culminated in the Criminal Tribes Act 1871, which involved identifying all tribes and gangs who were assumed to be systematically engaged in criminal activities and ensuring their containment within restricted territories. Such measures developed on grounds of presumptions concerning a connection between the absence of sedentarized, lawful occupations among peripatetic communities and criminal dispositions. If proven “guilty,” the local gazette would then declare these communities as criminals, their surveillance following in accordance with the act. Legal interventions in the form of the Indian Code of Criminal Procedure of 1861 (*Prinsep 1869) and the Criminal Tribes Act both harped on the operation of preventive sur-
veillance in which habitual offence by the native was assumed on grounds of reputation, probability of danger, and through the identification of hereditary criminal tribes and castes (Singha 2015: 243–244). For the colonized subject as “an object without history” (Nigam 1990: 133), the occupational continuity of castes was used to label the nomadic communities wholly as dacoits and criminals (Bhukya 2007: 186). The Banjara, notified as a criminal tribe, had to record their presence at police stations regularly (Satya 1997: 329), required passes for travel (Arora 2014: 13–14), and were often placed in missionary settlements where they stayed and worked (15–16). The basic criteria for identifying the propensity for criminal acts under the Criminal Tribes Act were occupation, residence, and contiguity through blood (Kumar 2004: 1082). Practices of vigilance as enumerated in the Act were asserted on grounds of the criminal tribe’s visibilized inferiority apparent from their unkempt, ruffian appearances as well, justifying the colonizer’s attempt to “cultivate new moral and corporeal subjects” out of them (Arora 2014: 17). The Salvation Army in India also emphasized the creation of institutional spaces for reforming the character of criminal tribes and disciplining them by reconstructing their lifeworlds, their manners, customs, appearance, habits, and their sense of hygiene and time (Tolen 1991: 119). Within the institutionalized reformatories that identified the formalized nature of caste-based occupations of these criminal tribes as contributing to the reproduction of their criminal dispositions, missionization insisted on the creation of docile and productive bodies through the organization of time and labor power (118–119).

In 1952, five years after Indian independence, the Criminal Tribes Act was replaced by the Habitual Offenders Act in all states, facilitating the legal dissociation or denotification of the branded communities from the label of criminality. It is essential to note that while not all nomadic tribes are denotified, all denotified tribes in India are identified as belonging to the category of nomadic tribes. This also reveals the dangers of homogenization implicit in their official classification under the singular category of “Nomadic Tribes” given their diverse histories (Bhukya and Surepally 2021), while also recognizing that the colonial categorization of criminal communities included tribes as well as castes.

For those whose identities were decriminalized after the Criminal Tribes Act was repealed, however, the denotification did not bring about much change in their stigma as hereditary criminals. Since the “habituality” of the offenders in this context was established on grounds of their conviction on three occasions or more, continuously for five years before or after 1952, those previously labeled as criminal castes or tribes were more prone to be convicted under this act as well. The Habitual Offenders Act stressed the occupation of the suspect or the accused, as if it encouraged a sedentary lifestyle (“Branded for Life” 2008). Several sections of the act in different states also revealed a strong continuity with the previous law in many aspects. As the Rajasthan Habitual Offenders Act 1953 states, surveillance is maintained through the use of separate registers for finger, palm and foot imprints, along with photographs. The “habitual offender” is required to report themselves to the police once per month and to notify their absence from their usual residence. They must inform the authorities about their residence and notify the District Magistrate if they are involved in any intrastate movement. The state government has the power to restrict their residence for a period of three years from the date they are identified as a habitual offender. If required, the state government can keep the offenders in corrective “settlements,” and if someone escapes, they can be arrested not only by the police officers of the state but also by the village headman. Once identified as a habitual offender, the individual remains registered as one for the next five years. The act also calls for penalty and/or imprisonment if any of the rules are not followed.

While under the Indian state after independence many such communities have been recategorized under Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes, and Other Backward Classes (OBCs), sev-
eral of them remain undocumented. Again, in some cases, the same community is recognized under different categories in different states. The Rajasthan government’s Department of Social Justice and Empowerment categorizes the Banjara (Baldias) as a nomadic tribe, who are now listed under OBC in the state (*DSJE 2022). Ethnographic observations in the districts of Jaipur, Sikar, and Nagaur reveal a close connection between their stigmatized past and their current lack of access to socioeconomic resources of development. The Banjara population in any locality usually lives together. While they explained this as their customary practice from the past when they traveled together, many individuals also mentioned that staying together allowed them to safeguard themselves from their repeated harassment by the police and local feudal landowners. Local politicians, they insisted, rarely visited them. For those who chose to stay at the margins of the town or near wastelands or forests, their decision was a deliberate act of invisibility on their part, to escape violence and harassment from the local administration and the dominant castes.

In Jaipur, the Banjara mostly reside in slums. In Sikar and Nagaur, most members of the community continue to live in makeshift tanda camps in unoccupied lands, near landfills or forests, while a few live in temporary shelters. In one such cluster of Banjara camps in the town of Sikar, situated on an open land, the residents shared how their demands remained largely neglected. Each family occupies an independent tent and has a separate cooking place. The ceilings of their camps are covered with tarpaulin, tied to four bamboo sticks on four corners. Sewage water flows at a distance, on one side of the settlement. They do not have any access to electricity and obtain water from municipal corporation tanks. The men of these families work as daily wage laborers, and the women manage the household. None of them have any official documents to prove their identity and citizenship, because of which they have no access to the rights that are provided to the citizens, including land ownership and the right to build a permanent settlement. “We have been living here for the last 25 to 30 years. Political leaders rarely visit us. We have repeatedly conveyed our problems and needs to them, but our situation remains the same,” one person explained. They live in open temporary spaces, with documents denied on grounds of their demarcation as a denotified community, and no scope of ensuring a stable income. External representations of the community as nomadic and lawbreakers continue to frame their identity. The absence of any land rights among the Banjara, despite their residence in the same state for more than a generation and their recognition as a “backward class” in the census, therefore reveals their continual production as invisible noncitizens through measures of vigilance.

Other than a few households in Jaipur, the Banjara living in camps and villages in Sikar and Nagaur do not have any valid address proof as required for their caste certification, because of which they are denied access to reservation quotas allotted to OBCs in secondary education and public-sector employment. Educational opportunities remain extremely limited in scope for their children because of their bleak economic conditions, their marginalized caste status, and the perceived tag of criminality. Owing to the lack of documents verifying residence, caste and income, most of the Banjara interlocutors said they were not being able to apply for “Below Poverty Line” ration cards, meant for the economically deprived communities, for receiving subsidized food supplies from the state government. In terms of their employment, across the state of Rajasthan, most members of this community work as casual laborers, at construction sites, brick kilns, and stone quarries. In Nagaur and Jodhpur, a few Banjara families also work seasonally as agricultural laborers. Conversing about the occupational history of their community, an interlocutor in Sikar explained that in precolonial India, they were always treated with respect by the royalty for being fearless subjects who were continually on the move, facilitating the transportation of salt and food grains across India. While narrating their experiences about instances of surveillance, he added that the police visit them about once every two weeks to
inquire about their activities and movements. During such visits, all members of the tanda are required to be present.

In Nagaur and Sikar, when Banjara individuals were asked about instances of discrimination, they reported that the police destroyed their encampments on a few occasions, on charges of illegally occupying agricultural land or government property and the lack of residential documents. As per the orders of the Rajasthan High Court, in an anti-encroachment drive carried out a year before the COVID-19 pandemic, a cluster of Banjara settlements in Nagaur were demolished by the state administration for having unlawfully occupied pasturelands. One morning, as one of the witnesses recounted, government officials arrived with a group of people who started pulling down the tents. Under orders to take down the illegal settlements in the area, most of the houses in this village, built with plastic sheets and pieces of cardboard and tin put together, were torn down, in the very presence of the local police. Utensils, beds, and other belongings were destroyed, and those who resisted were beaten up.

While reflecting on the attitude of the local civic authority and the police in relation to cases of violence, an interlocutor from Nagaur spoke about an incident of vandalism that had happened in 2014, in the Bhilwara district of Rajasthan, where a violent mob comprising of individuals hired by landowners and real estate dealers burnt down houses and plundered property. Cycles, food grains, furniture, and wells were all damaged in the presence of the police. In all these cases of displacement, however, there has been no attempt to rehabilitate the families, who have suffered tremendous losses. The existence of institutional violence against the Banjara hence indicates the structural absence of recognition of their entitlement to land and citizenship rights, explained in relation to their nomadic past and the label of criminality. While colonial law defined their criminality primarily on grounds of their unregulated mobility, their visualization as the nomad in contemporary times serves to revalidate the idea of collective crime and their criminalized past, justifying the practices of vigilance as preventive measures to control the Banjara's presumed propensity toward crime.

Perpetually Nomad: Vigilance and the Construction of Subjects of Subordination

The contexts of vigilance discussed above reveal how watchfulness involves the visualization of the subject. It incorporates visualizing the processes of subjectivation through which distancing and Othering takes place. Vigilance can thus be explained as being intricately connected to the politics of visibility and the production of legitimacy. Practices of vigilantism participate in the reorganization of space, the reconstruction of individual bodies, and the production of presence through seeing and subject construction, popularly in the form of surveillance or gaze, and again, through invisibility. It is in the unevenness of the gaze and its systemic production that the evidence of vigilance can be located. Such practices of watchfulness employed by the state to ensure security and care for full citizens and productive bodies of labor also remain observable among nonstate actors, for whom the moral need for vigilantism is fed through the circulation and the discursive reproduction of social imaginaries. This is, however, not to suggest the absence of imaginaries in state discourses, but rather their presence and legitimization, which enables normative power to be reinterpreted as rational truth. Parameters of watchfulness developed by the state involve the use of technology and/or legal discourses to observe and control the movement of irregular subjects and noncitizens, the creation of separate spaces to distance them from the remaining population, and the compelling need for documentation. Such institutional frameworks of control therefore operate alongside persisting social imaginaries.
ies to determine the incompleteness of the “nomad” in relation to others within a defined population, visualizing their essentialized identity for the purpose of subordination while rendering their discrimination invisible.

Invisibility in this sense then refers not to physical absence but rather the absence of recognition (*Honneth 2001: 111). And this assertion on “absence” is significantly reflected in the representation of the nomad, resulting in the visualization of those presumed “nomads” as irregular and predisposed to illegal activities. If vision is not symmetrical because it is structured in relation to power, then recognition and the authentication of appearance, owing to its connection with visualization, also remains embedded in discursive frameworks of domination. Absence, used in an overarching manner to denote the lack of recognition and presence, can hence be interpreted in the context of its discursive configuration, as a marker of invisibility, whether literally or normatively predicated in relation to legitimacy and agency.

In the case of the Banjara in Rajasthan, measures of vigilance in colonial and postcolonial contexts are explained through the intersection of caste-based conceptions of labor, mobility, and the discursive construction of illegality. With caste hierarchy being constructed through ascribed qualities of ritual purity and pollution that reflect in the graded nature of the hereditary occupations of the communities, the assumption of ritual impurity remains central in the legitimization of caste-based discrimination. The framework of caste hierarchy is also significantly connected to land and locality, within which structured patterns of exchange of food grains and services in villages have existed. The peripatetic lifestyle of the Banjaras in precolonial India challenged not only the land-based nature of caste hierarchy but also its connected relationalities of domination and subordination in action and interaction, resulting in their depiction as “placeless,” and ritually and morally impure. When the colonial construction of illegality incorporated the discourse of caste in the definition of habitual criminality, for the Banjara, their occupational mobility played a crucial role in the construction of imaginaries that framed them as criminals. Along with this, their subordinated caste position or tribal identity further contributed toward the legitimization of the discursive construction of illegality in reference to their mobility.

The colonial classification of the Banjara as offenders relied on ignoring mobility as a regularized occupational requirement. This allowed their mobility to be interpreted in terms of their physical absence from villages, from sedentarized territories in which bodily movement was spatially “disciplined” in accordance with caste-specific norms of purity. Their mobility was seen as a challenge not only to frameworks of colonial governance but also to Brahmanical authority, to the dominant landowning castes and the very structure of the exchange system in the village that reproduced the relations of caste. Their acts of mobility were visualized as the performance of opposition to colonial authority, explained on grounds of their habitual propensity toward crime and illegal activities shared by generations through kin ties and cultural dispositions, and assumed to be disguised underneath their claims of occupationally determined nomadism. Through the identification of the nomadic communities as collective criminals and their notification under the Criminal Tribes Act, the colonial government therefore established a new order of truth for native subjects, one that was defined through classification, containment, surveillance, and discipline. Colonial visuality justified the presence of imperial authority through the establishment of the trope of the nomad, symbolizing disorder, illegality, and uncleanliness in the territory of the empire. Acts of vigilance involved in the categorical visualization of the Banjara as criminals by birth were also implicated in the complementary distinction of the “good” colonial subject, which then carried over to the notion of the “good” and responsible citizen in independent India.

While the postcolonial state cemented the sedentarization of the Banjara through their “denotification” as criminals, it did not challenge the relation between nomadism and criminal-
ity. Rather, it is the stigma of criminalized past that explains their poverty and exclusion from access to citizenship rights in contemporary times. Their freedom from being tagged as criminal castes and tribes could not ensure a historical dissociation with this stigma of criminality, which not only explains their socioeconomic marginalization but renders them vulnerable to increased measures of surveillance. The conceptualization of “extraordinary crime” in relation to caste, specifically in the identification of the “lawful” occupation of communities by the colonial administration, in a way also contributed to the legitimization of the exclusionary and delegitimizing practices of the institution of caste itself. Thus, their denotification in independent India failed to obliterate their colonial identification as the dangerous Other, and even though it granted them with the status of the free citizen, it failed in facilitating their visualization as the fair or “good” citizen. Civic authorities view the Banjara as disruptive and marginal to the process of development. This mode of visualization results in instances of surveillance, forced displacement, and an attitude of indifference toward their needs. To the police, they are communities having a history of criminality and therefore in need of surveillance. And for the dominant castes, the nomadic communities remain a threat to the moral order, on account of their relative ritual impurity and its supposed connection with immoral and criminal activities. Their visualization as nomadic and as hereditary offenders is more than an act of seeing: it has discursive, spatial, and political implications. They remain subcitizens, or rather stateless, physically situated on the fringes of the city or the village, overlooked in development projects, silent in public discourses, and relatively absent from official records. Existing legal and civic discourses, with relation to the Banjara, constitute a framework of visuality that bears traces of colonial imaginaries of the criminal, and caste-based ideologies of intergenerational impurity, which together operate to legitimize vigilance. Vigilance then perpetuates the continued visualization of the Banjara as the nomad on grounds of their “inherent” criminal nature, their unreliability, and the limited economic value of their labor by restricting their citizenship rights. In the process, it therefore reproduces them as marginalized subjects of state control, legitimizing the acts of violence carried out against them, and renders their discrimination invisible by placing them at the socioeconomic and territorial fringes of the state.

By engaging in a critical reading of visuality through the genealogical frameworks of colonial and postcolonial regimes in relation to the representation of the Banjara of Rajasthan as the “dangerous” nomad, this article therefore demonstrates how enduring practices of vigilance, contextualized within the boundaries of the imperial colony and the territorial limits of the sovereign nation-state, engage in the structural reproduction of essentialist, exoticized, and colonialist notions of the nomadic subject. By representing this peripatetic subject as irregular and as a threat to the stability and efficacy of disciplinary mechanisms, colonialist visuality continues to engage in the production of discursive truth and dwell beyond the temporality of imperial domination, extending over to the spatial frameworks of the postcolonial and neoliberal state. Linkages between the Criminal Tribes Act and the Habitual Offenders Act reveal how measures of vigilance in the postcolonial nation-state, particularly in relation to communities conventionally identified as nomadic, still draw on colonialisations visualizations of this “dangerous offender” symbolizing the antithesis of progress and scientific rationality.

An examination of the composition of communities that were tagged as criminal castes or tribes primarily due to the absence of a formalized occupation and a sedentarized lifestyle would demonstrate how the trope of the nomad is significantly aimed at the marginalization and containment of unregulated mobility. The absence of written histories or documentation of the lived experiences of these criminalized communities accompanied by their collective representation as itinerant contributes to the generalization of nomadism, interpreted in relation to the idea of economic productivity and capital distribution, and resulting in the misremem-
bering of their histories of mobility and exclusion. For the sovereign nation-state, the Banjara and other communities identified as “nomadic tribes” are found at the peripheries of processes of capital production, distribution, and accumulation, largely engaged in casual labor. They are distanciated from “full” citizenship rights in the absence of official documents, and they remain invisibilized from development discourses, exoticized as nomads hereditarily associated with crime. They invoke suspicion and therefore vigilance. From the presence of pastoral power in colonial governance, aimed at disciplining and reforming the delinquent subjects, to the need of internal security so as to protect the boundaries of the sovereign nation-state and its citizens, the problematic distinction of the nomad can be seen to rest on the notion of the productive body and its connectedness to colonialist discourses of progress and welfare.

For the Banjara of Rajasthan, their visualization as the criminalized colonial subject on account of their mobility then remains crucial in the justification of the surveillance measures that they are subjected to, which in turn creates conditions of epistemic exclusion facilitating the further circulation of the trope of the nomad. Their delineation as the perpetual outsider or the perpetual criminal, or often both, reveals how institutional discourses, social imaginaries and mechanisms of vigilance engage in the visualization and distanciation of these communities as dangerous subjects of the state. Their conceptualization as dangerous or illegal affirms the asymmetries of visuality, and their relation to territorial and discursive interpretations of center and periphery as relational spaces, within which practices of vigilance operate to produce subjects of subordination. It signifies the delineation of the irregular subjects as vulnerable nonpolitical bodies assumed to perennially pose threats to values of national sovereignty (*Fejzula 2019: 2099) and economic productivity. Vigilance then shapes the visibility of the Banjara primarily through the apparatuses of security, revealing the intervention of state and nonstate actors in recurring acts of displacement and violence, coupled with their invisibility from contexts of citizenship and development. For the Banjara, their reasons for inhabiting filthy or unreachable spaces are often to escape violence and discrimination, and the surveillance of the state. Their entanglement in narratives of (in)visibility and (in)security demonstrates how frameworks of colonialist visuality within the boundaries of the sovereign state categorizes their bodies, their labor, and their histories as relatively “disposable” (*Jusionyte and Goldstein 2016: 8). The distanciation of these marginalized communities as the problematic Other is thus always produced by the dominant sedentarized source of power, expressed through the “physicality” of difference and inferiority (*Colloredo-Mansfeld 1998: 187) and social distinctions.

Visuality, Vigilance, and the Generalized Representation of the Nomad

The concept of visuality has undergone significant changes in its meaning. At its conception in the nineteenth century, Thomas Carlyle referred to visuality as mental representations. Later, visuality became a structural framework that renders certain aspects and artifacts visible, facilitating social perception and experience in the physical material world (*Sand 2012: 89). While vision might refer to the physical act of seeing, and visuality may involve interpreting seeing as a social construction, the two remain connected in relation to the body, located in the material, social world. Visuality is hence concerned with the “historical techniques” and the discursive contexts that structure seeing and its interpretation (*Foster 1988: ix). It not only reflects the social and discursive construction of the visual, vision, and the visible but also draws attention to the “visual construction of the social” (*Mitchell 2002: 171). Visuality is relational in nature, conceptually constructed in relation to the body, imaginaries, and institutionalized practices of
control. Visuality itself is agentic in the structural production of difference, and it is precisely this agency of visuality as a complex process of classification, hierarchization, and legitimation of authority (*Mirzoeff 2011) encompassing vigilance that is at the core of the argument.

In terms of its relation to sensoriality, as well as the possibilities of intersubjectivity, the concept of visuality remains closely connected to the acknowledgment of the body in the social world. In this sense, it moves beyond its mere preoccupation with sight to emphasize issues of representation, presence, and legitimacy. Visuality in itself does not, however, necessarily connote visibility. In other words, the visual is not necessarily always visible but requires visualization as active process (*Brighenti 2010: 33). As an expression of power, visibility signifies not merely presence but also the objectification of presence itself. Discursive frameworks of visuality shape the historical contexts of visibility and the latter involves making the visualizations visible or accessible through state power and the circulation of social imaginaries.

With visuality as the central axis of investigation, this work draws on Nicholas *Mirzoeff’s “genealogies of visuality” (2011: 6) to demonstrate the discursive power of visuality, and establish a connection between such genealogies, the work of vigilance, and the presence of colonialist visuality in the construction of the Banjara as Othered subject. The construction of genealogies is strongly connected to visualizing the process of knowledge production. Genealogy in a Foucauldian sense facilitates in the development of critique toward the very construction of history and the historical contexts of power, struggles, domination, and subject formation (*Mahon 1992: 101–108). The discursive production of visuality, involving the interplay of “information, imagination and insight” in physical spaces result in practices of domination, reproduction of authority, but also subversion. Connected to structures of authority, visuality is more than an individual practice of seeing; it refers to historically constructed ways of seeing that work toward the legitimization of power and authority (*Mirzoeff 2011: 3). Historiography, therefore, in this context, does not seek to promote the linear temporal understanding of power. Instead, it brings to the forefront the discursive practices involved in the reproduction of power relations and the visualization of the colonial and the postcolonial subject.

The development of the modern state in the West coincided with the visualization of the human body as a political subject of control, integrating discipline and biopolitics. The effectiveness of power became evident in how invisibility, in different contexts, could exist as a source of power and again as vulnerability. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, European colonial discourses largely revolved around disciplinary techniques and mechanisms of vigilance based on visuality that provided legitimacy to ideas of human difference (*Mirzoeff 2011: 7). Emphasizing the corporeal distinction of subjects through gaze and the spatial demarcation of territories inhabiting the Other (10; *Foucault 1977), sociocultural domination and economic exploitation were facilitated through the interpretation of vision as a source of objective reality. Visuality in the colonial regime established its presence and authority by defining the appearance of the subject. Nomadism, defined as “a social (dis)arrangement and a subjective (dis)order on the fringes of empire” (*Noyes 2004: 160), as a concept, was redefined by the turn of the nineteenth century in relation to the presumed difference in dispositions between the disorderly nomadic and the “civilized” sedentary population (*Noyes 2000: 49). This redefinition legitimized practices of control on the former. The nomadic subject was constituted not simply through movement alone but in the interpretation of movement as a form of rebellion against authority and convention (*Braidotti 1994: 5), both in the colonial empire as well as within the boundaries of the postcolonial state.

Under colonial rule, the demarcation of territory and the imposition of measures of surveillance on the native population did not simply function as means of classification complement-
ing underlying measures of control. These practices facilitated the visualization of a discourse of colonial authority, through the obliteration of the social imaginary of the colonized and the institutionalization of processes that ensured the structural reproduction of order and coloniality (*Smith 1998: 483). The establishment of truth in this regime was closely connected to language (*Mahon 1992: 104) and its institutionalized usage in colonial institutions, which then contributed to the production of truth, determining the appearance and identity of the colonized. Exploring genealogies of visuality in colonial and postcolonial regimes that go beyond individual acts of seeing therefore reveal the continuity of specific terms in official discourses. As we have seen in the case of the Banjara, colonialist practices of classification and Othering remain subtly present in postcolonial contexts as well.

Contemporary frameworks of control constituting the nation-state, unlike in the colonial regime, rest on preconditions of autonomy and free movement that are required for the efficient functioning of the neoliberal market, along with an increased intervention of elaborate mechanisms of vigilance. They ensure the freedom of the dominant by constantly affirming control through watchfulness over subaltern populations, without obstructing the fluidity and mobility of actions and individuals essential for the development of neoliberal capitalism. Continued measures of vigilance involving instances of surveillance and displacement along with the denial of access to citizenship rights for the Banjara community in Rajasthan therefore demonstrate how colonialist classifications of nomadism, hereditary criminality and casteist conceptions of impurity coexist to determine their identity and rights. Within the boundaries of the state, access to basic rights and to mobility also stands strongly connected to citizenship. In the absence of documents establishing their citizenship and residence rights, the Banjara then remain as stateless subjects, with their claims of spatial and historical belongingness unverified and challenged, and their nomadic representations essentialized.

Vigilance operates through an emphasis on the visual and visibility (see also Ivasiuc et al., this issue). Control over the body is significantly connected to its observation. Visuality “aestheticizes” (*Mirzoeff 2011: 15) spatial distinctions and naturalizes the essentialist ideas of difference involved in subject-formation. It emphasizes the moral character of the body, defined in relation to spatiality. Othering remains possible through the deliberate distinction of a separate space, territorially present or culturally represented. Frameworks of visuality involved in the regulation and (in)visibilization of human subjects can therefore be read as structures of vigilance that locate the body within definite material, social and discursive contexts. Visuality reveals the corporeal and discursive embeddedness of vigilance, through tangible obstructions in appearance and mobility, as well as through the organization of vision, bodies, and normative order. Visibility affirms moral value (*Honneth 2001: 120). While maintaining distance with the subject/object (*Daly 2016: 75), visibility positions the visible into definite categories of value determined through imaginaries and practices of control, obscuring the vulnerable as risky and requiring control. This results in the invisibilization of the marginalized, while reframing the invisibility as indicative of their lack of transparency and individual responsibility.

In the context of the Banjara, their official recognition as “denotified” in the present day, built on colonial assumptions of the interconnectedness of nomadism and collective criminality, and accompanied with the absence of documents verifying their citizenship, legitimizes measures of vigilance carried out by the state and civic authorities to control and discipline them. Vigilance furthers their selective visualization in social and political discourses, with acts of seeing and “unseeing” the Banjara through territorial containment, surveillance and displacement, thereby facilitating their continual reproduction as subordinated subjects of state control.
Conclusion

The allegorical imposition of the category of the nomad to refer to the Banjara highlights the fundamental connection between seeing and epistemological formations of difference that command vigilance. Their identification as nomadic and their visualization as irregular and risky subjects often involve diverse contexts, with explanations mostly reduced to the irregularity of their occupations or their historical trajectories of movement, or both. In the interpretation of vigilance and its relation to the redefinition of discursive truth, it therefore becomes essential to critically reflect on the institutional and socioeconomic contexts within which the Banjara are constituted as problematic subjects and essentialized as the nomad. The structural reproduction of their representation as the perpetual nomad impedes the acknowledgment of their subaltern narratives of mobility and their subjective experiences of discrimination and marginalization, crucial for the recognition of their agency. Efforts toward their integration at the level of their locality and neighborhoods are repudiated through their popular visualization as the criminal, irregular, and nomadic Other. Vigilance, in this context, facilitates the normative a priori difference to be read as authentic, leading to the atemporal construction of the nomad, without relation to time or history. Essentialized definitions engage in not only the exoticization of the nomad itself but also the quality of being nomadic, which challenges sedentarism and the politics of control and is dealt with through the biopolitical ordering of bodies and their containment through vigilance. Operating through ways of seeing and the establishment of legitimacy, vigilance hence normalizes invisibility, concealing discrimination and the lack of recognition of affirmative difference through the discursive visualization of the Banjara as the distanced nomad. This does not imply undermining the nondominant practices of countervisuality constructed by the Banjara to resist their invisibilization, exoticization, and exclusion. The article demonstrates how dominant discourses of colonialist visuality interact with measures of vigilance to contribute to the historical reproduction of the Banjara as the perpetual criminal community through their generalized representation as the colonially delineated nomad.

The trope of the nomad is therefore not only problematic for its ahistorical and homogenized representation of those communities that have been associated with a peripatetic past or are identified as nonsedentary. It is the identification of the Banjara as the irregular and dangerous nomad that draws attention to the moral undertones of Othering and the politics of visuality involved in the symbolization of the generalized figure of the nomad as a form of representation of all who resist, or rather challenge, the colonial attitudes of domination and threaten the smooth flow of disciplined bodies in the neoliberal spaces of the state and the market. By encouraging a genealogical representation of visuality, this article then calls for the need to historicize the relatedness between vigilance and the visualization of authority, not with the objective of developing a singular linear narrative of power but to redirect attention to the entanglements of discursive and nondiscursive practices imbricated, in the construction and maintenance of the relations of power, and in the deliberation of difference and invisibility. The visualization of difference and distance through the figure of the nomad in this context, therefore, represents the visualization of authority.

Through its intricate connection with people, objects, and diverse contexts, mobility connotes a sense of belonging for people on the move and again presents itself with manifold meanings (*Salazar 2016: 2–3). The visualization of movement in the material social world as well as in the epistemological sense of mobility implying freedom is, however, structured through practices of authority that recognize those trajectories that justify the reproduction of relations of power while delegitimizing those practices through which subaltern groups challenge authority. The
friction between the boundaries of “mobility and stasis” has been central in the European imagination of Otherness (*Engebrigtsen 2017: 43–44), reflected in the confirmation of the nomad as the unpredictable Other in colonial governance. The operationalization of the term nomad in this article hence critically reflects on how acts of vigilance involved in colonial and postcolonial contexts of governance contribute to the construction of an essentialized image of the nomad as a prototype of anomaly and anarchy. The categorization of the Banjara as a denotified tribe in law and official documentation and its relation to conceptions of nomadism and criminality suggest that unregulated mobility is seen as an obstruction to state projects of discipline, overlooking the socioeconomic and historical challenges that might, to a considerable extent, be responsible for their nomadic lifestyle or their “placelessness.” The generic visualization of the Banjara as the disorderly subject of the modern state therefore emphasizes “the visualization of difference.” Visualization, in this sense, exists both as acts of seeing/unseeing with the purpose of imposing control, and as processes of subjectivation that recognize the interconnectedness of bodies, spaces, and authority, in the establishment of presence, within the boundaries of the state.

Practices of (in)visibility are thus engaged in the normative construction of binaries of sedentarism and nomadism, in which subjective experiences are not only unaccounted for or obliterated, but in its place grand narratives are powerfully misconceptualized, often rationalized on grounds of the lack of documentation or evidence on the part of the dispossessed. In the context of the Banjara, vigilance and its consequences of domination through regimes of coloniality, development, and security thus remain central in the perpetual nomadization of these communities in social imaginaries and the policies of the state. Their projection as the archetype of the nomad, in which distanciation and discrimination are justified on grounds of presupposed social difference and economic and moral inferiority, invalidates their subjective experiences of marginalization and exclusion. Such exclusive representations that primarily derive their legitimacy through the mechanisms of state control and neoliberal governance, allow for normative interpretations to be established within the framework of rationality. Disestablishing their historicity, vigilance renders the Banjara invisible from the constructive and propitious discourses of development.

If violence in a broad sense of the term can be interpreted as relationally involving impositions or restrictions on agency (*Vigh 2011: 105), then vigilance involves violence through the selective visualization of the Banjara, resulting in the reproduction of discursive and spatial conditions that contribute toward their social invisibility. It promotes the general invisibilization of their bodies and spaces within the territorial boundaries of the state, and their particular visualization only through surveillance and in legal framework and social imaginaries as subjects of subversion, thereby redirecting attention toward the structural reproduction of perpetually liminal bodies and of conditions of liminality.

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NOTES

1. Bhangya Bhukya (2007: 187–188) mentions that many studies also reinterpret dacoity as organized protest by the peasants against resistance by the colonial state, instead of its popular elucidation as acts of widespread robbery and looting carried out by those perceived as hereditary criminals such as the Banjara.

2. By obtaining a certificate of good conduct in the reformatories, it was possible for an individual to become a “free citizen,” which was also represented through the ownership of commodities (Tolen 1991: 119). Thus, while vigilance was based on grounds of purported criminality of the whole caste or community, freedom had to be proved at an individual level through the regulation of the body and conduct, and through participation in the ownership of commodities.

3. The act underwent several amendments on grounds of the separation of children from their parents and the introduction of fingerprints in police records, until it was replaced by the Habitual Offenders Act (Rana 2011: 17), shifting the onus on individuals. In 2005, the National Commission for Denotified Tribes, Nomadic Tribes and Semi-nomadic Tribes was set up to ensure the development of these marginalized communities through reservation and access to resources.

4. The Criminal Tribes Act 1871 focused on the connection between habitual criminality and the hereditary nature of caste, with connections in kinship, occupation, and culture. Tribes notified as offenders were placed under additional surveillance to prevent the possibility of crime. Denotification thus involved repealing this law and the subsequent legal dissociation of criminality from entire communities.

5. Although the Indian Constitution does not particularly define OBC, the category consists of those communities, excluding the Scheduled Tribes and the Scheduled Castes, notified by the central government or states as socially and educationally deprived, primarily due to their caste status and poverty. Reservation is provided to these disadvantaged communities in higher education and public sector jobs to ensure their adequate representation and social advancement.

6. In the list of denotified, nomadic, and seminomadic tribes of India (updated in 2016), the Banjaras in Rajasthan are also recognized as the Baldias (MSJE 2016).

7. As reflected from the data I collected through observation and interviews carried out in the state of Rajasthan.

8. Interestingly, this perspective shifts the focus to their colonial classification as being the prime reason for their current socioeconomic marginalization. As reflected from conversations, none of the interlocutors denied the structural presence of caste differentiation, yet again, it did not come up as an overarching reason for social discrimination and exclusion in their narratives, which also hints at how caste hierarchies are internalized and normalized in the visualisation of presence and interaction in everyday life.

9. For Charles Taylor, social imaginaries are constituted of ideas and material action that facilitate a common understanding and a shared sense of legitimacy within the sense of a total moral order (2004: 23–25, 31).

10. In her discussion of nomadism, Rosi Braidotti focuses more on the possibility of subversive thinking and experience, rather than referring to the actual movement of people; a “critical consciousness” (1994: 5) that allows for the expression of subjectivity. But her reflections on nomadism and its relation to subversion connect to an important theme in this article— “what happens when nomadism is viewed as a possibility of subversion from the perspective of power?” — which in this case can be explained as a possible risk that legitimizes measures of control.

11. Countervisuality, as conceptualized by Nicholas Mirzoeff , involves challenging dominant regimes of visuality built on power structures that determine the conditions of the seeable and organize the relations between the visible and the invisible, through the intervention of decolonial frameworks of interpretation that emphasize the autonomy of the “right to look” (2011: 24). In the context of the Banjara, attempts at producing countervisuality are facilitated through cultural practices such as the performances of oral narratives (as witnessed during fieldwork), which present an alternative representation of their past. Such discourses subvert the populist narratives that render them invisible from local histories and cultures.
REFERENCES


Visualizing Vigilance in the Generalized Representation of the Nomad


