

Roma: The Socially-Excluded Indian-Origins of the West

Tanumoy Kumar Ghosh

Higher Secondary Teacher,

Navrachana School, Vadodara.

Abstract

Roma is an ethnic group of traditionally nomadic people currently living in Europe & the Americas. History of these people can be traced back to India - mainly the states of Rajasthan, Punjab and Haryana. One of the popular theory states that they are the descendents of Indian prisoners of war of Mahmud Ghazni. Historically, they have been victims of racism and thus discrimination and social exclusion for over a millennium now. The governments of Americas & Europe are not doing enough for them as well as conveniently ignoring their miserable condition. Also, their painful narrative is missing from the academic discourse across the globe. This article looks into their the Indian connection, migration, their history of discrimination as well as current condition in the so called 'developed' part of the world.

It is generally agreed that Roma groups left India in repeated migrations and that they were in Persia by the 11th century, in southeastern Europe by the beginning of the 14th, and in western Europe by the 15th century. Genetic¹, Linguistic² as well as mentions in *Shahnameh* written by Firdousi. Ian Hancock, a renowned Roma scholar, propagated the theory of Roma being descended from Indian prisoners of war of Mahmud of Ghazni in the 11th century. He pointed to the existence of Indic words mainly of military origin as evidence and also to a *Banjara* oral legend speaking of Rajputs leaving India through the Himalayas during the Ghaznavid invasions.

Evidences speak of the Roma leaving India and migrating towards Anatolia and the Balkans in the middle and later middle ages, and spreading throughout Europe and the New World by the early modern period. During this huge time period, discrimination and persecutions of the Roma was a daily affair. For example, the Holy Roman Empire passed nearly 133 anti-Gypsy³ measures between the years 1551-1774. Gypsy-hunts and legalized killing of theirs were common in most of the kingdoms and dynasties across Europe. Even the Enlightenment Age of the late 17th and 18th centuries couldn't bring a change in the painful conditions of the Roma.

The nineteenth century which saw the transition from the early modern world of the ancient regime to the post-agrarian and modern nation-states. The concept of these nation-states were mainly based on homogeneous and linguistic groups, and other minority groups but the well 'settled' ones. As Roma didn't fit in the concept of Eurocentric definition of 'modernity', these

¹ Haplogroup H-M82 is a major lineage cluster in the Balkan Roma, which is uncommon in Europe but present in the Indian subcontinent.

² Romani shares the basic lexicon with Punjabi and Hindi, phonetic features with Marwari and its grammar is closest to Bengali.

³ Roma are widely known among English-speaking people by the exonym "Gypsies".

nation-states, with their nationalism at its peak, decided of segregating and at times even eliminating them.

According to European Commission definition, social exclusion is “evidenced by several types of deprivation and barriers, which alone or together, prevent the full participation in areas such as employment, education, health, environment, housing, culture, access to rights or family support, as well as training and job opportunities.” This is exactly what Roma went through ages and are still going through even in this 'modern' age. In comparison to the mainstream society in any Western country, they are denied any role in governance and public life. A report of the World Bank in 2003 stated that unemployment rates are between 50-90 percent in the Central Eastern European countries. Unlike other minorities the estimated seven to nine million Roma lack even the minimum political, material and psychological support.⁴

A report issued by 'Amnesty International' 2011 claims that "systematic discrimination is taking place against up to 10 million Roma across Europe. The organization has documented the failures of governments across the continent to live up to their obligations". In 2014, another report of theirs, "*We ask for Justice*": *Europe's failure to protect Roma from racist violence*, examined hate motivated violence and harassment perpetrated against Roma by officials and ordinary citizens in the Czech Republic, France and Greece⁵. France came under criticism as French authorities demolished at least 51 illegal Roma camps in 2010 and started deporting them to Romania⁶. A Conservative Party Member of Parliament (MP), Andrew Mackay, stated "They [Gypsies and Travellers] are scum..". On 5 September 2012, prominent Canadian conservative commentator Ezra Levant accused the Roma of being a group of criminals.⁷

The West talks about spreading democracy to every part of the world. It presents itself as the messiah of liberty, equality & fraternity along with claims of being the champions of anti-racism. But it seldom talk about the conditions of the Roma who has been one of the most politically, economically and socially excluded people despite their presence in almost more than half of the world. Though it may sound convincing to some that the politicians & leaders have their vested interest in abusing or marginalizing a group, but even the intellectuals of the West, the same West which boasts of be the inventor of professional social work, too doesn't take any interest in the upliftment of this group. Also, the western media, known to

⁴ The World Bank (2003). *Draft: Social Development in Europe and Central Asia Region: Issues and Directions*. Washington, DC: Environmentally and Socially Sustainable Development, Social Development Team, Europe and Central Asia. March, pp. ix, x.

⁵ "*We ask for Justice*": *Europe's failure to protect Roma from racist violence*", 2014, Retrieved from <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/8000/eur010072014en.pdf>

⁶ *France sends Roma Gypsies back to Romania*, 20 August 2010, Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-11020429>

⁷ *Hate crime investigation launched surrounding Ezra Levant's Roma broadcast*. *The Canadian Journalism Foundation*. 24 October 2012. Retrieved from <https://j-source.ca/article/hate-crime-investigation-launched-surrounding-ezra-levants-roma-broadcast/>

be comparatively rational than others, doesn't show or focus on the gross human rights violation taking place against the Roma for centuries.

While mentioning holocaust, the world mainly talks about the persecution of the Jews. But somehow the world is either not aware or conveniently forgets that the Romas too were the victims of the concentration camps. The total number of victims has been estimated as 220,000, one of the largest mass killings in history. Jews faced tough times for a decade, but Roma people are facing torture & ill-treatment for nearly a millennium now, which can be seen in the form of Antiziganism (Anti-Roma sentiment in the form of racism & gross human rights violation). Romas' absence from historical texts can be considered a direct implication of the European domination on history.

Albania, a south-eastern country of Europe, until a few years ago, was like any other European country where Roma faced social exclusion. But this lesser developed and a smaller country (compared to other developed European countries like France, Germany, Britain, Spain etc) showed positive intentions and took commendable steps for the upliftment of the Roma. The Albanian government at first identified and recognized the Roma as the poorest and most marginalized groups in Albania and thereafter under the Albanian National Strategy for Socio-Economic Development programme, analyzed the needs and challenges of the community. Understanding various local problems along with their intensity and creating micro-level policy became the key. Along with the partnership of NGOs, Roma organizations and the private sector, it focused on certain basic areas such as education of the Roma children in Romani language, providing basic medical treatment for free, more and smoother access to justice system and so on. Some scholars feel that introduction of Roma history in the public schools can help in inculcating the value of respecting diversity in children and thus may end future discrimination towards the community.

Though some may consider Roma as Indians or may desire them to be recognized as Indian Diaspora, the truth is that their orthodox following of the ancient Indian traditions may create a problems for them to adopt to the new culture of the land or country they are currently residing. This thought should be seen in the context of the idea where a particular country wants a particular community to follow its constitution & rules rather than the culture which their religion follows in some other region of the world.

In the context of academic discourse in India as well as the world, there is an urgent need of including the Roma community in the historical literature. Academic committees, at least in India, should seriously consider of introducing a paper with the probable title 'Indian Cultural Influences across the Globe' at the higher education level.

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