

Historical and Ethnographic Review of Gondal Caste in Pre-independence Punjab

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Abstract

This narrative review presents a historical and cultural overview of the Gondal caste in pre-independence Punjab. It examines the unclear identity of this caste, as some historical sources describe this clan as Rajputs, while others consider them part of the Jatt community, reflecting the fluid identity. The Gondal community converted from Hindus to Muslims under the influence of the Sufi saint Baba Farid followed by the migration to the Chaj Doab in Punjab. They became associated with the agriculture as their economic activity along with playing a pivotal role in the British army during the colonial times. However, this research mainly relies on the colonial records of the British era with less discussion about women. This study shows the need for future research using modern methods like interviews, Oral Histories, and modern records for building the comprehensive history and understand the current situation of the Gondal caste.

Keywords: Gondal caste, Rajput-Jatt debate, caste identity, Gondal Bar

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Context

In the Indian Subcontinent, the caste system is a complicated way of segregating people into distinct groups based on the family they are born into. These groups have descriptive rules of living: whom they can marry, how they can interact with others, and what jobs they can do (Olcott, 1944). The Jatts are a community in India famous for their equitable social structure and agricultural expertise. They are divided into different clans, each residing in a separate village, establishing distinct clan territories. (Madsen, 1991). Among various Jatt Clans, the Gondal clan has the most importance and historical prominence. Williamson (1921) identifies the Gondal as one of the important clans of Gujrat District. They possess the area referred to as the *Gondal Bar*, which extends centrally between the Jhelum and Chenab rivers (Davies, 1866). It is declared that the Gondal caste is one of the main clans living in the area between the Jhelum and Chenab rivers.

1.2. Theoretical Frameworks

In South Asia, caste has frequently been examined as a strict structure, but more recent research highlights how flexible and contested it is. The idea of Sanskritization, which describes how groups take on the customs of higher castes in order to elevate themselves, was first proposed by Srinivas (1953). The Gondal clan's use of Rajput titles in colonial documents is closely related to this structure. In line with the Gondal case of dual identification as Rajput and Jatt, Pye and Dirks (2002) contends that colonial censuses and administrative classifications reinterpreted caste and included fluidity into official classifications. From a materialist standpoint, Omvedt (1993) emphasizes how caste status is altered by political and economic shifts; the Gondal people's transition from pastoral to agricultural life and their involvement in the British army are prime examples of these changes.

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Lastly, Guru (2011) highlights caste as a space of agency and negotiation where groups actively reinterpret their identities as opposed to passively accepting labels that are imposed upon them. When combined, these frameworks show how the disputed status of the Gondal caste in colonial Punjab reflects larger caste fluidity processes.

However, the Gondal caste has been addressed in a few blogs or articles, but there isn't thorough academic research on the subject. So this marks the significant need of the study that encompasses the historical ethnographic overview of this caste. The research question for this study is: "What are the historical origins, ancestry, and cultural identity of the Gondal caste in pre-independence Punjab?" the aim of this review is "to summarize all existing evidence on the Gondal caste's history and ethnographic overview".

2. Historical Overview

2.1 Origin and ancestry

One of the important aspects of the Gondal Caste's history is its origin. According to Davies (1866), the Gondal are purported to originate from a lineage of the Sooryavansa Rajputs. In a similar vein, Waterfield (1874) identifies the Gondal as belonging to the Sombansi lineage. Rose et al. (1911) assert in their study that the Gondals originate from the Chauhan Rajput lineage. Furthermore, Mirza (1992) describes the Gondal as Rajputs about Najabat's Poetry on the "Nadir Shah di waar" saying that

دو باریں راہ نیں گوندلاں، لاجپوتان آہے

"Alongside the road were the Gondal Rajputs"

The Gondal themselves claim descent from the Suraj Bansi Rajputs, a lineage also traced by Captain Elliott to the Chauhan Rajputs of the Lunar race (Williamson, 1921). In contrast, Dahiya (1980) suggests that the Gondal clan is associated with the Go-Nanada lineage of Kashmir, which is identified as a *Gotra* within the Jatt community.

These references lack agreement on the origin of this caste. Where many sources are tracing the lineage of Gondal to Chauhan Rajput, there also exists the theory supporting the Jatt Gotra. So the exact origin of the Gondal caste is still unclear reflecting the fluid identity.

2.2. Conversion to Islam under Baba Farid's Influence

The Gondal caste is believed to have embraced Islam through the influence of Hazrat Baba Farid of Pakpattan. According to Waterfield (1874), Kammu, the tenth in descent from Gondal, travelled from a place called Naushehra to Pakpattan, where he visited the shrine of the *faqir* Farid Ganjshakar and embraced Islam. Some accounts trace that the Gondal caste forefather migrated from the Deccan to Baba Farid's shrine, while others suggest the Naushahra, south of Pakpattan, as the point of origin of this caste (Ibbetson, 1916; Rose et al., 1911). According to another source, it is also mentioned in Gondal traditions that their entire caste embraced Islam under the guidance of the Baba Farid of Pakpattan (Davies, 1866; Punjab Government, 1884b).

Thus, these references indicate that 'Kammu' migrated from the southern regions, identified as Deccan and Naushahra, to Pakpattan, where he embraced Islam under the influence of the sacred Sufi saint Baba Farid Ganjshakar (1175-1265 CE; Nizami, 1955). This shows that the conversion of the Gondal community to Islam likely occurred around eight centuries ago corresponding with his lifetime.

2.3. Migration to the Gondal Bar

After the conversion to Islam, the Gondal community migrated to the region now known as *Gondal Bar* between the rivers of Jhelum and Chenab, which marks a significant settlement in

the history of this caste. As of Waterfield (1874), Kammu, the tenth descendant of Gondal, settled at the old village site of Hátí Vind in the Sháhpúr district. From there, his four sons expanded into all of the Bár region, spreading across both the Sháhpúr and Gujrát districts while maintaining strong unity between themselves. Three of the clans, named after Bádar, Ráju, and Dhír, established themselves in the Gujrát district, whereas the fourth clan was named after Búdha who remained in the Sháhpúr district. According to the traditions of this caste, the majority of the current population of this caste settled in this area during the late 13th or 14th Centuries (Punjab Government, 1884b).

As the conversion of the Gondal clan to Islam is referred to the influence of Baba Farid (Waterfield, 1874; Ibbetson, 1916; Rose et al., 1911; Davies, 1866; Punjab Government, 1884b), who lived during the 12th–13th centuries CE (Nizami, 1955), and their migration to *Gondal Bar* is also estimated to have occurred in this period (Punjab Government, 1884b), it can be reasonably concluded that the migration of this cast closely followed the adoption of Islam.

2.4. Rajput vs. Jatt Debate

The classification of the Gondal caste to the Rajput or Jatt community is under debate and unclear. There is a lot of fluidity in the identity of the caste in different eras. Several records presented the Gondal as of the Rajput origin. As per Davies (1866), the Gondals are regarded as descendants of the Suryavanshi Rajputs who embraced Islam under the guidance of the Baba Farid of Pakpattan. Mirza (1992) declares the Gondal as Rajputs during Nadir Shah's war. Similarly, Williamson (1921) declares the role of this caste in the British army that described qualities such as bravery, which colonial sources often associate with Rajput Identity. Additionally, Luard (1893) says that the Gondal were identified as Rajputs in the Shahpur district. The census data reported the claim, that the Gondal Rajputs were 19272 in number while the Gondal who were reported as Jatts were only 305 in number, that indicates that far more individuals reported themselves Gondal Rajputs than Gondal Jatts (Punjab Government, 1884b). All these references suggest the association of the Gondal community with Rajput while mentioning the origin and warrior traits in the clan.

In contrast, certain sources indicate the Gondal caste's affiliation with the Jatt community. Davies (1866) describes the Gondals as pastoral people who are dependent on livestock and reflect the Jatt lifestyle. According to Waterfield (1874), the Gondal community frequently intermarried with other Jatt tribes, which suggests the association of the clan with the Jatts. The Gondals are also identified as Jatts due to their expertise in the agriculture sector, which further strengthens the association of the tribe with Jatts. Additionally, there are claims of marital connections with other Jatt clans (Punjab Government, 1884a). Moreover, Dahiya (1980) presents a different theory, saying that the Gondal clan descends from the Go-nanada clan of Kashmir, which is classified as Jatt *Gotri*. So all these sources, identify the Gondal community's connection with Jatt while highlighting the intermarriage with other tribes and their agricultural lifestyle.

Some sources show the Gondals as either Jatt or Rajput, while others present a combined perspective on both identities. According to Rose et al. (1911), the Gondals are described as Chauhan Rajputs who have now acquired Jatt status and are known to intermarry with other Jatt tribes. The same source also mentions that they are commonly referred to as Rajputs, whereas their associates identify themselves as Jatts. Furthermore, Gondals present in the region of Shahpur and Multan were associated with agriculture and hence classified as Jatt while the Gondal in the Montgomery area are identified as Rajput. This shows the fluidity of identity based on the difference in the geographical area.

Similarly, Ibbetson (1916) highlights that some Jatt groups adopted a Rajput identity, a change that can be a reflection of desires for greater social recognition. In Shahpur, 6,700 individuals identified themselves as Gondal Chauhan, comprising the so-called Chauhan population in that district. The source also identifies that many other Jatt tribes made similar claims of Rajput affiliation to be socially advantageous. In addition to this, neighbouring castes such as Tiwanas and Janjuas do not acknowledge the Gondal's identity as Rajputs. So the Gondal clan appears to have the identity of both the Rajput and Jatt clan while marking the intermarriage with other Jatt tribes.

Additionally, Joon (1967) reveals that the Gondals were originally Jatts in the not-so-distant past, who gradually emerged as the Rajputs. This also supports the claim that the Gondal adopted the Rajput title to enhance their social recognition. While certain sources categorize the Gondal caste under the Jatts or Rajput, there exist sources that highlight the fluidity of their identity.

Table 1: Summary of Rajput vs. Jatt Debate on the Caste Identity of the Gondal Clan

Aspect	Rajput Perspective	Jatt Perspective	Key References
Origin Claim	Descendants of Suryavanshi Rajputs; converted under Baba Farid's guidance	Descendants of the Gananada clan of Kashmir (classified as Jatt Gotra)	Davies (1866); Dahiya (1980)
Occupational Traits	Warrior tradition; participation in British Army, showcasing bravery and martial qualities	Pastoral and agricultural community; dependent on livestock and farming	Williamson (1921); Waterfield (1874)
Census Data	19,272 Gondal reported as Rajput in Shahpur; with a comparatively larger presence in like Shahpur and Montgomery	Only 305 Gondal reported as Jatt; identified as Jatt in agricultural regions like Multan	Punjab Government (1884a, 1884b)
Marital Alliances	Rare mention of intermarriage with Rajput clans	Frequent intermarriage with other Jatt tribes	Waterfield (1874); Rose et al. (1911)
Identity Fluidity	Some Jatt-origin Gondals adopted Rajput title to enhance prestige (self-reclassification seen in census data)	Initially identified as Jatts, they were later recorded as Rajputs, reflecting changes in self-identification over time.	Ibbetson (1916); Luard (1893); Joon (1967)
Regional Variation	Identified as Rajputs in Montgomery and Shahpur	Identified as Jatts in Multan and other agricultural regions	Rose et al. (1911)
Sociological Factors	Neighboring Rajput castes (Tiwanas, Janjuas) do not recognize Gondal as Rajput	Jatt association highlighted due to agricultural lifestyle and intermarriages	Ibbetson (1916); Rose et al. (1911)

Luard (1893) notes that in the 1881 Census, the Rajput population was recorded at 22,026, which significantly increased to 60,220 in the 1891 Census. Such a high increase in the Rajput population was because the Gondal reclassified themselves as Rajput. This showcases the dual nature of Gondal Caste. To deal with this fluidity, the British administration documented the

Gondal population under both the Jatt and Rajput categories in official records, as for the census data (Ibbetson, 1916).

Hence, this discussion regarding the classification of the Gondal caste as Jatt or Rajput reflects the complex social structure in the Pre-independence Punjab and in colonial times. On one side, sources show the Gondal as of Rajput origin while claiming the Suryavanshi origin and showcasing the practices of Rajputs (Davies, 1866; Williamson, 1921; Punjab Government, 1884b). The Census data also back this claim by showing the large number of Gondal as Rajputs, especially in the area of Shahpur.

While on the opposite side, different sources claim Gondal is of Jatt, showing the agricultural lifestyle, intermarriage with other tribes of Jatt and Gona-nada theory of Kashmir (Waterfield, 1874; Dahiya, 1980; Punjab Government, 1884a). So these points closely link with the Jatt lineage and claim the Gondal as of the Jatt clan.

However, the fascinating element of this discussion is the recognition of fluidity in identity. The Gondal caste does not align perfectly with either category and shows the change in the identity over each period and era (Ibbetson, 1916; Rose et al., 1911). This is showcased in the colonial censuses and the change in self-identification from the 1881 to 1891 censuses (Luard, 1893), during which many Gondal Jatts identified themselves as Rajputs, which might be due to the aspiration for being more advantageous in the area.

The economic motivations behind the identity shifts may include easier recognition as the landed gentry in colonial Punjab, that may improve the claims over fertile land. In addition, the British colonization schemes may favour martial and agricultural tribes that may increase chances of land allotment.

Hence, the Gondal caste is described by the fluid caste identity, which might be influenced by historical background, economic roles, social aspirations or colonial records. So the Gondal caste cannot be clearly labelled as the Jatt or Rajput, however, it has the space for a change in identity which is also seen among other castes of South Asia.

3. Ethnographic Overview

3.1. Geographical Overview

The Gondal caste is mainly spread across various regions showing it as a significant part of different local populations. The Gondal community is known as Jatt in areas like Shahpur and Multan, while in Montgomery they are identified as Rajput. It further reveals that they have control over the *Gondal Bar* in *Chaj Doab*. While the few groups moved further east towards the River Ravi (Davies, 1866). Similarly, Waterfield (1874) also states that they are present on the western end of the bar and then extended to the Shahpur District. Gondal is the clan living in the area that extends from Shahpur to the Gujrat district (Mirza, 1992). It is also mentioned the Gondal are the principal clan of district Gujrat. Furthermore, it also describes the area of Gondal as the west of the termination of Pabbi Hills along with narrating that according to the 1881 census, approximately 24,825 Gondal are present in 52 villages out of 597 villages of Gujrat District (Punjab Government, 1884a). Luard (1893) also confirms that the Gondal caste has given its name to the Bar region, which is spread to the area of Shahpur, and that they own 50 villages in Gujrat District, primarily located in Phalia Tehsil near the Jhelum River. Gondal settlements are also reported along the right bank of the River Jhelum, within the Jhelum District. This also discusses the presence of Gondal in numbers at various places in a table. According to that Gondal is present in Ambala, Jalandhar, Hushyarpur, Amritsar, Gurdaspur, Sialkot, Lahore, Gujranwala, Ferozpur, Rawalpindi, Jhelum,

Gujrat, Shahpur, Multan, Jhang, Montgomery, Muzaffargarh, Nabha (Ibbetson, 1916). Another source shows that Gondals have 267000 Acres of land over 63 villages making the biggest landowner Muslamans in Shahpur District (Punjab Government, 1884b).

Hence all these references show the presence of Gondal at various places in the subcontinent but mainly present in *Chaj Doab* in the Gujrat and Shahpur Districts with a large amount of area in *Gondal Bar*.

3.2. Economic Conditions

The Gondal caste is a clan that is deeply affiliated with pastoralism. For a long period of time, their life mainly relied on raising animals, especially cattle, which provided them with economic support (Davies, 1866). Their arrangements for the cattle were called "*Dhoks*," which means cattle camps that showed how closely their daily life was tied to animal herding (Williamson, 1921).

In the starting time, cattle theft from neighbouring areas was a common part of Gondal culture. This practice was not considered the wrong act among the clan rather it was a way to prove bravery and skill (Davies, 1866). It was faith among this clan that any young man could not wear a turban, which shows respect until he does not steal the cattle. However, some also believed that a man has the right to wear the turban only after saving enough to buy a good animal and a present for his sister, who would then place the turban on his head in a ceremony (Williamson, 1921).

As time passed, the way of life of this clan started changing. They slowly shifted from living a life as herders to becoming farmers having the change in profession (Williamson, 1921). They became one of the largest landowners of the area by having 89,412 acres of land, divided among 3,237 families which shows them as the significant landowners of the area (Waterfield, 1874). Furthermore, they owned 52 out of 597 villages in their area, proving that they had successfully made the shift to the agricultural profession (Punjab Government, 1884a).

By the late 1800s, many Gondal men also joined the British Indian Army showing signs of bravery and courage and supporting their economic needs (Williamson, 1921).

Records from the Gujrat district in the mid-1800s reveal some of the financial challenges that they faced during this change. In 1865, the Gondals of Gujrat had debts of a total of Rs. 4,622 and 14 annas; in 1866, Rs. 4,547; and by 1867, their debts rose sharply to Rs. 14,142 and 15 annas. This also shows the hurdles in their life and overall challenges in the economic life of this clan (Waterfield, 1874).

Hence, the economic life of this clan mainly depends on animal herding and agriculture. Cattle theft is also present alongside joining the armed forces to support their economic need and it is also evident that in the British era, they faced significant challenges in economic life as shown by heavy amounts of debt.

3.3. Physical and Social Traits

The Gondal community is described as physically strong and healthy which reflects their active lifestyle and consumption of animal-based diet (Davies, 1866). However, they are also involved in cattle theft which is not considered wrong within their community (Davies, 1866). The Cattle theft is a trait associated with this clan, otherwise, the Gondal were viewed as virtuous and upright people, who carried no stigma in their moral framework (Rose et al., 1911).

It is also considered among this clan that a person cannot wear a turban, which is considered a source of honour until he has committed the cattle theft or has obtained the cattle on his own and has the means to gift it to his sister. (Williamson, 1921).

In addition, the Gondal Rajputs have been praised for their bravery (Mirza, 1992) and recognized for their industrious nature, especially in their agricultural framework (Punjab Government, 1884a).

On the whole, this clan appears to be physically strong with a healthy lifestyle but has an association with cattle theft as their cultural trait. Furthermore, there is also evidence of the bravery and industriousness of this clan.

3.4. Marriage and Religious engagement

The Gondal Jatt tribe intermarry both within their clan and with other Jatt tribes. As noted in Waterfield (1874) and Luard (1893) they freely intermarry with other Jatt tribes and even among themselves. So this provides insights into the marital practice of this clan.

It is mentioned in the remark section of the table that the Gondals were converted from Hindus (Punjab Government, 1884b). Furthermore, Ibbetson (1916) clearly explains the conversion of Islam under Baba Farid Ganj Shakar's influence. So it is evident that this tribe was previously a Hindu tribe but ultimately converted into a Muslim clan under the influence of the Sufi saint.

3.5. Administrative and Political Engagement

The Gondal community also played a pivotal role in the administrative and political landscape of the Region. Waterfield (1874) noted that the Gondal tribe had two main *zaildars*, Shashu of Majhi and Taja of Sohawah. A third leader, Budha of Chimun, was removed from his position by the district authorities because he was considered difficult to manage. Luard (1893) also noted the Shashu Gondal of Majhi as an influential Jatt figure in the area.

According to Davies (1866), the Gondal tribe is divided into several sub-clans that include Bhoolloowanas and Deowanas while other smaller groups such as the Boodhakas and Mumnanas also emerged from this clan along with other offshoots.

However, Williamson (1921) mentions that there were no important or influential people left among the Gondals to maintain the status and position of the clan. This shows that the Clan faced leadership crises at a certain time at the start of the 20th Century.

All these references show that the Gondal clan initially held various positions in the colonial era but later on in the early 20th century, the signs of leadership started emerging. Additionally, this caste is also subdivided into several sub-castes.

4. Limitations and direction for future studies

While this research comprehensively covers all the present information on the caste, there also exist some limitations in this study. There is a limited presence of contemporary Scholarly Literature on the Gondal Caste along with a Scarcity of Primary oral histories and interviews. Additionally, the Rajput versus Jatt identity debate remains unresolved due to a lack of genetic, linguistic and archaeological evidence. This study primarily covers the role of men mainly while ignoring the women's roles. Furthermore, analyses heavily rely on pre-independence Punjab and colonial records that can bias the study. The absence of modern-era sources is also one of its limitations.

Future researchers need to carry out detailed studies using modern methods including oral histories collection to improve the available knowledge about the Gondal caste. It is recommended that researchers collect real-life stories and interviews from Gondal community members living in different areas of Pakistan and even in other countries. This can give a new perspective to the historical and ethnographic overview of this caste. Furthermore, the Gondal Caste should be compared with bordering castes of area (Ranjha, Tarar etc.) to analyze the caste spectrum in Punjab.

For solving the Jatt versus Rajput identity debate, future studies should use language analysis, and family history research. Research on the social structure and roles within the clan is also recommended. In addition to this, the researchers should use the modern reference records after the independence to avoid the potential bias present in the British Record. Finally, it is recommended to update the ethnographic overview of the Gondal Clan to modern studies.

5. Conclusion

This narrative review comprehensively covers all the information on the history and ethnography of this clan in pre-independence Punjab. This shows the dual identity of this caste, some referencing as Rajput while others as Jatt. This confusion about their real origin still remains due to a lack of clear evidence. This study also shows the transformation from one religion to another along with occupational transformation over the passage of time.

This caste research shows that identity in Punjab has never been fixed but shaped by social, political, and economic factors. In modern Punjab, this matters because caste titles are still used for land, status, and influence, and the Gondal case gives strong evidence of how such fluid identities continue to shape society today.

Due to the lack of modern perspectives and the lack of primary data on the Gondal caste, this review is still incomplete and it points out the need for future research using modern methods. New studies should include primary data, scientific tests and other various modern methods to give a clearer and updated picture of this caste. Hence, this research not only compiles the existing literature on the topic but also opens the doors for many future studies.

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