



origins **Gypsies among us**

While April 8 is marked as Roma Day in Europe, the Roma hold up a mirror to European society about its treatment of outsiders

By Hussain Bux Mallah

April 8 is marked Roma Day in Europe as a day of coming together of various communities that are known by names such as Gitanes, Manouche, Roma, Sintis, Travellers, Tsigan, and Yifti in different states of that continent. From Anatolia (modern Turkey) to Ireland, these communities assert a common ancestry and a shared history of survival against the odds. It is an extraordinary story that brings the Gypsies, as they are most commonly known, into close kinship relations with the people of southern Pakistan and northwestern India.

Colourful and persecuted

The Gypsies or Roma conjure up images of a colourful life unhindered by the fetters of settled residence or regular work. The adjective 'Bohemian' that denotes a carefree lifestyle is connected to the way of living espoused by the Roma of central Europe. These music-loving, camp-dwelling, travelling communities have come to define the very national cultures in which they inhabit. The passionate flamenco music and dance of Spain -- with its Moorish, Arab and Indian traces -- is just one form of expression that has attracted the attention of those seeking colour and excitement. The European fascination with the Gypsy finds parallels closer to home. Helen's pulsating gyrations around the camp-fire in 'Sholay' or Madhuri's erotic 'Choli Kay Peechhay Kya Hai' in 'Khalnayak' hint at similar strains in our popular imagination of a romanticisation of a supposedly easy-going lifestyle associated with the music-loving, travelling Banjaras.

But the diversion that the Gypsy lifestyle evokes in mainstream Europe conceals a tale of untold oppression, and centuries of persecution, culminating in a holocaust in which some 600,000 Roma or Gypsy people were rounded up and massacred by the Nazis during the Second World War. As a proportion of population, Roma or Gypsy casualties were probably higher than those of the European Jews. For those familiar with European history the scale of the Roma holocaust ought not to be surprising. In 1929 (four years before Hitler's ascent to power) there was already a 'Central Office for the Fight Against the Gypsies in Germany'.

With the Nazis coming to power in 1933 the oppression intensified. The Nuremberg Law for the protection of German Blood and Honour was enacted in 1935 to prevent Germans from marrying 'non-Aryans' and non-Germans. During this year, about 120 girls of Roma origin were forcibly sterilized in the Ravensbruck camp and most of them died in hospitals. The first mass genocidal action against 'non-Aryan' people took place in January 1940 in which about 250 Romani children were murdered in Buchenwald where they were used as 'guinea-pigs' to test the theory of the 'Zyklon-B crystals'. Later these same crystals were used in the gas chambers.

The Gypsies or Roma, therefore, were the first to face the genocidal mania that was to grip Europe in the middle of the last century. Policies and instruments of genocide

were first tried and tested against them before being more widely applied to all other 'inferior' races. With the Nazi defeat in 1945 the world was shaken out of its complacency towards genocide. The Jewish Holocaust became a persistent reminder of the horrors of extreme nationalism. But the first victims -- the Gypsies or the Roma -- had to wait for four decades before they received an official apology from the German state. It was finally 1985, that the German President Richard von Weizsacker and Chancellor Helmut Kohl recognised German responsibility for the persecution of the Roma in the Third Reich and the continuing racial discrimination against them. Before then it was still acceptable for German writers to persist with the myth that Gypsies were killed during the holocaust not because of their race but due to their supposed criminality.

Official acceptance of responsibility did not end the racial discrimination. An opinion poll in 1994 revealed that two-thirds of Germans did not want Gypsies as neighbours. In fact, the 1990s saw a revival of racial discrimination and race crimes against the Roma across Europe. The end of the Cold War in Europe unleashed new waves of nationalism in Germany, Austria, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, the former Czechoslovakia, and the Balkans in which the Roma were targeted by racists and were left unprotected by the state.

The world community responded rightly to prevent ethnic cleansing of the Albanians in Kosovo, but it turned a blind eye while newly-empowered ethnic Albanian nationalists went about massacring the Gypsies. In 'liberal' England which had already made life more difficult for its own Roma and Travellers by amending centuries old conventions governing the use of common lands in the 1986 and 1994, the media led an all-out assault against Roma migrants from central and eastern Europe calling them 'thieves', 'criminals', and 'scroungers'. And as part of the preparations for the 2004 Olympic Games -- an event supposed to celebrate our common humanity -- the Greek government launched a campaign to get rid of 'stray dogs and Roma Camps' from the Athens area.

Long-lost cousins

While Europe used them as a source of amusement and colour on the one hand, and as targets of contempt and persecution on the other, the so-called Gypsies themselves began to engage positively with their own identity and history. The term Gypsy was used as a term of abuse, signifying a travelling lifestyle, a people who by choice and culture preferred to have no fixed abode, and who preferred not to hold down regular jobs. This began to be replaced, in many countries, by the terms such as Roma that was a badge of honour, signifying a history and continuous cultural existence and resistance in the face of terrible odds. The Roma were to assert themselves as a unified nation of up to 12 million people scattered across Europe.

Interest in a common Roma identity also led to more serious consideration of various speculative origin theories that had been around for some time. The word Gypsy, for example, was thought to be a derivative of 'Egyptian'. But the most powerful hypothesis turned out to be one that saw the Gypsies, Roma, or Sintis originating in the regions of Sindh and Rajasthan -- or present-day southern Pakistan and northwestern India.

The discoveries of the 19th century British adventurer and spy Richard Burton about cultural and linguistic similarities between Gypsy communities and the peoples of Sindh and Rajasthan provided initial insights. Historical writings and research focused on broadly two strands: migration dates and paths, and linguistic relations between the Roma and Indian-Pakistani languages. The first strand, that is, the reconstruction of the causes of migration, dates and paths was politically important because protagonists argued that the Roma were originally a settled people who had been uprooted and forced, due to dispossession and oppression, to adopt a peripatetic lifestyle. Attempts at unravelling the real migration story remained mired in speculative controversy. Perhaps the value of this historical research was what it revealed about Roma oppression in Europe and elsewhere.

Pain is 'dukkha'

It was the second strand of research, however, that provided more conclusive evidence on Roma origins. Linguistic analysis showed close ties of vocabulary and grammar between various Roma languages and Hindi, Sindhi, Marwari, and Seraiki. Dozens of common objects are called by words that are identical or similar to those found in these latter languages. A small sample should suffice: agni for fire; arta for flour; busa for straw; dugdha for milk; ghara for house; lavana or luni for sickle (harvesting is called labharo in modern Sindhi); mukha for mouth; naman for name; paniya for water; rakta for blood (in modern Sindhi it is rut); siras for head; supna for dream, and dukkha for pain.

While historians will remain divided over the precise causes (warfare, invasion, economic opportunity, natural calamity), dates (7th AD to 11th AD), and routes of migration (via Afghanistan, Persia, Anatolia, Egypt, Greece), linguistic analysis has shown that the Roma origins lie in Pakistan and India. There are many communities in present-day Sindh and Rajasthan that resemble the Roma in various respects such as their travelling lifestyles, occupations and culture. It might be tempting to conclude the modern-day Roma are long-lost cousins of the Saami, the Ghurgula, and the Shikaris of contemporary Sindh and Rajasthan.

But perhaps what unites the European Roma with the present-day 'wandering' communities in Pakistan and India is not some genetic preference for particular lifestyles. Rather, the linkage might be that those dispossessed from their land have had no choice but to make the most of what homelessness has to offer. The pattern of dispossession and the survival of the Roma/Gypsies/Sintis bears close resemblance to survival strategies 'available' and utilised in traditional and contemporary Pakistani and Indian societies: i.e. migration; self-imposed caution against making claims on the land of more powerful groups; reliance on marginalised activities such as common property resources, seasonal labour, begging, fortune-telling, entertainment, petty crime, and sex work.

The Roma hold up a mirror to European society about its treatment of outsiders, and the almost effortless steps from intolerance, objectification and contempt, to genocide. For South Asia the history of the Roma provides a lesson into the processes of marginalisation that our societies can sustain indefinitely. According to Roma human rights activist Dimiter Georgiev, the World Roma Day "unites Europe and India and is a remnant of this connection". This connection remains relevant if it

helps European and South Asian societies to recognise and resist age-old tendencies towards dispossession, in their contemporary guises.