

FORUM

STRATEGIZING ROMA IDENTITY FOR INDIA-EU COLLABORATION: STRENGTHENING THE NRIS

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ABSTRACT *It is an established observation that the Roma have been one of the world's most impoverished, persecuted and marginalized communities, yet also the least understood. While there have been some estimates of a global Roma population of 20 million, these communities are dispersed throughout several countries in Europe, Asia and the Americas. This article concerns the European Roma and the issues which engage them, the most salient being identity. It seeks to find congruence between the socioeconomic empowerment processes of Dalit (oppressed) communities in India with those of the Roma. There is a historical connection between the Romani language groups and north Indian languages – indeed it is from India where Roma communities are known to have originally migrated from. This article argues for the value of reviving these links by turning the argument around and advocating that aspects of the contemporary Indian experience of socioeconomic empowerment could be applied to Roma empowerment in Europe within the framework of the EU's National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS). This could benefit India through interaction with the Global Roma Diaspora and lead to a win-win situation whereby India would equally obtain advantage from learning about EU-centered models of inclusion. Accordingly, the robust sharing of good practices could benefit both sides.*

KEYWORDS: *Roma; marginalized; Dalits; empowerment; NRIS; Diaspora*

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BACKGROUND

Imagine for a moment that the age-old persecution of Roma communities in Europe² had ceased and that they were integrated as fully fledged “citizens” into the mainstream societies of the host countries; that they were no longer marginalized nor subject to xenophobia, racial slurs or extreme poverty, and no longer seen as socially deviant characters. On the contrary, their skills, both innate and accrued (as part of their social capital as well as through government intervention), were productively utilized in a society where they too stood to gain as equal members. Such a vision seems an ever distant dream when one reviews the trajectory of the history of the marginalization of the Roma until the present day. This paper puts forth some proposals for how India might assist the Roma in their quest for social justice.

The Roma have been persecuted over centuries since their entry into Europe and have been forced to eke out a living on the margins of society or to render manual, and in some cases slave-like, service in countries such as Romania³. Attempts at assimilation have been sporadic starting with the Habsburgs in the eighteenth century and peaking with the proletarianization of the Roma under the communist system⁴, and their becoming part of the labor force for soviet-style industrial production.

This exclusion led, in the 1960s and 1970s, to a backlash as numerous Roma Sinti activists and NGOs originating in Germany spread out over Europe mobilizing in the areas of human rights, social awareness and cultural capital issues (viz. the spread of education, promotion of a common language, culture and heritage), which saw the beginnings of solidarity amongst the Roma, often centered on identity politics and forms of what Spivak describes as “strategic essentialism” (Landry – Maclean 2016). This crystallized in the first International Romani Union (IRU) gathering, otherwise known as the World Romani Congress held in London in 1971 which saw the Romani flag

2 This study is primarily based on the author’s personal experiences and primary data collected during a period of doctoral research in Hungary and India. No accurate census of the Roma has been conducted in any country, in part due to non- or poor ethnic monitoring and/or weak self-ascertainment

3 The Roma arrived first in Romania among all central and western European countries sometime in the 14th-15th centuries and were rendered slaves in the provinces of Wallachia and Moldavia. They later migrated to other provinces and outside the country until they were bonded to a form of slavery formerly little known to them. Slavery was formally abolished in Romania in the 1860s. Currently the Roma population in Romania is the largest in the region at an estimated 2.3 million.

4 This applies particularly to the Roma living in Central and Eastern Europe who lived for nearly 45 years when these countries were under soviet influence until their liberation in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

being adopted with the Indian Ashok Chakra (cart wheel) depicted at the center (Acton 1974). This has remained the Roma emblem to this day⁵ despite protests from fringe Roma intellectuals who have objected to the adoption of an Indian emblem because they wanted to negate the Indian origins of the Roma and identify them purely as a European group (Acton 2004). This event also marked the beginning of Roma solidarity as a transnational community capable of promoting the Roma as a single community in a pan-European sense and acting on their own governments and regional institutions as a pressure group (McGarry 2011)⁶.

With the departure of the Soviets from the erstwhile Communist bloc territories and the Soviet Union's consequent break-up, the level of social and economic deprivation of the Roma increased a great deal. In the last decade of the twentieth century, the plight of the Roma particularly caught the attention of the European Union (EU). Persecuted socially, marginalized economically and undervalued politically by the emerging neo-liberal societies of Central and Eastern Europe- themselves emerging from the vestiges of a state-dominated socialist society- they were thrown to the fringes and furthermore subjected to hate politics by almost all sections of the society (viz. governance bodies, extreme-right political parties, media and the mainstream population).

It is surprising that despite the numerous Roma NGO bodies and activists in Europe who work for the Roma cause⁷ as well as pan-European organizations that lobby national governments on behalf of the Roma, and despite ample funds being separately disbursed to member countries by the EU to promote the implementation of the National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS), any benefits that have accrued to the Roma in real terms are not perceptible (Kostka 2013). Moreover, periodic assessments conducted by the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) indicate very little progress in several aspects of Roma inclusion and empowerment on the ground⁸. This claim is also borne out by assessments by Roma leaders on the ground as well as in surveys conducted by Roma researchers (Rovid 2012; Rostas – Ryder 2012; Mirga 2014).

5 The Ashok Chakra was adopted as part of the Indian tricolor (national flag) at the time of India's independence on 15 August 1947.

6 The author posits that although the Roma do possess a transnational identity, this is "highly fragmented and contested". See McGarry (2011)

7 The "Roma cause" is broadly meant to signify the inclusion and empowerment of the Roma in the light of the core objective of the EU-driven NRIS.

8 For selected findings on the Second EU Minorities and Discriminatory Survey (EU-MIDIS II) see <http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2016/eumidis-ii-roma-selected-findings>

With the benefits of the Decade of Roma inclusion flowing into the NRIS⁹, and with the constant pressure of EU on the member states to prudently utilize funds meant for the Roma, the awareness and agency concerning self-development amongst the Roma population has been augmented (McGarry 2011). Being part of the European Open Method of Coordination (EUOMC)¹⁰, EU member countries are also called upon to frame their national policies to facilitate integration and accelerate the process of the socioeconomic empowerment of the Roma in respect of the four pillars laid down by the EU; namely, education, employment, healthcare and housing (EC 2010).

OPPORTUNITY FOR INDIA

We may begin with the postulate that the inhuman conditions associated with the Roma in the public and media imagination as well as governmental thinking could be gradually dissipated if the Roma were empowered to participate in their own development by applying their own experience and knowledge sharing. Thinkers such as Ledwith and Springett (2010) have advocated community participation in grassroots planning¹¹. In my view this could be the basis for Roma inclusion and empowerment. Experiences of countries which have succeeded in raising the levels of socioeconomic empowerment and political participation of marginalized communities should be brought in as reference markers. India in this sense could be of value as it has been able to develop some expertise in harnessing the development and empowerment of marginalized communities at the grassroots level.

Since India's independence and even prior to that, there has been large-scale mobilization of marginalized (Dalit) communities under various leaders,

9 While the Decade of Roma inclusion was convened at an unofficial level among like-minded countries of Central and Eastern Europe with sizeable Roma populations, the NRIs was mandated by the EU for all member states.

10 The EUOMC was meant to generate coordination among all the member states in terms of sharing best practices and building collective data about the various objectives of NRIS and thus reaffirm their position in the Roma empowerment processes and build solidarity amongst Roma by taking advantage of the NRIS being applied to a group of countries, all under the ERU umbrella. It was also meant to be a self-supervisory mechanism for EU Member States.

11 10 basic principles of Roma inclusion, otherwise known as the "Roma platform" have been laid down as part of NRIS for Roma empowerment. These are: constructive, pragmatic and non-discriminatory policy; explicit, but not exclusive, targeting; intra-cultural approach; awareness of the gender dimension; transfer of evidence-based policies; use of EU instruments; involvement of regional and local authorities' involvement in civil society, and active participation of the Roma. See Rovid (2013).

notably Ambedkar and Gandhi, which was followed by various provisions being enshrined in the Indian Constitution to empower these communities in the post-independence period. This has given way to broad-based “affirmative action” policy that has led to the guaranteed representation of Dalit groups in Panchayat Raj Institutions (Mathur 2013)¹², State Assemblies and Parliament as well as job placements and admission into educational institutions (Pai 2013). This is administered through the Ministry for Scheduled Castes and Tribes in the central (federal) Government as well as their counterpart departments in all states. Moreover, various statutory bodies have been formed and specific laws have been enacted for the socioeconomic empowerment of SC/ST communities in India.

The above provisions have given constitutional support to the empowerment program for Dalit communities and, with various state-and grassroots-supported measures undertaken by state governments, have further helped to strengthen their institutional and social support. Additionally, various economic support measures aimed at the grassroots level have helped with economically empowering the former and integrating them as members of society.

It is a truism that despite more than seven decades of Indian independence, a significant proportion of citizens live below the poverty level and the lot of marginalized communities remains extremely neglected in several pockets notwithstanding government-induced welfare programs that target so-called “below the poverty line” (BPL) families (Ahluwalia – Little 2012). The current neo-liberal policies that are being applied to social reforms are grounded on the axiom of capitalism-driven social development whereby the state plays a minimalist role¹³. Herein lies the fundamental contradiction in the Indian society: to reconciling the co-existence of the emerging nouveau riche classes (Crabtree 2018) with the poorest sections of the society who indeed constitute nearly a quarter of the country’s population. Here, the state, despite its minimalist stance, has to play a socially balancing role and thus support the marginalized communities through both economic reforms as well as constitutional and legislative measures.

12 PRI consist of the Gram Panchayat (Village Council) at the lowest tier of governance and Zilla Parishad (District Council) atop that. Together they constitute the governance procedure for the village/municipality and represent the lowest political set-up in a decentralized democratic system as exists in India.

13 This is encapsulated in the Modi government’s dictum of “maximum governance and minimum government”, which has since become a guideline for governance in India today.

CONTEMPORIZING THE DALIT-ROMA CONNECTION

Having discussed the constitutional framework of affirmative support measures for Dalit communities in India, I would now like to explore the possibility of sharing empowerment processes between the Indian and European contexts in order to find common ground. Comparison between the two diverse experiences can be built around the contention of a few scholars about the Roma's transnational identity and lack of a 'motherland' (McGarry 2011: 285). It is further argued that the implications of constructing loyalty for the host state may, a) invite recrimination from the governments of those states, and b) absolve host governments of the responsibility for the care and protection of their Roma communities (Ibid: 284). However as pointed out by certain other scholars, asserting the Roma's trans-national identity would in a way rationalize the lack of proper engagement on the part of EU Member States in terms of accentuating the integration of these communities into their respective societies (Dunajeva 2015). On the other hand, such broad-based internationalist conceptions of identity would promote a pan-European solidarity (in contrast to narrow nationalist perceptions) and fit well with the discourse on widening the scope of Roma political solidarity and empowerment processes.

Contrasting with the contemporary political scenario in Europe, where extraneous factors of immigration and terrorism cloud the mainstream perceptions about the Roma in the EU member states – and where such factors are held to be directly related to growing Roma impoverishment- the latter tend to receive the most sordid treatment at the hands of their own governments. Furthermore, the scaremongering and "Roma-baiting" common among extreme-right wing politicians who seem to be in ascendance perversely fuels adverse public perception and defeats moves towards their empowerment notwithstanding the supportive policies of the EU in this regard. It is therefore not surprising to find that current right-wing governments deny the Roma holocaust for fear of furthering political solidarity amongst the Roma and their NGO sympathizers¹⁴.

14 In recent months the Fidesz government in Hungary has completely denied that the Roma were ever Holocaust victims, as attested by senior Minister Balogh's statement quoted in local press reports. See Bayer (2018).

PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE ROMA

It would be pertinent at this point to discuss how the Roma are perceived in India. It seems that there is very little existing knowledge about the Roma in India. Except for a few anthropological studies (Rishi 1971; Shashi 1990) and a few organizations that promote Romani studies¹⁵, there is very little in terms of scientific and sustained knowledge about the Roma, nor their Indian connection. Nor is there coverage about them in the national media or in school or college textbooks whereas such engagement would not only be desirable but essential as part of Indian historiography. There is no denying that the Roma were part of a historical migration process from India nearly 1200-1000 years ago (Hancock 2018) and this knowledge could be imparted among the educated class of India as well as incorporated into academic curricula as part of ethnic, immigration and Diaspora studies. As such, there have been very few studies about this unique migration process which has accompanied conquest and slavery. Appropriate advocacy efforts could therefore be made among intellectuals, pedagogues, policy makers and the like. Seminars could be organized in India as well as overseas through Indian diplomatic missions to explore the possibility of engaging with the Roma. Obviously care needs to be taken not to undermine the nationalist affiliations of the Roma who see themselves first as nationals of the countries in which they live, but this still leaves space for the Roma and Indians to celebrate their common links. Thus while ensuring that Roma continue to maintain their local identities of nationality, language, and even the acquired culture of these countries, a fine balance could be struck between their affiliation to the land they live in with the cultural and educational efforts made by the government of India through its representation abroad as well as cultural organizations as regards fostering such links.

ROMA FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF INDIAN MIGRATION

Here we may be stepping into perilous waters. The salient question is, would it be advisable for India to appropriate the Roma as part of its heritage or not? This would amount to laying a direct claim to this older diaspora of

15 The Institute of Romani Studies, Chandigarh set up by Dr W.R. Rishi and Roma Studies and Heritage, Delhi founded by Dr S.S. Shashi are the only two organizations which have generated a sustained interest in the Roma. However, a right-wing Hindu organization named Antar Rashtriya Sahyog Parishad (ARSP), based in Delhi, organized an international Roma conference in February 2016 which was attended by nearly 30 overseas Roma delegates. A similar exercise was conducted by the same organization in January 2019.

some 20 million odd persons dispersed practically throughout the world. India boasts of several diasporas, the oldest recognized one officially dating to the early nineteenth century, comprised of indentured labor migrants. This is followed by the not-so-old diaspora of the early twentieth century involving railroad workers, petty business persons and the like, and the more recent one of the mid-twentieth century involving skilled workers migrating to western countries (e.g. doctors, engineers and scientists) and non-skilled (mostly blue collar workers) to the Middle East and South East Asian countries. Now, to add one more diaspora, also one of a much older vintage, may not be a politically viable proposition and may complicate India's relations with the countries who as such have difficulties handling the Roma in their territories. The safe option is to recognize that the Roma were part of the historical migration out of India, as attested by well known Roma experts¹⁶ and having done that, to work on soft areas such as education and culture to reaffirm the Roma's current identity which would help build a pan-European personality. Not that the Roma would ever want to barter their current nationality and ways of living in their country of habitation for India but the latter could play the role of an older master ancient civilization to which the Roma could find some heritage links and reinforce these. The reverse may or may not be true, in the sense of India gaining some instant gratification out of playing the "Roma card" but it could certainly add to the moral high ground that India has asserted even before its independence under the policies of stalwarts like Gandhi and Nehru.

Such modalities then need to be worked out within the framework of modern day international relations and India's broad-based relations with Europe. To repeat, would it pose a danger to these relations if the Roma took India for their distant motherland? Would this inflame right-wing passions in Europe, mixed up in the contemporary cauldron of the backdrop of economic migration and refugee formation and increasingly make the Roma a target of their xenophobia? Can India adopt a common position towards Roma communities across Europe as part of its distant diaspora?

How can India make the situation a win-win proposition: this is the crux of the matter which in terms of international relation building would make the Roma proposition a viable entity. In addition to the aforementioned, our contention

16 Eminent Roma expert (and himself a distinguished Roma) Ian Hancock attests strongly to the Indian roots of the Roma and suggests that the Roma need to know their Indian past so as to move forward as a community with unity and solidarity (based on the present author's interview with him on March 15, 2018 at his office in the University of Austin-Texas), as well as from his eminently readable tract, *Points of Departure: Routes of the Ancestors out of India*). See references.

is that the most constructive, yet sensitive, step would be for India to help the Roma by seeking to share good practices in governance and empowerment. In this the example of the Dalits, who could be categorized as their counterparts, and their relative success story of empowerment could serve as a marker.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND FINANCIAL INSTRUMENTS

Many Roma experts have posited the need for inclusive development and community participation (Ledwith – Sprigett 2010; Acton – Ryder 2013). However, this strategy has not borne visible fruit largely due to non-engagement with, and a certain indifference of, the Roma elite and local leadership towards engaging the Roma in a bottom-up approach, as well as lack of awareness/advocacy for improving community development as a tool for empowerment (Klahn 2015). Traditionalist Roma leaders are sometimes seen as setting an agenda for the community in their power-grabbing mentality and tendency to prefer hierarchical power structures. This again reinforces the earlier conditioning of Roma to ghettoize, or to remain at the lower end of a political hierarchy with no aspirations to engage in community empowerment. Moreover, institutions like the Hungarian National Roma Minority Self-Government are conspicuous in their omission of Roma women in decision-making positions, although it has been clearly identified that women play as important a role as men in the Roma household. This contrasts sharply with female representation in Indian/local government bodies where women are given due representation, (a minimum of 33% seats in local government bodies, as per a legislative order issued by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India in 1990).

It needs to be acknowledged that although there has been a trend towards greater awareness through education amongst the Roma and the formation of Roma elites (Gheorghe 2015), this has still not reached a critical mass. The numbers of the latter are still too small compared to the total Roma population. It needs mention here that a community development project observed by the author in a backward district of Odisha (India), namely the OTELP has been running for more than a decade with full community participation in both policy-making as well as the implementation of sustainable development programmes at the grass roots level. The goal of the project is to enable poor tribal households to sustainably ensure their livelihood and food security through promoting a

“more efficient, equitable, self-managed, optimum use of natural resources”.¹⁷ Initially implemented in seven of the most seriously Maoist affected districts of Odisha, the OTELP has been running for well over a decade with full community participation in both policy-making as well as the implementation of sustainable development programs at the grass roots level. A sister project, OTELP Plus, was launched in January 2013 in the tribal district of Kandhamal.

The important components of OTELP are a) community empowerment and management, b) beneficiary skill development, c) capacity building, d) land and water management, e) agriculture and horticulture development, livestock and aquaculture, f) forest management, and g) community infrastructure development. It is therefore clear that the scope of OTELP covers almost all sustainable livelihood measures in addition to skill building.

Replicated in several districts of Odisha and some other states of India this scheme, with local modifications and infrastructural availability, could be thought of as an example of good practice that could be shared with the Roma in the Hungarian context¹⁸. Moreover, since the governance infrastructure in respect of the Roma is present in all EU member countries that have been mandated to implement the NRIS, the comparability of certain Dalit-specific areas in the State of Odisha (India) with the Roma of Hungary could be taken forward as part of the NRIS with systemic support and an economy-of-scale effect in terms of costs and personnel. Additionally, a series of advocacy measures could be undertaken in which various other socioeconomic empowerment measures that befit the Roma communities could also be taken up. Instruments such as micro-finance disbursement as well as Self-Help Group (SHG) schemes have been extremely successful in the Indian rural context for women’s groups (Tapan 2010). Both these schemes have been operational in an ad hoc fashion over a period of time since the 1960s in Central Europe, with mixed results.¹⁹

Micro finance (Yunus 1989) pioneered by Nobel Prize winning economist from Bangladesh, Muhammad Yunus, has been described as a key means of

17 Quoted from a publication by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the Odisha Tribal Empowerment and Livelihood Programme (OTELP), Government of Odisha, 2016. The OTELP has been implemented by the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Department of the Government of Odisha since 2004 under the Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA) in 10 districts of Odisha among extremely poor and marginalized tribal communities.

18 I have specifically mentioned about Hungary because of my research interest in the Hungarian Roma who have been studied in terms of their comparability to the Dalit communities of India. Furthermore, having served in Hungary as India’s Ambassador (2013-15), I have had the opportunity to observe the Hungarian political system from close quarters. This issue in Hungary, host to several regional Roma-related bodies and one of the founder-initiators of the EU’s NRIS, has sustained my interest through my doctoral research.

19 See Ivanov – Tursaliyev (2006).

empowering rural women and was extensively implemented in Bangladesh. The scheme basically involves the disbursal of low cost loans mostly to rural women who come together by forming Self Development groups (SDGs). These groups are mostly run by women and are profitable as the investments that are made are small and the products they dealt with are diverse. The SDGs generate employment for rural women while giving them direct access to the village markets and cooperatives. They also encourage the target groups to network and develop businesses from small to medium-sized enterprises. In all these activities, a cooperative bank on the model of Grameen Bank (Rural Bank) is involved and grants are made by the state on the basis of merit and demand (Faizi 2009).

In this context, it is not out of place to point out the necessity of setting up a bank to assist the Roma along the lines of an Agricultural Credit Bank or Grameen Bank such as those found in India and Bangladesh. The proposed bank could be headquartered in a Roma specific Central European country or even Brussels, with branches in similarly placed countries. Since the EU has been the driving force for Roma empowerment, it is essential that this kind of banking has the approbation of the EU and its personnel are commissioned by the EU to work in various parts of Europe wherever the Roma are numerous. However, such initiatives could be implemented on a pilot basis and replicated depending on the success of the latter.

THE NEED FOR THE INVOLVEMENT OF THE ROMA IN DECISION-MAKING

Against a background of exclusion and disempowerment, calls for the Roma to be directly involved in decision making among pan-European organizations have become more vocal. The European Commission has stated that “strategies should be designed, implemented and monitored in close cooperation and continuous dialogue with Roma civil society and regional and local authorities” (European Commission 2011:9). An emphasis on poverty alleviation strategies, including micro-credit, skill-building and low-level technology training could be an integral part of such policies. It is felt that social welfare measures such as the Public Works Programme (PWP) has been largely skills-unfriendly and designed to accumulate unproductive unskilled labor, which in the final instance would only relegate the Roma to the parallel market (Orban 2015).

I observed during my field visits to several Roma-concentrated areas of Hungary that while the majority of adult males join the PWP, and it does provide an ample income, due to inadequate skill-building these workers languish

thereafter in poorly-paid jobs and lack further opportunities for development and the accumulation of family income. With large families and wives generally confined to typical Roma homes, this leads to the alienation and the demotivation of the younger generation of Roma.

A principal obstacle to inclusive community development has been the high level of anti-Roma sentiment displayed by power elites at local and national levels, particularly by politicians with extreme right-wing ideologies. However, in the process of dialogue and negotiation, Roma have tended to seek “alternative strategies” calling for “engaged action” (Filchak – Skobla 2012). These have not been successful principally due to weak leadership and the lack of unity amongst the Roma and the absence of motivation of the Roma elites. Despite the presence of a multitude of Roma political parties on the ground, no political party has strong enough representation at the national level barring exceptions, such as those in Romania where one Roma representative is nominated to parliament, or in Hungary where a representative from the Roma National Council (the supreme national level Roma political organization), as one of the 13 national minority groups, is nominated to parliament but cannot take part in parliament sittings. This denotes a cosmetic political presence for the Roma in national legislatures with no effective political representation. It could be argued that the task confronting the Roma communities is to reassemble their forces, starting from grass roots organizations where they may have more strength in numbers, and build solidarity, thus ascending the ladder of political participation.

From the perspective of this discussion, a contextually suitable economic empowerment model could be developed to raise the standard of living of the Roma through skill-enhancement and the development of educational and technological standards to guarantee long-term employability and commensurate mobility within the EU countries. This would help validate the EUOMC among Member States who could also undertake burden-sharing in the true EU spirit (Meyer 2010). It is therefore essential for national governments to ensure that the marginalization and segregation of Roma in their respective societies are progressively reduced which will condition their gradual integration into the host societies. Their political representation at the national level would largely flow from their social integration and solidarity building.

In India, forms of community and social action based upon micro-finance, self-help and collectivity (cooperatives) are part of an important strategy to fight social exclusion. It has been estimated that more than a million SHGs have been formed in India (Tesoriero 2006). Given the efficacy of this strategy it has been demonstrated that while mitigating the effects of extreme poverty such as that which exists in India, collective strategies to upskill the marginalized, bridge the gender gap related to income generation, and generate social empowerment

through social and cultural capital could have transformative potential with regard to decision-making abilities and opportunities (Torri 2012). Such engagement, as pointed out above, has been advocated by the EU within the framework of the NRIS (EC 2011; Acton – Ryder – Rostas 2013).

However, in applying the instruments which have been successful in the Indian context, one has to be cautious about how they could also prove to be beneficial in the European context where many such schemes have floundered or proved short-lived²⁰. In Hungary, for example, it has been noted that a small Roma entrepreneur may need a micro-credit loan of several thousand euros, whereas a similarly placed Dalit entrepreneur in India would need barely a fraction of that to start a new small enterprise, depending on the economies of scale and forces of production, (i.e. cost of labor, land, operating costs, etc.). Similarly, profits generated from agro-business may be much less in Europe as compared to those in India because of the volumes involved and discrepancies in market conditions. Risks may be considerable in the European context since there would be no state guarantor or an agro-credit mechanism such as in India. Moreover, a lack of assets (collateral) or a poor credit history - which are common - may deter the Roma from accessing credit unlike the Dalit communities in India (Moulaert – Ailenei 2005). Despite teething problems encountered by SHGs and micro-enterprises among poor SCs or ST groups in India (Karunanithi 2013), they continue to work even without much hand-holding by the state, which may not be possible in the European context.²¹ Some economists have talked about “time banks” in Hungary, but these have only short-term success (Orban 2015; Primavera 2010). Such banks worked on the fundamental premise that social capital could be generated from marginalized communities, although there was no means of converting this social capital into economic capital which could have stimulated further growth among these communities.

INDIA’S POSITION FROM THE LENS OF TRANSFERABILITY

India thus far has been put forward as a reference country for the Roma in terms of its own experience with the subaltern communities who have some

20 For an excellent overview of the various financial instruments which have been prevalent in Hungary, see Orban, A (2015).

21 The author’s field visits to two predominantly tribal districts of Odisha state – Koraput and Kandhamal – pertinently highlighted that a little hand-holding for marginalized communities goes a long way, increasing income levels and the up-skilling potential of income earners in the family.

degree of sociocultural similarity. Since independence, India has provided constitutional support in the form of the legal framework under which the central and state governments have extended their support in various ways to the related communities. The “distant diaspora” factor also adds to the potential of considering the situation in India to be appropriate on terms of the sharing of best practices for the empowerment of marginalized communities. The fact that Roma communities are embedded in their respective host societies leaves no cause for concern that their integration and solidarity building will have to be encouraged and monitored by the countries through the related administrative and legal frameworks. The fact that these countries are EU members also leaves the door open for the NRIS to expand its scope for further reinforcing empowerment measures through streamlining and effectively supervising stimulus schemes.

However considering India as a reference country what could be an appropriate goal, is the further development of linkages in the areas of education and culture where both India and the countries concerned would stand to gain. This would open the door to the generation of cultural capital, the creation of skilled manpower, and technology dissemination through advocacy efforts, all of which could make the dispossessed more employable in their own countries.

Here we are looking at a win-win situation where both parties would collaborate in particular areas that would benefit their respective marginalized communities, largely in terms of further integration and empowerment. Such a goal could also generate cross-country and multidisciplinary studies. Second, with more knowledge and experience-sharing, India could assist in the conception of a viable model for Roma entrepreneurship, development and governance.

CONCLUSION

As the study contends, India stands to gain from its linkages with the Roma community in “soft” areas in relation to the generation of cultural capital which could, with additional skill building and technology dissemination and the application of the right economic instruments, further develop economic capital. This would be beneficial to the Roma, as well as India, in expanding the latter’s footprint. However, such policy would require careful crafting and imaginative handling so as to avoid problems relating to pre-existing relations with the countries concerned. This would dispel fears of displacement or attempts at obtaining dual citizenship while stabilizing the Roma in the mainstream societies which they inhabit. Strengthening Roma identity through the consolidation of cultural and economic capital would go a long way towards

reaffirming their solidarity and integration.

It is evident that the Roma would like to be European citizens first and foremost, while integrating fully into their respective societies. The India linkage could enhance their identity as a means of social integration and economic empowerment while creating “skill dividends” for them in their respective countries, and an exchange of best practices, partly through coordination among EU member states through EUOMC. This would help change the prevalent discourse of their being treated as different entities which otherwise produces no significant gain despite the substantial disbursement of financial, human and technological resources (Tanaka 2015; Rostas – Ryder 2012)²².

The Roma agenda additionally driven by NGOs and civil society bodies has hitherto not helped matters either (Dunajeva 2015). The time has therefore come to plan medium- and long- term strategies that reinforce Roma identity (while not disturbing or corrupting their ethnic identities and forms of behavior in any way), as a form of mid-course correction for the NRIS while using such linkages to foster cooperation between India and the Roma-specific countries of Europe in a value-for-all model.

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²² In an interview with Ian Hancock (March 15, 2018), the author was given to believe that much of this policy has created no tangible gains for the Roma community as policy was flawed from the beginning and administered by gadjes (non Roma) who have no knowledge of Roma lifestyles nor any idea of how to channelize the relevant resources.

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