

## Theories of Roma Origins and the Bengal Linkage

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### Abstract

*Roma, also known as Gypsies, are the people who started migrating from India to West (through West Asian and Central Asian States) long back in the tenth or eleventh century till the late medieval times. The migration took place at different phases of history which is still under scrutiny. It is an established fact now that a good number of them were enslaved by Mahmud Gajni during his raids on India (1000 A.D to 1026 A.D.). There are many theories of Roma origin and migration today but the Kanauj Theory is considered to be more realistic. However, the author contends that since Roma migration is not a onetime exodus as believed by many their origin owes to multiple of movements and kingly acts over the centuries. They are not only from the north-west of India or Kanauj rather from East of India too (Bengal) and also the result of sale of slaves by the kings in medieval times to the land of their origins.*

Today, when it comes to the old migrations from India most of the writings and studies keep silent about Roma in Europe because for a long time they were mistook as a people from Egypt. Since many of the Roma groups reached Eastern Europe through Mediterranean and Egypt they were identified as people from Egypt and described as Gypsies. Even today Roma are also known as gypsies in Europe. It was in the mid of nineteenth century that their Indian origin was established.

Cultural derivations primarily owe to the socio-economic structure and the long preserved values and patterns of life of a society. Since Roma are the people who have been identified, of course evidentially, with their Indian linkage, the society and the occupational engagements they exhibit are quite apparent.

Rena Colbert (Clebert) offers a large list of gypsy occupations where he derivates certain most common occupations of the community, "with a few variations, the gypsies are first and foremost smiths and workers in metal, musicians and mountebanks, horse-coppers and dealers and exhibitors of animals and fortune-tellers".<sup>1</sup> With the passage of time the changing scenario has brought a significant shift in the occupational patterns of the gypsies. The newly emerged patterns largely rely on the changed socio-economic conditions, means of communications and transportation and the construction and repair works. Gypsies are mostly peddlers, tin workers, gutter makers, metal workers, peg makers, hawkers, horse traders (now second hand motor sellers), animal trainers, entertainers and fortune tellers.<sup>2</sup>

What is more significant and a matter of concern for the members of the Roma community is the loss of distinct identity and culture in the different regions of Europe and America. Although, the Roma had in general a common cultural tradition (social interaction, values, marriage ceremonies, beliefs and occupation) intervened by their varying experiences over the centuries in different regions, yet with the advent of modernity and globalization their socio-economic structure is undergoing a huge transformation. This might bring more prosperity and development to the Roma but in the trail would certainly be the cultural lag and decline.

Now the problems are multi-pronged about the issue of culture and the rights of Gypsies since there is a huge variation about the common perception about them in different states and people. Within the state-systems there are established lines of thought which think otherwise i.e. total extinction of the minority from their national map or deliberate extraction of the people and their forceful expulsion from the national territories without having any concern for the human values and respect for international law. For this purpose almost all the states of Europe and West are engaged in clandestine ethnic census guided by the motive of ethnic cleansing, as feared by many Romas.<sup>3</sup>

However the prime objective of the paper is to investigate the theories of Roma origins. Roma migration constitutes one of the biggest migrations from the different parts of India over a millennium back. The exact time of the migration is still under scrutiny but it is largely agreed upon by the scholars and historians that the migration took place at different phases instead of being a onetime exodus.

The history of Roma people is now but conspicuous as there is a huge stock of literature referring to the incessant migration from the Indian mainland, especially from the north-west India. But to have a deeper insight into the historical movement in either way, one has to have enough information about the history of India and vice-versa.

To take the history, culture and state of society of Roma it would be quite difficult to assess the community in its holistic character. Needless to say that the huge spillover of the community in the past while migrating to Middle East and different parts of Europe has gathered a wide range of characteristics thus locally, regionally and continentally contextualizing the broader shades of Roma culture. In the process of continuous movement of the community (partially because of its historic traditions and nomadic character and largely because of ruthless non-acceptance by the states they entered in) a good deal of cultural part was lost. Still the Roma as a community share some strong cultural heritage and of late there have been some serious attempts at its preservation.

The earliest accounts throwing some light on the history of Roma migration seem to be wrestled over by the scholars today. They take inferences from the various accounts, travelogues and regional epithets and literature about the Roma exodus from India. Not only is there dearth of unanimity over whether it was a single compact move by Roma or a fragmented departure from India but even over the time of actual departure.

Regarding the exodus of Roma from India the argument of Ian Hancock leaves a huge space for debate because of lack of evidential support. Ian Hancock and few others see it as a single migration out of India and the consequent split into Domari, Lomavren and Romani, though he would beg to disagree with the same later (on the basis of lexical data).<sup>4</sup> The argument seems too fragile to be taken seriously as the availability of information about the migration is a multi-pointer. In fact, the subject is so complex and the data fluid that it is not so easy to arrive at a conclusion exactly.

To come up with the conventional testament it would be useful to take a few. Some of the earliest accounts that history offers us are of Firdausi's *Shahnama* and Hamza's *History of Sassanides*. Infact, Hamza wrote few decades before Firdausi and held that Berham Gour, a Persian Monarch received about 12000 musicians (both male and females) mostly Jatts for the entertainment of its subjects. Even today the gypsies of Arab of Damascas are known as Zott, a deviation of the Indian word Jatt. The Arabic dictionary *Al-Kamus* also defines the word Zott as Jatt Arabicised, a word of Indian origin.<sup>5</sup>

Firdausi's *Shahnama* also informs us about the same event. It tells us that the musicians that Berham Gour received were known as Luris. The Gypsies of Persia are even today known by Luris and this is widely acknowledged fact that they are descendents of musicians. Now the references apart about the Luris or Zott this is a hard reality that these nomenclatures still exist and there is a certainty about the theory of their being from the community of Jatt, the one in majority in the north-west of India. The designation Zott occurs time and again in different writings and accounts.<sup>6</sup> Then there are a good number of theories about the gypsy origin of India largely relying on various accounts and travelogues.

Quite late, about in 1763 was it established by Stefan Valye, a student of Theology at Leyden that there was a strong similarity in the language spoken by Gypsies of Kormon district of Hungary and the language of Indian sub-continent such as Hindi, Punjabi or Rajsthani.<sup>7</sup> With the help of three Indian students he also compiled about 1000 words of commonality and this was followed by a series of studies of linguists like Pott (1844), Miklosisch (1872-80), Paspati (1870), Von Wislockli (1890), Turner (1926-27), Rishi (1974), Shashi (1990), Ian Hanock (1997) and many more.

Today the Romani language comprises of a multiplex of derivations gathered over a millennium long past. There are many theories about the Roma migration from the Indian mainland towards west. The movement and spread of the Roma through the land of Persia and, Armenia to Byzantine seems to be authenticated by the fact that a large number of Armenian words have entered into the Romani dialect when compared with the other languages. So is true of Egyptian and Greek presence.

Franc Mikolosic's (1813) theory offers a similar derivation as he avers "Roma travelled through Kabul, Iran and Armenia from where they arrived via Frigija and Lakonija to Byzantium empire. Some groups settled in the Arab lands whereas other smaller groups reached Egypt and North Africa via Syria. The Roma stayed for a long time in Armenia, a fact which is proven by the presence of a large number of Armenian words which have been preserved in the Romani language until today".<sup>8</sup>

The **Jat Theory** is also quite popular among many Roma scholars. **Jats** are primarily farmers (exceptions in profession are there) in north India, a community spread over greater Punjab (now includes region of Indian and Pakistani Punjab, Haryana and parts of Himachal Pradesh) and Rajasthan. Michael Jan de Goje (1862-1909), a renowned scholar of Arabian culture, and some Indian linguists like V.R. Rishi, Pyare Lai, G.S. Pathania, Dev Bhardwaj and Pakistani scholar Khurshid Ahmed Khan also deposit faith in the said theory.

One of the argument known as *Rajput Theory* is by J. Kochanowski and W.R. Rishi who hold that the defeated army of Rajputs (from Mohammed Gauri in 1192) split into three groups and the third group, the wandering one, later escaped into Afghanistan and consequently to other parts of Middle East and the Balkans.

However, *Jat* in India are not only a people living in the above mentioned areas and states. Even today there is a community known as *Jatt Ghumantu*,<sup>9</sup> a nomadic tribe that keeps on moving largely in the deserts of Rajasthan and parts of northern Gujarat. These people move in caravans and are dependent on the services of camel, flocks of sheep and some sundry items for sale. They claim this mode of life for centuries and reasons they attribute for this are harshness of the whether and infertility of the land. (Even today *Jatt Ghumantus* can be found in the said regions)

There are several deviations and twists in the theory in the sense that for many *Jats* originally were Aryans who moved from Eurasia to North India in the early past and then there was a boomerang situation with reversal of the community to the places of its origination.<sup>10</sup> Jats came to India in 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. The whole exercise incorporates historically wide alliterations ranging from Aryan move eastward to the nomadic movements and human traffic westward. However, this would be confounding to draw a line of similarity between the Aryan movement and the Gypsy migration since the latter took place quite late in the sequence of events.

Besides the lexical evidences there are lots of resemblances and traces (anthropological) that people confuse with the Roma. In the long history of Roma there is probability of a partial communal confluence at different junctures of time. The evolution of physical features like the Egyptian and Indian (skull of many Romas like the Egyptian one or like the Hindu one) is to some extent hypothetical in nature but with the probabilities of possible occurrence. (Johann Friedrich Bluemenbach, a German anthropologist and Weissbach believe in the Egyptian shape of the Roma skull while Isidor Kopernicki and A. Olevak are of the view that Roma head is hardly different from the one of Hindus. Eugene Pittard is also of the view of Roma's Indian origin. Babu Rajendra Lai Mitra believes that Roma are most close to the Bedyas people of West Bengal) Within India the hypotheses doesn't approve of the single origin from Rajasthan, Punjab or Uttar Pradesh. If *Jats* are mainly from Punjab *Banjaras* and *Rajputs* are from Rajasthan and Bedyas from Bengal.

Among many scholars the *Kannauj Theory* is also quite popular. The advocates of this theory hold that in the winters of 1018-19, a raiding force came from Ghazni (now in Afghanistan) and captured the population of Kannauj. They sold the captured people as slaves. It was not the Sultan's first raid, but the previous ones had reached only as far as Punjab and Rajasthan. This time he moved on to Kannauj, a major city of more than 50,000 inhabitants, and on 20 December 1018, captured the entire population, 'rich and poor, light and dark ... most of them 'nobles, artists and craftsmen' to sell them, 'entire families', in Ghazni and Kabul.<sup>11</sup> Later, according to the same text, Khorassan and Iraq appeared to be 'full of this population'. The theory of Kannauj seems to have many drawbacks since there are multiple of dimensions of the Roma's Kannauj link. Besides Gaznavi's intrusions and enslavement at Kannauj it is worthwhile to note that Kannauj was under the occupation of *Sen* dynasty of Bengal, the dynasty that later ruled in the areas of Punjab and Jammu.<sup>12</sup>

Then there is the argument, and quite serious too, that the Roma have strong *Bedyas* features. Bedyas, are a people from Bengal who have certain anthropological features that resemble to the Roma. But this is not enough to contend about the argument that Roma came all along from Bengal. However, a deeper study of the subject reveals that history has something different to offer here which could be significant to the *Bedyas* and *Kanauj* theories.

At different intervals there were migrations, post-war expulsions and pre-war abscondings from Bengal and adjacent areas to Tarai, Punjab, and other parts of North India. If we take the history of ruling clans of Himachal, a hilly part of the erstwhile Punjab we find the traces of Bangla migrations. *Sens*, a ruling family of Suket princely state of district Mandi came from Bengal around 800 to 1000 AD. The family had, at one time a strong hold over the areas of Kannauj, Orissa and Nepal. This is on records that there were intermittent arrivals from different parts of India into the foothills of Himalaya for taking shelter from warfare and further occupation of territories.<sup>13</sup> So there might be a larger spill over of the groups at that very time or in the consequent years. Therefore, if people came from Bengal to Himachal (Punjab), there are possibilities that many of them went ahead to Sindh and Kabul.

Let us take the account of the ruling clan of the Suket state as mentioned in the State Gazetteer of Suket, 1922. The chief of Suket and Mandi are from the same ancestor of Chandravanshi line of Rajputs and they, therefore, claim descent from the Pandavas of Mahabharata. Traditionally the origin of the line is carried back to a remote period. The original dynasty is said to have ruled over Delhi for about 1700 years but this is highly improbable. The last Raja (king) named Khem Raj was displaced by his Wazir who retired to Bengal. There he established a dynasty known as *Sena* dynasty which ruled there for about 350 years with Lakshmanpuri as their capital. The most distinguished king of this dynasty was Lakshman Sen who is said to have extended his conquests to Kannauj, Nepal and Orissa and also founded the city of Gaur in Malda, calling it Lakhnauti after himself. The later capital was Naldia where they continued to rule till

expelled by Bakhtiyar Khilji in AD 1198. The last ruler of the dynasty then retired to Prayag (Allahabad) where he died. His son Rup Sen went to Rupa near Ambala where he settled for a time. Having been attacked by Muslims he was killed in the battle and three of his sons fled into the hills. After some time they founded three separate states of Keonthal (Shimla), Suket (Mandi) and Kashtwar (Jammu). Several annals of the history of Punjab Hill States confirm the account.<sup>14</sup>

However, yet another debate lingers over the arrival of Sens in Punjab Hill States, now Himachal. Cunningham and many others would ascribe the period of Sen's arrival in 765 AD. This is confirmed by the accounts in Bilaspur State Gazetteer, 1922, Suket State Gazetteer 1922, and Sirmur State Gazetteer, 1932.<sup>15</sup>

If the Sens were there in Punjab around 700 to 800 AD the theory of forcible enslavement of the Kannaujians in 1018 AD by Mahmud Ghaznavi proves to be incomplete if not a farce.<sup>16</sup> Another dimension opens up here as the approach of Sens with the bands of artisans, smiths, common subjects, soldiers and the rest from Bengal and Kannauj transforms the patterns of Roma migration. Since Sens settled upto Jammu as escapists the further spread of the people unto Sindh and Kabul could not be denied. The presence of many Kashmiri and Dogri words like Zutschi (astrologer) in the Roma language strengthens the theory of Jammuite nexus.

The argument here is not to refute the *Jat* and *Kanauj* theories (and for that matter the other ones, discussed and not discussed) holistically rather to present the newer version of Roma migration which could best describe or attempt to understand the actual migration patterns or incidental effluxes guided by time and circumstances. Certain anticipations based on mythological references or the ungrounded belief of Aryan boomerang does not call for serious investigation.<sup>17</sup> Here the author's perspective of interpreting and presenting the history of Roma migration that he would prefer to call the *millennium long efflux* is sequential in events and comprehensive in incorporation so that the wider ramifications and complexities of the migration patterns could be inducted. Needless to say that there is a long span of time, in fact a millennium long from eighth century to eighteenth century when there has been either migration or enslavement or even sale of slaves from the Indian mainland to the west. Therefore, to reach at the conclusions by just heading on a single line would be calling for further misconceptions.

There are enough evidences about the sale and purchase of entertainers, slaves and artisans. This is compounded by the facts that there was, at the same time, caravans at the move, of course as traders, artisans, entertainers. If Firdausi and Hamza refer to the purchase of entertainers by Berham Gaur the *Jat* version is equally true since lexical evidences would strengthen such argument. *Jat* could be part of such purchases or even extension of the caravan mobiles of the *Jatt Ghumantus*. If the descendants of Alexander<sup>18</sup> can be found in certain areas of Ladakh in the state of Jammu and Kashmir of India then the *Rajput Theory* is another interesting addition to the history.

The Kannauj theory is signatory of the enslavement of the Kanujians but with some newer dimensions to be explored with the merge of *Sens* and *Bedyas* into it. This is on records that even Mughals kept on selling the poor farmers irrespective of caste (when failed to pay *Jazia*) as slaves or workers into the land of their origin. Hence the exodus from the Indian mainland seems to be sequential then one time efflux guided by time and circumstances and requires more serious investigations.

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- Colbert, *ibid.* pp. 48-51. This is author's personal experience with the Roma of Croatia and Serbia. Since he met several of Roma scholars, politicians, laymen, students and children he was able to collect the information about the actual work most of the Roma were engaged in. He also got the opportunity to visit many of the Roma habitations, streets and circles in Belgrade, Zemun, Lescovac, and Nis in Serbia and Zagreb and Pula in Croatia.
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- Rajko Duric: Seobe Roma-Krugovi pakla i venae srece, Belgrade 1987 (translation) available at <http://kosovoroma.wordpress.com/from-the-note-to-the-theorie/from-observation-to-theory>.
- A tribe still living in parts of Rajasthan and northern Gujrat.
- Lee, Donald, Lee, Derek and Avraham, Sandor are of the view that it might be the other way round i.e. The Gypsy movement first from Europe towards East i.e. India and then a reversal of the process, a movement from India to the West. For details of the account see at <http://debatt.passagen.se/show.fcgi?category=350000000000014&conference=1050000000000403&postmg=1950000003750142> , Last accessed on march 7, 2010. See also Kenrick, Donald (2000). 'Romani Origins and the Migration Patterns', *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 17(3), and also of the same author, (1997). *Gypsies: From the Indus to the Mediterranean* , London; and Kachehnyre , John M. 'One Historical Account of the Gypsies by a Romanian Missionary', nd.
- There is elaborate account about the huge community uplift from Kanauj in the Al-Utbi's text. For an interesting account of theories about Gypsy origins see Okley , Judith, 'Some Political Consequences of Theories of Gypsy Ethnicity. The Place of the Intellectual', in Alisson, James et al. (Eds.), (1999). *After Writing Culture, Epistemology and Praxis in Contemporary Anthology*, London: Routledge
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- See also Cunningham, Alexander (1966), *Archelological Survey Report of India, 1872-73*. Delhi; Manmohan. (1930). *History of Mandi State*, Lahore.
- Kitab al-Yamini (Book of the Yamin) by the Arabic chronicler Abu Nasr Al-'Utbi (961-1040), nd.
- In fact, it has been observed that due to excessive pressure on Roma for centuries there has been a fundamental shift in the thought processes of the community. Many of the members are voluntarily giving up their identity to gain the newer one so that they can get a dignified place in their respective states. The missionary pressure and the racist persecution has forced many of the Roma scholars to develop newer versions more acceptable to the people of Europe.
- There is a community in Baltistan of Ladakh region that calls itself the progeny of the scampering soldiers of the defeated army of Alexander