

All Change!

Romani Studies through Romani eyes

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Mind the doors! **The contribution of linguistics**

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‘The Gipseys are an eastern people, and have eastern notions.’
Grellmann, 1783: xj

For a very long time, the explanation of the circumstances leading to the departure of our ancestors from India seems to have been settled and the doors closed on that part of our history. They were, according to almost every popular source, the 10,000 or 12,000 musicians who were sent as a gift from India to Persia in the middle of the fifth century. The list of accounts of this is a long one but I will give a couple of examples from the past few years. Telerama released a film entitled *Rom* in 1990 where this story was presented as unequivocal fact. Soon after that, Harcourt Films released its own documentary entitled *The Romany Trail* in which this same history was recounted accompanied by animated maps, once again the exodus from India being explained by referring to Firdausi’s *Shah Nameh*. The story has now wandered its way into *The Encyclopedia of Multicultural America*, although here both the date and the number differ widely and a new name and reference to ‘linguistic evidence’ is introduced:

Near the end of the ninth century B.C. an Indian King, Shangul, sent 1,000 *Dom* to Persia (now Iran) as minstrel musicians ... linguistic evidence indicates that after a hundred years or so of entertaining Persians in the tenth century, the *Dom* began to roam far afield. They separated into two major groups and lived as nomads. The first group

to leave wandered into Syria ... the second group traveled northward from Persia into Armenia [and] after passing through Byzantine Greece, the Northerners reached Eastern Europe (Heimlich, 1994: 627–8).

Tony Gatlif's beautiful film *Latcho Drom*, which appeared in 1993, presented the same historical scenario, as did Marlene Sway in her book *Familiar Strangers: Gypsy Life in America* (1988) and Elizabeth Sirimarco in her *Endangered Cultures: Gypsies* (2000). The entertainer connection is supported by Matras (1999: 1), who says that 'Indic diaspora languages [are] spoken by what appear to be descendants of itinerant castes of artisans and entertainers who are spread throughout Central Asia, the Near East and Europe. They include ... Romani,' and more recently by Tcherenkov and Laederich (2004). They say:

[It] is but a small step to support the hypothesis that the[se] Indian *Dom* are the ancestors of the European Rroma. The professions exercised by the *Dom* in the Indian subcontinent – musicians, dancers, smiths, basket weavers, sieve makers, even woodworkers, are transmitted from father to son. From their similarity to the ones of the European Rroma these could or may be considered as the origins of the traditional Rroma trades.

But the social, historical and linguistic evidence now available to us has demanded that those closed doors be opened and the details of our origins be examined anew.

Paspati's statement that the history of our people must be sought in our language has become something of a cliché in Romani studies, but to a great extent it holds true. However, the assumption implicit in the scholarship of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that there was a connection between one's genetic history and the specific language one speaks has long been recognised as false, and that fact must temper our interpretation of the linguistic data. I remind my students that there are those among their classmates of German, Czech, African, Asian and Native American ancestry, but that they are all native speakers of English. The study of our language is intimately bound up with our identity. I want to deal with both aspects, but will talk about language first.

Westerners have been aware of the Romani language for as long as our people have been among them, but they were not able to identify it, or us, until several centuries had gone by. Some of the early Romanies did in fact tell the Europeans where they'd come from: Foroliviensis, for example, reported that the Romanies he met in Italy in 1422 'said they were from India' (Muratori, 1754) and a Spanish

rabbi wrote about a similar encounter in the same century. Even earlier, it was probably Romanies the Irish friar Simon Fitzsimons met when he visited the lands around the eastern Mediterranean between 1322 and 1324, subsequently writing about the 'Indians' there, 'all of whom have much in common with crows and charcoal'. He also referred to their military involvement when he reported that they were 'always at war ... with the Danubians' (Hoade, 1952: 10–11, 36, and see especially Piasere [1988] for further discussion). Sebastian Münster reported in 1544 that he had understood from a conversation with some Roma in Germany that their home was 'in Asia, along the Ganges or the Indus'. Cesare Vecellio too had written about an Indian origin for the Roma in 1590, placing their home in Calcutta. Liégeois tells us that *Indiens* was a name applied to Romanies in a document from France dated 1632 (Piasere, 1988). But even though we have references to an Indian identity which date from the Middle Ages, the concept of 'India' itself meant little to the medieval European peasantry, and in time the connection became lost and was replaced by several others, some of them highly imaginative: an origin on the Moon, from inside the hollow earth, from Atlantis, from among the Jews, the Nubians, the Scythians and so on. This confusion with other, non-Romani populations blurred distinctions and reinforced the idea that 'gypsies' were a composite population of native origin, defined by behaviour and not by history or place. It has been precisely this vagueness regarding Romani identity that has allowed the ease of its manipulation by outsiders, a point I have made several times. But this manipulation has also been helped by the conflicting notions of identity that exist within the different Romani populations themselves, and there's a reason for that too.

The conventional account of the establishment of the Indian linguistic connection involves one Vályi István, a student at Leiden University who in the early 1760s reportedly overheard three students from Malabar in south-western India discussing their native language, and who recognised similarities with the Romani he had picked up from the labourers on his family's estate. According to Samuel ab Hortis, author of the first of several accounts of this episode, Vályi obtained a list of over a thousand words from those Indian students, the meanings of *all* of which he said the Romanies knew 'without any problems or difficulty'.

This account finally got into print in 1776 and set the stage for the emergence of Romani studies. When I went to the University of Leiden in 1990 to investigate for myself, however, I found *no* record of Vályi's ever having been a student there, but discovered instead that he had attended the University of Utrecht a decade earlier. It seems likelier that someone else – perhaps Horvath, perhaps Bacmeister, Bryant or Rüdiger – was responsible for this historic breakthrough (Hancock, 1992). But not only has the list he

was supposed to have compiled never been found, Romani is in any case quite unrelated to the Dravidian language of Malabar, and has two or three hundred Indian roots fewer than the more than one thousand words on Vályi's list even if they *had* been collected in a related Indian language. Regardless, the assumption was that if the Romanies spoke a language from India, then they must be from India themselves, which brings me back to my earlier cautionary statement. This was a cavalier supposition, although it happened to be true, at least in part. Grellmann (1783), like Tcherenkov and Laederich whom I quoted from just now, seeing the low and marginalised social and occupational status of Romanies in Europe, concluded that this simply reflected a continuation of their original position within Indian society. He identified the *Zigeuner* with the *Śudras* – he called them *Suders* – members of the lowest of the four Hindu castes. Later, in 1841, a man named Hermann Brockhaus suggested that the word *Rom* had its origin in the Indian word *dom*, which refers to a class of people which the dictionary describes as ‘...a very low caste, representing some old aboriginal race, spread all over India. They perform such offices as carrying dead bodies, removing carrion, and so on’. Sinclair (1909: 40) defines them even less charitably as being ‘the very dregs of impurity, the Helots of all, shameless vagrants, eaters of carrion, beggars and thieves’. Very quickly, this origin became the conventional wisdom in Romani studies, and is repeated even today without qualification in books about Romanies. Matras (2004: 278), for example, has recently written that:

Proto-Romani was carried from India westwards by migrants who appear to have been members of service-providing castes, similar in status and occupational profile to jatis or service groups known in some parts of India as *dom* ... the *řom* settled in the Byzantine Empire some time around the tenth century CE.

In the early nineteenth century, the existence of two more apparently Indian languages spoken outside of India became known; these were Lomavren and Domari. Lomavren, spoken in Armenia, Georgia, eastern Turkey and probably elsewhere in the region, was first brought to the attention of European scholars in 1828 when a list of 100 words was published by von Joakimov (mentioned in Finck, 1907: 2). The first published account of Domari was by Pott (1844–5), in which he summarised notes on the language sent to him by the Reverend Eli Smith, an American missionary who had worked in Syria in the early 1800s. By the end of that century, John Sampson had constructed his well-known hypothesis, which saw a single migration leaving India in the ninth century that moved through Persia and then separated into three branches: the Domari

speakers or Dom remaining in the Middle East, the Lomavren speakers or Lom moving off into Armenia, and the Romani speakers or Rom continuing on westwards and eventually coming into Europe.

Shared Indian linguistic similarities persuaded Sampson to see a common origin for Romani and Domari:

It may be inquired whether the language of the Asiatic and that of the European Gypsies had a common origin, or whether the two forms of speech are so distinct as to warrant us supposing that they may have belonged to separate Indian peoples living perhaps under different conditions of time and place. To this question there can be but one answer. In spite of the outward dissimilarity between the Eastern and the Western Romani of to-day, an analysis of their grammar, the true criterion of relationship, makes it clear that both languages were originally one ... thus finally establishing the close relationship of the two dialects despite their long separation (1923: 160).

He believed that 'Gypsies, on first entering Persian territory, were a single race speaking a single language ... separation [into Romani and Domari] could only have taken place after their arrival in Persia'. And that his work 'proves conclusively that both languages spring from a single source, which must have been the parent speech of the Gypsies when they first entered Persian territory' (1926: 34). But Adrian Colocci (1907: 279) urged caution in drawing too sweeping a conclusion from the available data:

To imagine that just because the Gypsies of Europe and their brothers in Asia share a common linguistic core, one should therefore conclude that there was a single exodus of these people [out of India], and furthermore that the unity of their language argues against more than one migration, seems to be a conclusion which is only slightly weakened by the still nebulous state of the documentation.

Unity of language might well prove unity of origin; but there could still have been different migrations, chronologically and geographically, without that fact being too apparent from the lexical adoptions acquired by the mother tongue in the countries through which they passed; all the more so since those migrations were very rapid.

To conclude, therefore, that the unity of their exodus rests upon the recognition of the unity of the substrate of their language, strikes

me as a proposition which shouldn't be universally accepted without [first incorporating] the benefit of a [lexical] inventory.

Turner (1927: 176) agreed with Colocci, and wrote that:

[T]he morphological differences between European and Syrian Romani [i.e. Domari] are very considerable, and many of the resemblances can be referred back to a common Indian *origin* rather than necessarily to a post-Indian period of *community*.

He was saying, in other words, that while Romani and Domari are both Indic, this does not necessarily mean that the ancestors of both constituted one population while they were still in India. Gypsy Lore Society member A.C. Woolner also wrote in a letter to Dora Yates dated 21 September 1932 that he was 'not convinced that the origin of Syrian Romani (*sic*) and European Romani are the same'.

Nevertheless it is *still* widely accepted that the Dom, Lom and Rom branches of Gypsy are related in terms of their original speakers having left India as one population, separating only once they had passed through Persia. In 1972 Walter Starkie brought all of the ideas current in his day together in one statement:

[Gypsies] are still as mysterious as when they entered Europe in the fifteenth century. Sprung from Dravidian stock in the northwest of India, they were pariahs, and according to tradition metal-workers, minstrels, story-tellers and fakirs. They spoke a language which was derived from Sanskrit, and we find them mentioned in the *Shah Nameh*, or *Book of the Kings*, by Persia's most famous poet, Firdausi (935–1020), who calls them *Luris*, the name by which they are known today in Iran. From Persia the Gypsies wandered on to Armenia, and from there into Syria and the Byzantine Empire.

It is upon the basis of such pronouncements by non-specialist academics and authors writing far outside of their area of expertise that erroneous perceptions of history pass into the popular domain.

Determining the relationship of Lomavren is not quite so straightforward, since its Indian link survives only in its vocabulary. In light of the koine hypothesis it may in fact have only ever existed as a Para-Romani language. Nevertheless, some years before Turner voiced his suspicions that Domari had a different linguistic history from Romani, Finck (1907: 49–50) had also made

the same claim for Lomavren, which he believed was probably of Indic (*Śaurasenī*) descent, unlike Romani, which he saw as a Dardic language. Nevertheless, it is Sampson's position that has become the established one; all attempts to describe Proto-Gypsy have assumed it. Kaufman (1984) called his protoform *Dōmbari*, and called its speakers *dōmba*, while Tálós (1999) preferred the name *Dommānī*. Higgle called it Proto-Romani. Kaufman's reconstruction utilised items found in each of Romani, Domari and Lomavren; such reconstructed forms have, therefore, incorporated phonological changes found in all three. This would be rather like including Gothic in a reconstruction of Proto-Low West Germanic.

To his credit, Sampson (1923: 164) admitted that 'lacking in Nuri [that is, Domari] are several important loanwords [from Persian occurring in Romani], which may perhaps be regarded as evidence that the two bands had separated *before* these later Persian borrowings were absorbed into the speech of the western Gypsies' (emphasis added), but this modified position seems to have gone unnoticed, certainly by our late colleague Angus Fraser (1992: 39), who wrote:

[D]espite Sampson's insistence that both sprang from a single source, some of Domari's dissimilarities from European Romani create doubts about how far we can assume that the parent community was uniform.

Sampson's position had moved to his *not* actually insisting that Romani and Domari sprang from a single source, and his basis for this radical shift – the Persian component of both – led me to examine it in an article that appeared in 1995. If there had been one migration that had remained intact through Persian territory before dividing, we would expect the Persian words acquired to be shared by all three languages, but there are surprisingly few: just 16 per cent between Romani and Domari, 7 per cent between Romani and Lomavren, and 12 per cent between Lomavren and Domari. And there are virtually none at all shared by all three. There are other lexical differences; most Iranian items in Domari are Kurdish, not Persian, while Lomavren has just one possibly Kurdish item. Romani has about ten. There is no Armenian or Greek in Domari, nor is there a trace of Greek in Lomavren, although that language is the second largest contributor to pre-European Romani after the Indic. And while only about one sixth of the Iranian-derived items in Romani are shared by Domari, over a half of them are found in Urdu.

Published estimates of the dates of the exodus differ remarkably, from as early as the fifth to as late as the fourteenth century. Also a matter of contention

is the question of whether it consisted of one ready-formed group that left all at once, or several unrelated smaller groups that left over a long period of time. It is possible to determine the earliest date, however, by examining the language, which has features that clearly put its origin at no earlier than about the year 1000 CE. It was then that the neuter gender was becoming lost. Indic languages began with three (masculine, feminine and neuter) but, like the Romance languages developing out of Latin, they lost the neuter category, which got redistributed to the other two genders. Romani has only two genders, and did not leave India at an earlier time with three. Domari on the other hand does have three.

This fact provides us with the bottom end of a window in time; the upper end is when Romanies first appeared in the West, which was during the twelfth or thirteenth century. Thus we have a span of about two centuries during which to account for the move out of India, across the Middle East and up into Europe.

The high proportion of Persian items shared between Romani and Urdu, which contrasts with those shared among Romani, Domari and Lomavren, together with what we know about the origins of that language, suggested to me that a specific connection linked the two of them. Urdu began as a military lingua franca in the early medieval camps – in fact the word ‘Urdu’ itself *means* ‘military camp’ – and an examination of the semantic areas in the Romani vocabulary reveals a surprising number of military, or military-related, words of Indic origin, considering the proportionately small Indic-derived lexicon overall.

Taking into account other clues in the language, such as the words for non-Romanies which mean such things as ‘prisoner’, ‘slave’ and so on, and the oral traditions referring to a history involving warfare, it seemed logical to examine Indian history for further clues in this area. There were of course already several hypotheses in the literature. A military origin for Romanies, generally as captives, is not a new idea; De Goeje (1876: 32) wrote that:

In the year 1000, we find bands of Zotts in the army of Abû-Naçr ibn-Bakhtiyâr, in Persia and Kirmân (Ibn al-Athîr, ix., p. 114). In 1025, al-Mançûra was conquered by Mahmûd al-Gaznawî, because the prince of this town had forsaken Islamism.

Clarke (1878: 134) wrote that:

It was from the Ghaznevide conqueror and at home that the independence of the Jats received its death-blow. The victorious army

of Mahmud, when returning laden with spoil from the Somnauth expedition of 1025, was attacked and pillaged by them on the banks of the Indus. Their temerity was chastised with exemplary rigour. Broken and dispersed by the resistless arms of the Sultan of Ghazni, they were not, however, annihilated.

arrow	<i>sulica</i>	< Skt <i>sūla</i> , Hi <i>sūl</i>
axe	<i>tover</i>	< Hi <i>tarvar</i> sword, Kurdish <i>taver</i>
battle	<i>kurripen</i>	< Skt <i>ku-</i> + <i>-tvana</i>
confront	<i>nikl-</i>	< Skt <i>nikālayati</i> , Hi <i>nikālnā</i>
encounter, engage-	<i>lat(h)</i>	< Skt <i>labdha-</i> , Hi <i>laddhiya-</i>
conqueror	<i>idjavno</i>	< Skt <i>-nayati</i> + <i>karoti-</i>
decamp	<i>rad-</i>	< Skt <i>rah-</i> + <i>dadā</i>
defeat in battle	<i>vidjav-</i>	<i>cf.</i> Hi <i>vijit</i> , <i>vijetā</i>
ditch	<i>xar, xavoj</i>	< Skt <i>khata-</i> , Hi <i>khawa</i>
fight	<i>kurr-</i>	< Skt <i>kuayati</i> , Hi <i>kuna</i>
gaiters	<i>patava</i>	< Skt <i>patta-</i> , Hi <i>pa</i> , <i>cf.</i> E. <i>puttees</i>
horse	<i>khuro</i>	< Skt <i>ghoa-</i> , Hi <i>ghoā</i>
military	<i>lurdikano</i>	< Skt <i>lūati</i> + <i>-(k)ano</i>
plunder	<i>lur-</i>	< Skt <i>lūati</i> , Hi <i>lūnā</i> , . E. <i>loot</i> , <i>Luri</i>
set up camp	<i>lod-</i>	< Skt <i>lagyati</i>
shot	<i>karja</i>	< Skt <i>karika-</i>
slaughter	<i>manušvari</i>	< Skt <i>mānuamārikā</i>
soldier	<i>kuripaskero</i>	< Skt <i>kuayati</i> + <i>-tvana</i> + <i>kro</i>
soldier	<i>lur, lurdo</i>	< Skt <i>lūati</i> , Hi <i>lūnā</i>
spear, lance	<i>bust</i>	< Skt <i>vścika-</i> , <i>bhršti-</i> (now ‘spit’)
spear, stab	<i>pošav-</i>	< Skt <i>sparśayā</i> , Hi <i>phasnā</i>
sword	<i>xanrro</i>	< Skt <i>khaaka-</i> , Hi <i>khā:ā</i>
trident	<i>trušul</i>	< Skt <i>trišūla-</i> (now ‘cross’)
whip	<i>čukni, čupni</i>	< Skt <i>čuknuti</i>
<i>Of Iranian origin</i>		
battleaxe	<i>nidjako</i>	< Persian <i>naĵak</i> , <i>cf.</i> also Kurdish <i>nijakh</i>
halter	<i>ašvar</i>	< Persian <i>abzūr</i>
saddle	<i>zen</i>	< <i>zēn</i>
spur	<i>buzex</i>	< Persian <i>sbux</i>
<i>Indic Items in Romani with a military or a likely military association</i>		

Leland, (1882: 24) wrote that 'Jat warriors were supplemented by other tribes ... they were broken and dispersed in the eleventh century by Mahmoud' and Burton (1898: 212) wrote that 'Sultan Mahmoud carried with him in AD 1011 some two hundred thousand [Indian] captives, the spoils of his expedition.' Kochanowski (1968: 27–8) later agreed that 'our own inter-disciplinary studies have shown that the Gypsies are Rajputs who left northern India,' and Vijender Bhalla's serological studies undertaken in India concluded that 'Rajputs occupy the [genetic] position nearest the Gypsies' (1992: 331–2). Nagy et al. conclude that there were 'non-significant differences' in haplotype frequencies between Haryana and Sikh Jats and Slovakian Roma, but 'significant differences with non-Romani populations' (2007: 19). Seventeen years ago the Polish scholar Lech Mróz had also considered a specific connection with the Islamic raids into India, saying 'I consider it likely that the Gypsies' ancestors arrived in Iran in the time of Mahmud of Ghazni, as a result of his raids into India' (1992: 40), and Bajram Haliti (2006: 6) has come to the same conclusion:

Some time between the tenth and eleventh centuries, the largest groups of Roma left India and the main cause was invasion of the great emperor Mahmud Gazni, who led 17 raids in western India. Running away from terror, Roma first stopped in Iran, and then separated in two groups, the first moving toward Spain, and the second toward Byzantium and Greece.

It is significant, I think, that the Banjara, an Indian population some of whom claim descent from the Rajputs, include in their own historical record a number of references to their ancestors having been defeated by the Ghaznavids and taken out of India never to return. They believe that those were the ancestors of the Romanies.

Nevertheless there continues to be resistance to this; in 2004 in his own interpretation of Romani history, Viorel Achim wrote, '[t]he distinguishing feature of the Gypsy migration is that it was not of a military nature' and Tcherenkov and Laederich (*Ibid.*: 13) wrote that 'some authors claim that Rroma originated from either one of the upper castes such as the Rajputs or from a mix of different castes. With our current knowledge, this cannot be settled to satisfaction'. For some historians a more casual explanation is preferred; Solsten and McClure (1994: 6) write that '[p]referring to feel free and unhindered, Gypsies attached little importance to the accumulation of property and wealth, choosing instead a life of wandering'.

I personally am entirely convinced that we are on the right track with this

emerging history. I see our ancestors as consisting of (a) an Indian military body accompanied by its camp followers that left India either in pursuit of invading Ghaznavids or as their captives, and (b) Indian slave-soldiers or *ghulams*, and perhaps mercenaries, being used on the side of the Ghaznavids. I believe that the Indian prisoners of war and another captive population – the Seljuqs, with whom the Ghaznavids were also engaged – were able to join forces and defeat their captors in AD 1038. The Seljuqs then brought the Indians with them as allies to defeat the Kingdom of Armenia, which they did in AD 1071. They established the Sultanate of Rûm in Anatolia, where the Indians were able to establish semi-autonomous areas known as *beyliks*, thus ensuring their continued cohesiveness as a group. For the next two centuries the Romani people and the Romani language began to take shape.

I want to comment here on the perhaps deliberate focusing of some writers on my reference to the Rajputs. Fonseca, for example, interprets my position as though I believe that our ancestors consisted solely of Rajputs. In her influential book *Bury Me Standing* she says:

Gypsy writers and activists ... argue for a classier genealogy; we hear, for example, that the Gypsies descend from the Kshatriyas, the warrior caste, just below the Brahmins. There is something ambiguous about origins, after all; you can be whoever you want to be (1996: 100).

Let me make it clear once again that in the make-up of medieval armies in that part of the world, the camp followers greatly outnumbered the actual militia, and the camp followers moreover included women as well as men. Our ancestors were not Rajputs. There was a minority of Rajputs among them.

Some, such as Leland, have tried to place our language somewhere among the seven Indian dialect groups, but have concluded that Proto-Romani belonged to another, now vanished, category of its own, because it matches no single one of them. Rather than supposing the existence of a vanished Prakrit from which Romani descends, however, the evidence points to a *mixed* origin, emerging from a *mixed* population in a *mixed* military environment. The military factor, evident from the social and historical clues, is also supported in the vocabulary, discussed earlier. The componential nature of the language also parallels the military origins of Urdu, the contact language that emerged as the lingua franca of the camps from a number of Indian and Dardic languages and from Persian, which was the language of administration not only in the Indian armies but also in the Ghaznavid and Seljuq armies as well. Clough (1876: 15) says that the military leaders:

experienced some difficulty in communicating with their new subjects. A lingua franca was composed, consisting principally of corrupt Persian and Hindi, and this was known under the name of *Urdu Zeban*, or camp language, to distinguish it from the court language, but the poets called it *Rekhta*, or 'scattered,' on account of the variety of elements composing it.

Romani clearly demonstrates its mixed Indian origin with the considerable number of synonyms it contains. It has three Indian words for 'sing', for example, and three for 'scare' and 'burn', two for 'wash' and 'cold', and so on – none shared by any single language spoken in India. There are even three, or possibly four, different dialect groups represented in the numerals alone; Vijay John in Texas is doing valuable research in this area. Thus the contact language that formed the basis of Romani, and which for lack of a name I have called *Rajputic* was, like its speakers themselves, drawn from a number of ethno-linguistic populations, and maintained that composite identity until reaching Anatolia. This too has attracted criticism, predictably from Matras, who in a recent book (Margalit and Matras 2008: 107) writes:

Despite Hancock's claims about the existence of linguistic findings to support this – although he has never produced them – there is no evidence, and certainly no linguistic proof, to support the theory of ... a Romani melting pot outside of India.

Matras' position must therefore be understood as stating that Romani was ready-formed inside India, and was taken out of India by *one* people speaking that *one* language – his 'itinerant castes of artisans and entertainers' and 'who appear to have been members of service-providing castes, similar in status and occupational profile to jatis or service groups known in some parts of India as dom' – although he doesn't explain how those groups presumably reassembled and how and why they reached Anatolia in the tenth century.

To return to the question of identity, I have argued elsewhere that, like our language, this came into being during the sedentary Anatolian period. The professional status of the Indians contributed to the contact variety of their language, which crystallised into the Romani language and its people, who were particularly under the influence of Byzantine Greek. While a case may be made for the word *R(r)om* being derived from *dom* its semantics have been challenged by Kenrick (1994: 37), who maintains that it meant simply 'man', or 'our people' rather than 'others', and, at the time of the exodus from India, did not have Brockhaus and Sinclair's later interpretation. Leitner (1877: i–6) has

also shown that, in some Dardic languages, the words *rōm* and *rōm* mean simply ‘race of people’, in Khowar it means a ‘flock’ (Sloan 1981: 128), while Mookerji (1927: 66) says that in Bihari, ‘the epithet for a *gentleman* is *Rouma*, a contraction of the Sanskrit *Romya* (the beautiful)’. Some of the Indians probably were *dom* in India, and while we might make a case for convergence, it is in my opinion more likely that the self-designation *R(r)om* originated in the names applied generally to citizens of the Byzantine Empire: *Romaivi*, *Romitoi*. There *were* no ‘Rom’ before Anatolia.

I should like to advance here a different perspective which, I believe, provides an alternative way of understanding the question of identity, as well as why the question of identity confuses journalists and sociologists, and why it causes us ourselves so much of a problem.

In light of the particular details of our origins and of our shared and unshared social history since then, certain conclusions must be drawn: first, that the population has been a composite one from its very beginning, and at that time was occupationally rather than ethnically defined; second, that while the earliest components – linguistic, cultural and genetic – are traceable to India, we essentially constitute a population that acquired our identity and language in the West (accepting the Christian, Greek-speaking Byzantine Empire as being linguistically and culturally ‘western’), and, third, that the entry into Europe from what is today Turkey was not as a single people, but as a number of smaller migrations over perhaps as much as a two-century span of time. These factors have combined to create a situation that is in some sense unique, that is to say, we are a population of Asian origin that has spent essentially the entire period of our existence in the West, and which, because of our mixed origins, has been open to absorbing and assimilating various non-Romani western peoples, contradictory perhaps in light of the stringent cultural restrictions on socialising with non-Romanies – an anomaly that bears examination.

Because the population was fragmenting and moving into Europe during the very period that an ethnic identity was emerging, there is no sense of our ever having been a single, unified people in one place at one time. We can speak of a ‘core of direct retention’ consisting of genetic, linguistic and cultural factors traceable to Asia and evident to a greater or lesser extent in all populations identifying as Romani, but we must also acknowledge that all of these factors have been augmented through contact with European peoples and cultures, and it is the latter accretions that account for the sometimes extreme differences from group to group. The Romanies in Spain have been separated from those in Romania for perhaps six centuries, and by 2,000 kilometres in distance. In Europe the migration, by this time consisting of a

conglomerate ethnic population moving off in different directions at different times and whose diverse speech had become one language in a multiplicity of dialects, encountered other mobile populations and in some cases joined and intermarried with them. Sometimes the Romani cultural and linguistic presence was sufficiently overwhelming that the newly encountered populations were absorbed and became Romanies in subsequent generations; sometimes the Romani contribution was not sufficient to maintain itself, and other non-Romani populations such as the Jenisch or the Quinquis emerged. This last factor underlies some of the discussion here today.

For some groups, 'core' Romani culture has been diluted practically out of existence, sometimes by deliberate government policy as in eighteenth-century Hungary or Spain, yet such populations are nevertheless regarded as 'Gypsies' by the larger society on the basis of appearance, dress, name, occupation and neighbourhood and are treated accordingly. They have, however, no traditional ethnic community in which to find refuge. Like urbanised, detribalised Native Americans, or like Chicanos who do not speak Spanish and who regard themselves as neither Mexican nor Anglo-American, in some respects they have become 'new' ethnic groups: unable to speak the ancestral language and unfamiliar with traditional culture and behaviour, yet still distinct from the larger population and shunned by it. At the other extreme are Romani populations in substantial numbers, such as the Vlax or Sinti, who vigorously maintain the language and the culture and who are restrained from functioning in the European mainstream because of them.

As we acquire our own voice I see a rising wall of resistance to it from the outside; our effort to become educated and to speak for ourselves is clearly perceived as a threat to those who support globalism and the assimilation of disruptive ethnic populations. Non-Romani organisations have been created to study and define Romani populations, even to cultivate our thinkers and our leaders. The Open Society Institute has a scholarship programme 'to support the creation of a broad-based Roma elite'.

Non-Romanies exercising an intellectual authority over our people decide on the standardisation of our language, and non-Romanies have represented themselves as our political spokesmen. Non-Romanies in their droves have decided that arranged early-teen marriage among Vlax Romanies is reprehensible, although no similar outrage has been directed at India where it is also common and where the Romani custom originated. Likewise arranged marriages amongst the European royal families have taken place for centuries without moral criticism, although ours are periodically an issue in the western press.

Remarkably, the Council of Europe has released an 'official' account of our history (Wogg, 2006), something they would scarcely do any for any other nation:

what would the Germans or Russians say if an official history and description had been imposed upon them without their having been once consulted? My last quote from Yaron Matras was from a book that has recently appeared called *The Roma: A Minority in Europe*, edited by Roni Stauber and Raphael Vago and published by the Central European University Press. It contains the papers from the first international conference on the Roma at Tel Aviv University in Israel held in December 2002. No Romanies participated in either the presentations or the organisation of that conference. This is to me a colossal insult and a mark of supreme arrogance. It is also an indication of the direction things are surely taking if we do not protest now, and loudly. That such conferences on Romani issues can be organised without any Romani involvement whatsoever is reminiscent of meetings of the US Bureau of Indian Affairs in the early 1900s where Native American issues were discussed in the absence of any Indian participation or representation; a Black Studies conference with no African American presence would be unthinkable; a Jewish policy symposium with no Jewish voice would be an outrage. Academics and politicians who have never met a Romani in their lives make their opinions about Romani policy known in the national press. At the same time some of the same people who *have* met us seem to feel threatened by those of us who are educated or who are branded as ‘activists’, as though this were automatically a bad thing, thereby wasting the resource potential of such marginalised individuals when so few Romanies educated to degree level exist. When I first met David Crowe, a US Holocaust Memorial Council consultant on the Romani Holocaust, his very first words were: ‘I’m not going to be intimidated by you’. At the University of Texas in April 2007, the promotional flyer for a conference on Romani women in Turkey entitled *Reconfiguring gender and Roma (“Gypsy”) identity through political discourses in Western Turkey* noted that ‘Rom and non-Rom men’s voices speak for Roma women’, although the ‘reconfiguration of Roma identity’ in this presentation was made on our behalf by a *non*-Romani woman, and not by a Romani herself. We recently acquired an addition to the Romani Archives, presently at the University of Texas, a report by an associate professor of anthropology at DePaul University in Chicago, who went to Croatia ‘for the purpose of establishing a Romani woman’s empowerment program’ (Hofman, 2008: 46). By her own admission she knew nothing about Romanies, and she wasn’t successful – at least not in helping us. But she did get a travel grant and a publication out of it.

A week-long ‘Gypsy’ conference at the University of Florida in March 2007 consisted mainly of singing, dancing and dressing up by various non-Roma, but included no Romani participation. When they were questioned in this regard, the response was that they ‘couldn’t find any Gypsies’. They have

since received a complaint from members of the Miami Romani community. When the late Miles Lerman called me at home in 1998 before I took up my position on the US Holocaust Memorial Council he nervously asked, ‘Are you an activist?’ This scary word ‘activist’ comes from ‘act’, and we must act now. I was so pleased that the Romany and Traveller Family History Society was established and is growing, the first organisation of its kind created by and for Romanies. Initiatives such as this bring the beginning of change. Surely if groups or individuals who identify themselves as Romanies seek to assert their ethnicity, and to ally themselves with others similarly motivated, then this is entirely their own business. The non-Romani anthropologists, sociologists, folklorists and others who have taken upon themselves the role of ethnic police are interfering and presumptuous at best, and are perpetuating paternalistic attitudes. Something more sinister underlies the marginalisation of our educated Romanies who argue for ethnic unification: it flies directly in the face of those who seek to control and regiment the world’s peoples and economies. I call for a new respect and a new cooperation between Romanies and *gadje*, and an end to the nineteenth-century cultural colonialism and neo-Gypsyism that lives on in only slightly modified guise.

Before closing I do want to take this opportunity to speak out – yet again – against our national sickness, commented on over 130 years ago by George Smith of Coalville who said ‘almost all Gipsies have an inveterate hatred and jealousy towards each other, especially if one sets himself up as knowing more than [another] in the next yard’ (1880: 195). Salunke (1989: 28) saw it as being a characteristic of our distant military ancestors, whose ‘major vice [is] the main reason which does not allow them to come together and try to solve their problems. For minor disputes they never try to come together and negotiate to thrash out their problems or to resolve some reforms; the superiority of their kinsmen seems to be intolerable to them’. Thus it is very deeply rooted in our history. We all recognise this and we all deplore it; yet if we are to regain control of our own affairs we must put this aside and learn to cooperate with each other. Our detractors delight in watching our infighting, and see it as evidence that we are not ready to play with the big boys.

Summary

- 1 The linguistic features of Romani identify it as a new-Indic language rather than an old-Indic language, dating its time of separation from India at no earlier than ca. AD 1000.
- 2 The Romani language cannot be traced to any single Prakritic branch of the Indic languages but has features from several of them, although it is

most like those of the Central group. The language closest to Romani is Urdu which itself emerged from Rajputic.

- 3 Romani includes a substantial Dardic component (particularly from Phalura) and items from Burushaski, a language isolate spoken in the Pamir and nowhere else. This, and other linguistic evidence, points to an exodus through this particular area – the same area through which the Ghaznavids moved into and out of India.
- 4 The various Romani terms for non-Romani peoples suggest a military/non-military relationship; thus *gadžo* is traceable to an original Sanskrit form (*gajjha*) which means ‘civilian’, *das* and *goro* both mean ‘slave, enemy, captive’, and *gomi* means ‘one who has surrendered’.
- 5 Romani has a military vocabulary of Indian origin, including the words for ‘soldier’, ‘sword’, ‘attack’, ‘spear’, ‘trident’, ‘battle cry’ and ‘gaiters’. On the other hand, most of its non-military vocabulary relating to metalworking or agriculture, for example, consists of words not originating in India.
- 6 Some Romani groups in Europe today maintain the emblems of the Sun and the Moon as well as the *nadjakor* mattock as identifying insignia, all of which had the same function for the Rajputs.
- 7 Cultural practices of some Romani groups in Europe today resemble elements of Shaktism or goddess worship, as in the Rajputs’ worship of the warrior goddess Parvati, another name for Kali/Durga. The European pre-eminence of *Les Saintes-Maries* may be taken to indicate a certain cultural affinity (Fraser, *Ibid.*: 313). The statue of Kali may be said to be immersed in the Mediterranean just as it is in the Ganges once a year in India. The Hindu deities Vayu and Maruti are mentioned in some Romani proverbs.
- 8 Throughout the earliest fifteenth- and sixteenth-century written records we find that Romanies told the Europeans that they had been defeated after conflicts with Islamic forces (Fraser, *Ibid.*: 72, 83). We should recall that the period after the Muslim invasion of India was also a period in which Byzantines, Crusaders and Armenians sustained a patchwork of anti-Islamic military resistance in Anatolia, with the last Armenian principality being reduced by the Ottomans as late as 1361. The oral tradition of some Romani groups in Europe includes stories of a conflict with Islam leading to the original migration west.
- 9 The mixed linguistic nature of Romani is evident from the numbers of synonyms of Indic origin in modern Romani, for example, the multiple words for ‘wash’, ‘burn’, ‘awaken’, ‘back’, ‘dog’, ‘fight’, ‘belt’, ‘give’, ‘birth’,

‘arise’, ‘bracelet’, ‘cold’, ‘comb’, ‘day’, ‘excreta’, ‘fear’, ‘food’, ‘heel’, ‘leave’, ‘man’, ‘move’, ‘non-Romani’, ‘open’, ‘pay’, ‘sing’, ‘straw’, ‘thin’, ‘tomorrow’, ‘raw’, ‘wet’ and so on.

- 10 Our population has been a composite one from its very beginning and at the beginning was occupationally, rather than ethnically, defined.
- 11 While our earliest linguistic, cultural and genetic components are traceable to India, Romanies everywhere essentially constitute a population that acquired its identity and language in the West (accepting the Christian, Greek-speaking Byzantine Empire as linguistically and culturally Western).
- 12 The entry into Europe from Anatolia was not as a single people, but as a number of smaller migrations, at the least three, over perhaps as much as a two-century span of time.

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