

RECOGNIZING THE ROMA AS INDIAN DIASPORA: A POLITICAL ACT

Abstract

This paper reflects on the process of Indian diasporic recognition of the Roma, a group that defines the classical understanding of nationhood and diaspora. Following the statement of Indian Minister Swaraj who in 2016 declared that the Roma should be recognized as Indian diaspora, I employ Brubaker's normative framework of diaspora, and explore the political implications of this possible recognition. Based on discourse analysis and fieldwork (interviews with Roma elites and Indian diplomatic staff), I show how this recognition process is related to two dissimilar nationalist projects: one of the Indian state and other of the Roma elites, who come together as strange-bed-fellows to further their individual political agendas. I end by suggesting that this process opens up new political avenues for diasporic recognition, which might not need the concept of one "homeland."

Key words: diaspora, Roma, India, Romania

Introduction

In January 2016, at the International Roma Conference and Cultural Festival, the External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj took part, and she was accompanied by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and the Antar Rashtriya Sahayog Parishad (Bharat). Back then she declared that: "Roma community spread across the world children of India, and India needs to recognize them as India's diaspora," and continued by stating:

"More significantly so, because the process of adaptation, diffusion and progress was based on Indian value systems of peaceful co-existence, respecting other cultures and contributing towards growth. Roma maintained Indian traditions in the countries that were unaware of India, and its culture and traditions."¹

Jovan Damjanovic, the president of World Roma Organization, echoed this view:

¹ <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/26350>; accessed 13 April, 2019

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"Roma people are an Indian nation, the autochthonous territory of southeastern and western Europe, but also in other parts of the world, with all attributes that make them a special national entity... We would like to be treated as the Indian diaspora and can make a contribution to our country of origin's growth." ²

Similarly, on February 15, 2016 the *Times of India* declared a: "Call to recognize Romas as Indian diaspora."³ Following the conference, KG Suresh, declared in on a similar tone in the op-ed published in on-line edition of the *Pioneer*, titled: The Roma People: India's Pride"⁴

"Unlike many Indian nationals who refuse to acknowledge their Indian ancestry, Roma community members worldwide have always been proud of their Indian origins and linguistic and cultural affinity with their mother country. We need to care for them. Unfortunately, till the previous Government was in power, India chose to remain a mute spectator to these incidents. Unlike many Indian nationals who refuse to acknowledge their Indian ancestry, the Romas have always been proud of their Indian origins and linguistic and cultural affinity with their mother country. With a view to removing negative perceptions about itself in Europe and other parts of the world, the Roma now want India to accept them as their diaspora and as a linguistic and cultural minority."

These discourses are not new, but a part of a long line of arguments that have been expressed since the 1970s, when the Indian origin of the Roma has been articulated in political claims by European Roma activists and Indian scholars.

The Roma and their (presumed) Indian origin

It is rather unfortunate that much of the academic work focused on Roma people needs to start by introducing the reader to the general life and activity of Roma communities

² Ibid

³ Source <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/nri/Call-to-recognize-Romas-as-Indian-diaspora/articleshow/50999163.cms> accessed March 10, 2017

⁴ <http://www.dailypioneer.com/columnists/oped/the-roma-people-indias-pride.html>; accessed March 10, 2017

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(Stewart, Crowe 1994/1996; Barany, 2002; Matras, Fonseca, 1995/2006). Extensive use of this type of introduction implies the need for a translation of academic work with Roma to general readership, which typically includes translating the term “Roma” into the more known and pejorative term “Gypsy.” While new scholarship has been emerging (Bhabha, Mirga and Matache 2016, Surdu, 2017, McGarry, 2018, Necula, forthcoming) addressing more specific subjects pertaining to Roma politics and access to human rights, the urgency of redefining and introducing the Roma as the unknown people still persists. When overt racism is avoided, the Roma are usually described as the “victims” of Europe, a group that is depressed, marginalized, hit by racism, and devoured by health issues and lack of education:

“Many Roma (which include Travellers, Gypsies, Manouches, Askali and Sinti) live in overwhelming poor conditions on the margins of the society, and face extreme levels of social exclusion.” (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights - FRA⁵)

Most of the literature on the topic, starts by introduces the Roma as strangers in Europe; they are the “other,” who came from somewhere else. For the first two centuries, since their recorded arrival in the 1500s, their origin was thought to be Egypt. However, as more studies (not all accepted by specialists) were done, the Romani people of Europe are considered to have their historical origins in India (Shashi, 1967) For example, in his work, D.P. Singhal suggestively titled “Gypsies: Indians In Exile” (1982) declares that:

“Romanies, or gypsies as they are poorly know, (...) who, having migrated from India gave contributed so much to European cultural life, especially music, dance and metallurgy” (Singhal, 1982:VII).

⁵ <http://fra.europa.eu/en/theme/roma>; accessed April 4, 2018

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Taking for granted their Indian origin, but lacking scientific proof, he reiterates and details further:

“Romanies, or Gypsies, had their origin in India. They are descendants of tribes who left the banks of Indus, transverse a number of intervening countries over a period of centuries and arrived in Europe more than five hundred years ago. For a long time they were mistakenly believed to have come from Egypt, and the word ‘Gypsy’ – a misnomer – is a derivative of Egyptian.” (Singhal, 1982:13)

Similarly, Ashok Rao asserts that the first wave of Indian migration can be traced back to the first century AD during the rule of Kanishka consisting of: “the Romani people, now known all around the world as ‘the gypsies’ from what today is the Indian state of Rajasthan. They emigrated from India towards the northwest and eventually settled in Eastern Europe” (Dwidevi Om Prakash: xv).

This theory of the origin of Roma people in India is formally and informally, supported by many scholars in genetics (Rai et al. 2012; Moorjani et al., 2013; Martínez-Cruz et al, 2016). who affirm that “the exact haplotype matching analysis of both uniparental lineages consistently points to a Northwestern origin of the proto-Roma population within the Indian subcontinent” (Martínez-Cruz et al, 2016: 937). This link is reiterated by anthropologists (Lee, 2009), linguistics (Matras, 2002) and historians (Trehan, 2016). While these theories emphasize one transcontinental connection, they implicitly place the Roma at odds within Europe suggesting that, different from other ethnic groups, the Roma are not European. This view further strengthens their image as “the other,” which often makes the Roma people to be seen as “out the ordinary”, and “out of place” within Europe⁶.

⁶ While Roma communities have been present within many European countries, their identity often comes under strict scrutiny. Moreover, as many Roma groups have been nomadic (they are in effect the original European migrants), their presence did not leave European rulers unchallenged, and in response they

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What is a diaspora? Connection with the nation state

If we consider the Roma minority status, the opacity of their historical descend and their precarious political clout within Europe, we need to ask: is it suitable to use the term “diaspora” to refer to them? If so, what would be a definition of diaspora that encompasses the Roma? And what are its implications?

According to Brubaker in his now classic *The ‘diaspora’ diaspora*, early discussions of diaspora referred to a small number of groups: Jewish, Greek, Armenian, who were looking for their return to “homeland.” It can refer to a “number of ethnic and racial groups living in alien lands” (Dwidevi Om Prakash, citing AL Mcload PAGE!!), and nowadays, “the term has proliferated, its meaning has been stretched to accommodate the various intellectual, cultural and political agendas” (Brubaker 1995:1). The term of “diaspora” essentially extended “to any and every namable population category that is to some extent dispersed in space. ... the category becomes stretched to the point of uselessness (Brubaker 1995, citing Sartori 1970: 3) In spite of this inherent diversity, there are three core elements that remain widely understood to be constitutive of diaspora. The first is typically understood in spatial terms: “as forced or otherwise traumatic dispersion; more broadly as any kind of dispersion in space, provided that the dispersion crosses state borders.” (Brubaker, 1995:5) Second, is concerned with the gaze of the community, which is for diaspora: an orientation towards homeland, which can be real or imagined. “The homeland” appears in this context as an authoritative source of value, identity and loyalty”. (Ibid) The diaspora includes “those who live in alien land

created and implemented legal, penal and incarcerating systems aimed at curtaining the Roma presence and their movement (Dragomir, forthcoming 2019).

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cherish fond memories of their motherland, recall their need and dear ones, their friends and family and associations, and are lost in nostalgia and a sense of unrootedness” (Dwidevi Om Prakash). Citing Safran (1991), Brubaker states that the concern with a homeland includes “maintaining a collective memory or myth about the homeland; ‘regarding the ancestral homeland as the true, ideal home, and as the place to which one would (or should) eventually return’; being collectively ‘committed to the maintenance or restoration of the homeland and to its safety and prosperity;’ an ‘continuing to relate, personally and vicariously’, to the home land in a way that significantly shapes ponés’ identity and solidarity (Brubaker, 1995:5) The third element is socio-cultural, concerning the “‘boundary maintenance’ living the preservation of a distinctive identity vis-a-vis a host society (or societies)... self-enforced endogamy or other forms of self-segregation (Ibid: 6).⁷

Brubaker continues by acknowledging two perspectives. The first one, “the Old perceptive” focused on the process immigrations, assimilationist, (methodological) nationalist, and teleological. This perspective took nation states as units of analysis and assumed that migrants made a sharp and definitive beak with their homelands, that migration trajectories were unidirectional and that migration inexorably led to assimilation (Brubaker, 1995:7-8). Differently, the new perspective explains the stop in the diasporic journey “neither unidirectional nor final,” (Ibid:8), thus allowing for multiple ways of being recognized and engaging in diasporic activities.

⁷ Studies of diaspora, such as the one of Robin Cohen explains that the concept of diaspora can be applied to different kinds of diaspora such as labor diaspora, victim diaspora, trade diaspora, cultural diaspora, and homeland diaspora (Dwidevi Om Prakash: xiii)

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Brubaker recommends that “rather than speak of ‘a diaspora’ or ‘the diaspora’ as an entity, a bounded group, an ethno-demographic or ethno-cultural fact it may be fruitful and certainly more precise, to speak of diasporic stances, projects, claims, idioms, practices and so on. We can then study empirically the degree and form of support for a diasporic project among members of its putative constituency, just as we can do when studying a nationalist project (Ibid: 13).

Following this line of argumentation, in the case of the Roma, the first requirement of the diaspora is met: the community is vastly spread across the world, and especially in Europe. In Romania they speak Romanian, in Turkey Turkish in France, French, etc. and at times they also speak Romani; however Romani is a languages spoken in different dialects and not all who speak it understand each other. They are religiously diverse: they are Christian in Western Europe, and Muslim in the South – such as Serbia or Montenegro. They look different on every European country: they could look more like Russians in Eastern part of Romania, and more like Turks in the southern part of the same country.

However, different from typical diasporic communities, many Roma people do not see themselves belonging to a larger community, one that transcends national boundaries. For example, in my extensive field-research I have not encountered Roma people who seek to live in a Roma neighborhood in Paris or attend the same church in Munich. Moreover, most Roma people identify with their country of citizenship and track their individual or family histories only few generations ago, typically to the same country. The thought of them coming from the far away lands of India is often a foreign idea.

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In spite of this multiplicity, the Roma groups across Europe share the same name, and at times similar negative labeling from others. One could argue that what they have in common from Bulgaria to Sweden is the way they are treated by the gadje, non-Roma (Surdu, 2017). However, at a closer look, some Roma groups share certain things in common; some of the Romani people who kept their traditional clothes, wear long colorful dresses, and men cover their heads. Women from traditional Roma communities at times wear long hair twisted in long braids and traditional men prefer facial hair, mostly moustaches. There are some Roma groups who worship a black Madonna, whom they call Kalo Madonna, making scholars and Indian enthusiasts to declare that she is an Europeanized version of Goddess Kali. This diversity and unity of many Roma traditions – especially visible in traditional Roma communities – kept for generations, might be interpreted as a result of “self-enforced endogamy or other forms of self-segregation” (Brubaker, 1995: 6), thus satisfying Brubaker’s third criteria of diaspora.

Nevertheless, in spite of the Roma communities at times satisfying these two criteria of diasporic community, due to the fact that only seldom the Roma see themselves as one group that traces itself back to India, the second criteria of diaspora as outlined by Brubaker, i.e. “an orientation towards homeland, which can be real or imagined,” (Brubaker, 1995: 5) is severely challenged. In my fieldwork for three years, I asked many Roma people what they thought of the possible Indian recognition as outlined by Minister Swaraj. Most shrank their shoulders and replied: “I do not know.” Those who knew more about this typically said: “it is good someone is finally accepting us. It is a nice feeling,” (Yoav, 36, Romania) referring to the fact that the Roma community is usually pushed away and thought to be “foreigners.”

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Thus, while many Roma communities might satisfy the first and last enunciated criteria of diaspora, the second, namely “orientation towards the homeland” and I would argue the most important one, remains (still) unaddressed. To address this insufficiency a new form of Roma activism, created by Roma elites over the past three decades has emerged, in connection to a novel nationalist project.

Nationalism, diaspora and the elites

European Roma elites often have different views about the goals and the political path of the community. In spite of their differences, which I will highlight below, they are brought together by their agreement upon several Roma symbols. Since 1933, “Dzelem dzelem” was accepted as the community’s anthem and it is sung at all Romani congresses. Over the past two decades, many Roma elites have been working tirelessly on numerous fronts supporting the recognition of the Roma minority. The Roma elites recognized one Roma flag, that shares the same colors as India, and it has a wheel at its center symbolizing the community’s mobile lifestyle. Romani was acknowledged as the official language, and several forums for centralizing information about the language and culture were created, mobilizing towards political representation (ex: Arasel⁸). Thus, as a result of these efforts, a nationalist project has also been taking shape envisioning a people with a common history. In this context, the Roma people’s origin becomes an important step. The idea of India, and of Roma Indian roots has been widely embraced by some Roma elites, and while academic studies about the common Roma origin are

⁸ Source <https://petitie.aresel.ro/aresel-manifest?fbclid=IwAR20mjd6LGZ3kw4mQ9Tk8ocb70csenpEJ46WluOhOFuZAgabTAJ-hg5KBP0>; accessed April 11, 2019

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still scarce, these steps have become important aspects in understating the Roma as one coherent community. Thus, in the context of the elites, the recognizing the Indian origin of the Roma community represents an important, though contested, step in establishing one Roma identity as a recognized, unitary community.

Important Roma thinkers, such as Nicolae Gheorghe (2016) articulated the strategies that could be employed to support Roma communities through out Europe:

“The fundamental source for the construction of the Roma identity and the basis for political action in the 21st century should be citizenship, which guarantees, at the same time, the minority status as a part of the nations and states. An alternative would be to suggest that political action needs to be based on the status claimed by Roma as a nation with a country-less population, similarly to refugees, asylum seekers or diasporic populations.”

Gheorghe’s ideas have been highly influential both scholarly and politically, and created space for further interrogations regarding the Roma’s identity and its possible diasporic recognition among Roma activists and political figures.

“It all started in 1971 with the first Romani Congress,” told me Daniel Vasile, Roma representative in Romanian Parliament from the Roma Party (*Partida Romilor*) who enthusiastically shared details about the diplomatic and political activities that seek to connect Romanian and European Roma with the Indian government:

“And since 2014 we have been strengthening the ties; we have been inviting Indian embassy [in Bucharest] to Roma events, like the 8th of April [International Roma day] ceremonies, and we have been engaged with the Indian ambassador in political acts. We [political representatives from Roma Party] have been partnering with the Indian embassy in organizing the Indian festival [in Bucharest] Namaste India. I have been discussing with the Indian ambassador a university research project at Bucharest University, within the Roma Studies department. I hope to have territorial visits as well with the diplomatic collaborations. Then, I want to visit India as a part of diplomatic relations. “ (July, 2017).

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To my question regarding the possible negative backlash in strengthening the ties with India might ensue, PM. Vasile promptly answered:

“One can be European and admit your Indian belonging. Indians are defined as the cult of a brahmanic people, with a star on the their forehead [Romanian folkloric reference signifying being chosen, special, exquisite], touched by angels. India has a elevated behavior, where the Roma traditions and habits connect and this could help the [Roma] community to identify culturally.” (Vasile, interview, 2017)

Vasile continued by reflecting on the common points between Roma and Indian culture, such as the importance of marital life, role of children, skills and social divisions, which in his view strengthened the ties between diverse Roma groups and the overall Indian society. While warmly embracing the Indian connection, MP Vasile also pointed out that: “Roma are European. We live in Europe. We are born in Europe.” But he continued by outlining that while the Romanian political system, run by the non-Roma, i.e. *gadje*, wanted the Roma to assimilate, the Roma traditions have been surviving. And “this survival is the Roma’s higher virtue.” And this survival is what links Roma communities to India.

“You doubt it?” He rhetorically asked. “Place Roma people in front an Indian [Bollywood] movie, and see how they react. Then ask them what they think of India. They resonate with Indian culture.” His voice was strong and emotive, as he ended by looking at me with pride. I looked at him, and did not dare to say that many people from all over the world, *gadje* included, of different creeds, races, classes and ages “resonate” with the powerfully told Bollywood stories.

His examples of the Roma-India connection were vivid and captivating, but as in many cases where ties and connections are symbolically forged and strengthened for

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political interests, the historical changes tend to be overlooked, community/ national images are stagnant, references are monolithic pointing to idealized images.

Differently, Ciprian Necula, Roma activist, scholar former cabinet member of the Ministry of European Funds of Romania articulated in an email:

“I would be curious to see which Roma traditions are of Indian heritage. Blah-blah about respecting the elder, and alike are commonalities that are generally applicable, and function just like ‘palm reading’; meaning: you hear what makes sense in any circumstance, such as: you are hurt, something is weighing you down etc.” (Necula, personal correspondence, March 2018)

His view differs from that of Vasile, as he highlights that while this connection is discussed at the level of the elites, it seldom reverberates into the Roma communities:

“In the field, never in my experience, have I met a Roma who really thought they have Indian origin. It appears as a cartoonish remark, or it is used when someone wants to look smart. Actually, the news about the “Roma origin” had become a new public label given to the Roma.” (Ibid)

Different from Vasile who saw Roma’s connection with India as a sign of a privileged group, touched by grace (i.e. “with a star on forehead”), Necula sees this as a problematic identification (that in fact highlights bias and radicalizes remarks), which might reinforce negative stereotypes about Roma communities in Europe:

“Roma-Indians has a negative connotation, referring to their foreign, Asian, inferior (compared to the Dacs [the presumed Romanians forefathers] origin.) So, when you call someone in Romania, “Indian” you do not pay a compliment, quite the contrary. (...) Well, the Roma have all the reasons in the world to smile when hearing about their possible Indian origin, and they accept it as possible, but they do not care about India, and about the grand Indian culture (beyond their curiosity for the exotic) because the European pressure and experience weighs more than a faraway possible origin, which is stereotypical and for many Roma is demeaning. (Ibid)

However, just like Vasile, Necula emphasized the *Europeaness* of the Roma:

“Roma are European even though 1000+ were present throughout India. What we know for sure is that they left, and never came back.” (Ibid)

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When I addressed this issue with PRM Vasile, and asked how come there are Roma elites who are opposed to the Indian diaspora recognition of the Roma, he replied: “There is a general phobia among the Roma elites and academics who think that the 1940’s history can repeat itself” he said referring to the trauma and the genocide suffered by Roma people in Europe during the Second World War, as a part of the Holocaust. “To preserve the community, they deny the connection with India.” He continued by strengthening his argument: “But this is reversed racism; it means denying history. We are European, but remember there has been a process of Indo-Europeanization [of all people]; no nation is just European,” (Vasile, interview, 2017) he said reflecting upon the complexity of identity.

While enthusiastically arguing in favor of the Roma – India connection, and supporting the possible recognition of Roma as Indian diaspora, Vasile also underscored that this recognition is only symbolical, without many political, social or economic implications: “Recognition [as Indian diaspora] is symbolical. India will become an economic power in the future decades, and it would be beneficial [for the Roma].” Immediately, he added:

“However our [Roma] political efforts should be focused on strengthening the ties and bettering the relationship between the majority and us here within European states. In this sense India can facilitate Roma integration. Thus, Roma would be a different kind of diaspora. (...) India’s trajectory can inspire the Roma, who could take similar steps, from their own elites.” (Vasile, interview, 2017)

The activist and academic Delia Grigore, shared the similar concerns during our interview in 2017, and commented that the Minister Swaraj and Mr. Damjanovic’s support for the recognition of the Roma as Indian diaspora was lacking serious political commitment. She defined them as “rhetorical movements” viable only the “symbolic

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level.” Furthermore, she critically engaged with the events organized by the Indian embassy in Bucharest in connection with the Roma, as being superficial and hastily prepared. While she admitted that having the support of a powerful state, such as India is important for the Roma, she raised concerns that European politicians might support the Roma-India connection for rather different (and possible dangerous) reasons, such as possibility of sending the Roma to India. She would rather like to see the practical implications of these political maneuvers, and she declared herself in favor of real support from the Indian government towards Roma initiatives, such as the Roma museum.

On a similar tone, Necula added:

“Actually, any common grounds between groups are beneficial. It would be best if Indians would learn from the Roma what it means to survive in a hostile environment, without castes, militaries, dignitaries, religions, educational institutions. And, of course, the Roma would have plenty to learn from Indians.”

On a tougher note than Grigore, Necula pointed out that the Indian-Roma connection is a political strategy. Different from Vasile who saw this a mutually beneficial project, Necula perceived it as one that would benefit the Indian politicians, and not the Roma communities:

From a political perspective, of course, I understand why India needs 12 million of its “diaspora” in Europe, why a Roma PM believes is Indian, why some Romanian Roma politicians speak about their “Indianism.” It is called instrumentalization of a faraway origin for satisfying current goals. The paternalistic, pathetic approach of Indian politicians, following the biblical myth of “the lost son”, is not the best promise for developing Roma communities in Europe. Quite the opposite: it is a return to uncertain and insignificant origins (and in Romanian to send someone to their origin is not at all good [reference to a well-known Romanian curse phrase]).” (Necula, personal correspondence, March, 2018)

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While rather unforgiving, his statement forces the analysis towards the political acts of the other parties that participated into the Roma-Indian initiative, and asks for reflection on the reasoning that the Indian government and political elites, might determine them to support an unlikely (or unwilling) diaspora.

Indian Side: Bharat project

Aiming to reveal the political connection of these initiatives, I pursued interviews with the Indian consulate, and asked the vice consuls Ray about the 2016 initiatives. He, alike the journalist from *Pioneer*, was quick to place this statement in the renewed Indian (post-Congress party) political context:

“Before the present government came to power [BJP party], since August 2014, it was not much interest shown to this subject. Even though we know that historically Roma community comes from India, South Asian continent, because of the exodus of so called Roma people from Punjab, from other part of India. This has been a long time back, 11- 13th century. Those days, India was not the India of our times. But after the coming of the new government [i.e. BJP], there is a permanent shift in the thinking. We are noticing them saying that ‘they [i.e. Roma] are from India, they are welcome to come back, bring their expertise, they are ambassadors of India who have been through such hardships of life.’” (Ray, interview, 2017)

Using the image of the prodigal son, with which Necula sharply engaged critically, his Excellency continued:

“They have been through so many roots, places before the reached the final decision of where they are. They are welcome to come back and share their experience with the original people, with the people from where they felt, and also to feel the fraternity of the people, or the ancestors. This was the pulse, the feeling. To say otherwise that if you want to come back. They are almost two million people, if you come back we are not overcrowded. It is like two teaspoons of water in the ocean. But it is indirectly said, not directly.” (Ibid)

However, similarly to Vasile, Necula and Grigore, Ray also acknowledged the symbolic nature of these transcontinental commitments: “Of course we know nobody is

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coming. Everybody is settled in our ways, and they will not come back. But in case there is a pull back factor it will not be problem.” (Ibid) However, even though this connection might not materialize in a migratory movement, Ray asserted that the Indian government’s commitment for the Roma communities in Europe could translate in supporting activities, exchanges and furthering research.

As the issue of political timing has been brought up consistently during this research process, the following question begs to be asked: How come these initiatives were brought to the fore now, under the BJP leadership? What is different about this political context that empowers and furthers the conversation on the possible recognition of the Roma as Indian diaspora?

“This [BJP] government is active on many aspects. They want to build sections of people, who will be guarantors, will speak good things [about India] and will take the principles and policies of this new government aboard. So Roma community is abroad, can be someone who if you go back historically we are the same people. If we aspect now, they will be our ambassadors! That is it,” answered Ray. (Ibid)

While having millions of ambassadors, as Ray suggested, is an added advantage of any nation, any time, it is not a coincidence that we have the current Indian government interested in expending the concept of Indian diaspora as to recognize the Roma present across Europe. This is a part of the larger Bharat project, of portraying an India that is unique, and unitary, whose people - even those who left a long time ago from the “motherland “ - still keep the traditions and the Indian flame burning.

This possible disaporic recognition is a part of a larger Indian national project, which reflects both on a past time, on an ancient mythical time of greatness and on a glorious future yet to come. Typically the glorious past does not even begin to compare with the meek present, but if conditions are proper it could be replicated in the future.

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The nationalist present is seen as a problem, as a stage to overcome. Within the Indian context, nationalism refers a larger Bharat, to the glory of the nation before the invaders, when its riches and traditions were at their pick, acknowledged and envied by many. To this glory the present lays still, but the future of India looks bright. Being a booming a super power, the fastest growing economy in the world, all this will be restored in the future.

First, the diaspora in general, and the Roma people present in Europe in particular add a new dimension to this new constitution of Indian nationalism. The Indian diaspora is typically described as “the other one percent of the Americans,” (Chakravorty, Kapur, Singh, 2016), as “the model immigrant” etc. While India might have its struggles, the successful and numerous Indian diaspora stands tall as a proof of the past and as hope for the future. While many of the Indians in India are eager to embrace the other (Western) ways, the typical diasporic Indian communities keep the traditions, another sign of India’s national greatness.

The Roma people’s lives and willingness to keep the “Indian traditions” while living in Europe for many centuries legitimizes traditions, and participates in creating the image of India is greater than its territory, than is physical borders, than its billion people. It shows that even when present on another continent, separated from the place of their origin, the Indian identity is desirable and accepted.

Second, the language of the external affairs minister, Sushma Swaraj deserves attention. She calls the Romani people “children of India,” implying that their mother is India, mother India or Bharat Mata. This discourse emphasizes the deep, organic connection, and refers to the love and protection that India has towards its members.

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This approach criticized by Necula (2018) as “paternalistic, pathetic, (...) following the biblical myth of ‘the lost son’,” is a dear political symbol used in political discourses to portray the nation as a living creature, who needs to be loved and respected. The image of India as the mother, as Bharat Mata, the great mother, is by no means new, but part of the national symbolism used from late 19th century onwards.

According to Carl Olson analysis, although not the first author to emphasize the mother for political purposes, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (or Chatterjee) (1838-94) was the first to transform Bharat Mata into a fullyfledged Hindu goddess and symbol of India. Using the image of a mother in distress Chattopadhyay depicts India as a feminine, organic, endowed with human characteristics, as suffering as a person through difficult times, with her children indifferent to her sufferings. This personification contours further in 1875 Chattopadhyay composes *Bande Mataram*⁹, a song that identifies India as a female and a divinity, as a goddess figure. This song used by many activists, becomes “an anthem for Indian nationalists in their struggle for liberation from British hegemony” (Olson!) and coins the symbol of India as Bharat Mata and enters the Indian nationalist fervent imagination and vocabulary:

“Do you see this map? It is not a map but the portrait of Bharat Mata: its cities and mountains rivers and jungles form her physical body. All her children are her nerves, large and small...Concentrate on Bharat as a living mother, worship her with nine-fold bhakti.” Aurobindo Ghosh (1905)¹⁰

This powerful image was appropriated by political leaders and was chosen as the "national song" in 1937 by the Indian National Congress. This image is still used today to

⁹ <http://www.sanyal.com/india/vande.html>; accessed 12 April 2019

¹⁰ <https://scroll.in/article/805247/history-lessons-how-bharat-mata-became-the-code-word-for-a-theocratic-hindu-state>; accessed March 10, 2017

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express the state's interest for its members abroad, as an attentive and carrying mother pays attention to its lost children.

Political implications

Integrating the Roma in this image of Bharat Mata has a powerful yet symbolic, impact. A de facto recognition implies awarding legal status to the Roma, and giving them Overseas Citizen of India (OCI)¹¹ or a similar status. This legal status awards its recipient with a series of benefits, similar to those who are citizens of India (except political rights).¹² However this apparently small change within the legislation, if implemented for the Roma people would open up a Pandora box of citizenship rights in the region. From the very clear dilemma of how do you prove your Indian origin and Roma ethnicity, to what would be the process of application for PCI for European Roma, to the questions of: why Roma and not other people with ancestral ties in India such as Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan citizens?

To complicate the matter further if hypothetically (and unrealistically) Roma would be recognized and integrated within the Indian society, they are not integrated in a horizontal society, but one that is hierarchically marked. And as genetic studies mostly place the Roma ancestry within the Dalit and/or Adivasi communities,¹³ as they “displayed the closest connection of Romani haplotypes with the traditional scheduled

¹¹ <https://www.in.ckgs.us/oci/>; accessed 12 April, 2019

¹² <https://www.immihelp.com/nri/overseascitizenshipindia/oci-benefits.html>; accessed 12 April, 2019

¹³ “Roma gypsies in Britain and Europe are descended from "dalits" or low caste "untouchables" who migrated from the Indian sub-continent 1,400 years ago, a genetic study has suggested” by Dean Neslon, in European Roma descended from Indian 'untouchables', genetic study shows from the on line Edition of the Telegraph, 3 December 2018. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/9719058/European-Roma-descended-from-Indian-untouchables-genetic-study-shows.html> accessed 13 April, 2019

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caste and scheduled tribe population groups of northwestern India” (Rai et al, 2012). This integration process might not be one of straightforward movement for the European Roma, but one that would possibly place the Roma in a difficult position¹⁴.

Faced with this surmounting amount of questions and tensions, the formal recognition of the Roma as Indian diaspora tends to be left at its incipient, symbolic stage, aimed to contribute to BJP’s political agenda that emphasizes national belonging beyond the state’s physical borders. Ultimately, this is a political quest, one that just like in the European case is initiated and discussed at the level of the elites, just like all other nationalist projects.

Conclusion

It might take a life time and more for the conversation of recognition the Roma as Indian diaspora to move beyond its symbolic stage. However, what these conversations and reflections on the part of the Indian and Roma elites bring to view is the process through which political acts are developing using a nationalist framework. While nationalism often comes under critical scrutiny, it can be also be analyzed as a movement to centralize power and secure long political life of groups aiming for recognition, being that in Europe (as in the case of the Roma) or globally as it is the case with India.

The recognition of the Roma as part of the Indian diaspora implies their recognition by a state as its original people. Without a state recognition Roma are faced with making diverse (and at times divergent) claims onto the international community.

¹⁴ The social position of the possible Indian ancestors of the Roma is a contested territory. And a site for debate. While there are Adivasi and Dalit groups in contemporary India identified as “Gypsy,” some scholars identify the original group in the cast of “Chatryia,” (Lee, 2009) as warriors and kings. This royal background is not atypical in nationalist projects that envision a glorious past, to which the present does not measure, but the future surely will.

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Without being recognized by a state it is difficult to have their voices heard and support received. The movement towards the centralization of Roma resources and political power serves to supplement this gap in political clout. Centralization under the idea of a “nation,” while not that one of the nation-state comes close consolidation legitimacy and political visibility. In this process some Roma leaders find the Indian’s state support profitable, while others find it deterrence from their European orientated goals.

Roma leaders who support their diasporic recognition by the Indian state are found in the situation of “strange bed-fellows,” in which two different parties come together to further their own independent goals through a common act that is meant to lead to their individual (as in separate) access to legitimacy and power. While India’s nationalist discourse follows the classical steps of a nationalist project, the Roma elites are still to come together and decide upon making (or not) use of their point of (presumed) Indian origin.

If Roma leaders do not seek Indian diasporic recognition, and they do not emphasize their Indian origin, they have a fragile nationalist project, which fails to fit the definition of a nation. However, as in many cases, the fact that political processes, communities or actors do not fit well our definitions, it does not mean they fail at their existence or acts. These cases point out the limitations of our definitions, showing that maybe it is time to change the definition to accommodate diverse groups and processes:

“A discourse supporting the idea of Roma as an Indian diaspora could potentially place the Roma closer to the current definitions of a diaspora. Yet, that would be far from the reality, as although many Roma recognize their Indian origins, they do not manifest a collective memory of India as a homeland or the “myth” to return. More so, forcing a discourse on an Indian diaspora could also affect negatively [Roma] communities across the world, as within the current nationalist and extremist contexts, I would not be surprised if some would send us to ask for rights where we ‘came from.’ Thus, we do need to reimagine the concept of a

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diaspora and to discuss the place of the Roma in that framework, and basically, to put forward new attributes of a diaspora. Hence, I would still suggest a conversation about Roma as a global diaspora, dispersed many times from places they would acknowledge, jointly or independently, as their homelands, but still passing on a common historical, cultural, and linguistic heritage.” (Matache, personal correspondence, April 16, 2018)

Matache’s view of a diaspora challenges Brubaker’s classical definition, implying that “the homeland” “as an authoritative source of value, identity and loyalty” is no longer needed” (Brubaker, 1995:5). But if we are to follow Matache’s view, homeland will become plural, i.e. “homelands,” with different Roma communities referring to their different places of origin. This new approach challenges the second criteria of a diaspora, but still allows us “to speak of diasporic stances, projects, claims, idioms” (Brubaker, 1995:13). Furthermore, accepting this new understanding of diaspora, might open up novel possibilities to redefine communities, to create notions of being without emphasis on origin, without looking backwards, towards a lost homeland, to develop new political paths and processes that emphasize transnational access to rights.

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