

[Changes in Europe Aggravate Problems of the Gypsies](#)

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Language, Customs and Religious Practices Reveal the Hindu Origins Of Romany Nomads

A visit to the new Community of Romanies (Gypsies) in Skopje in the southeastern part of Yugoslavia is like entering a village in Rajasthan. At the Belgrade Railway Station I overheard Gypsy parents talking to their children in their native tongue, Romany. It reminded me of visiting a Bombay Chawl. The tone, the vocabulary were very familiar, and they used expressions like "duur jaa" ["go away"], a common chiding in Hindi. It was, in fact, through such language similarities that the Gypsies' Hindu origin (which included areas of Rajasthan) were initially discovered in 1763.

The Gypsies - they prefer to be called "Romany" or "Roma" from Rom, meaning "man" - are very much in the news these days in Europe. The London Times went so far as to proclaim "Gypsies are one of the worst skeletons in Europe's cupboard." Recently, the East German Parliament met in an emergency session to discuss how to cope with the influx of Gypsies taking advantage of eastern Europe's newly opened borders. The emergence of new nationalism in eastern Europe has unleashed many long-suppressed ethnic rivalries, but the problem of the Gypsies are of the utmost concern. There has been violence against them in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Romania.

For the last two months, HINDUISM TODAY has been monitoring the developments in the Gypsy world. I went to Yugoslavia to interview Rajko Djuri[?], the newly-elected president of the International Gypsy Community. Djuri[?], works for a famous newspaper group in Belgrade called Politica and is currently editor of NIN

magazine. As a seasoned poet and writer, his election as the president is seen to make an important bridge between the United Nations and other key organizations and otherwise illiterate Gypsies trying to survive in a world increasingly hostile to them. Perhaps it is time for Hindus to become more aware and concerned about the Roma, our wandering brethren.

India's Lost Tribes

The colorful and nomadic Gypsies in their horse - or truck-down caravans are an ancient but never assimilated part of Europe's communities. Many people still expect Gypsies to fit the stereotypical mold - exotically dressed, racially pure, whiling away their time step dancing and fortunetelling. The reality is less romantic. Many have been so severely harassed they have become desperate. They have shed much of their folksy color, as have we all. It is a little-known but fully-documented fact that half-a-million Gypsies died in Nazi death camps during World War II. Unlike the Jews, the Gypsies have never recovered from the catastrophe.

In addition to interviewing the Gypsies themselves, I met with Donald Kenrich, a Romany linguist who has traced the Hindu traditions still present in the Gypsies' way of life. He told me that the old Gypsy saying, "Our caravan is our family, and the world is our family" is a direct adaptation of the Sanskrit saying, "Vashudhev Kutumbakam." Another echoing of Hindu origins is, "Whether it is night or day, the door of a Gypsy is always open." There are hundreds of Hindi words in the Romany language, which diverged from a common ancestor about 1,000 years ago. Some cognate words are *sutti* (sleep), *sui* (needle), *tan* (place) and *sachchi* (true).

Kenrich has found traces of the Hindu way deeply buried in Gypsy customs. For example, the tradition of burning of caravan when a Gypsy dies is an extension of the cremation of the body. This started in the medieval times when the Gypsies were not allowed to cremate their bodies in the Hindu fashion.

Gypsies are divided into caste groups who mostly live in the separate areas or "mohallas." For example, there are mohallas of Loari (blacksmiths). There are Romanian Loaris and their counterparts in Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria. They have their own king, too - a post which is not hereditary. The crown is given to the

richest and wisest man in the Loari caste. There are 149 sub-castes among the Bulgarian Gypsies. Most of the marriages among Gypsies are pre-arranged by their parents, many of them before the birth of the betrothed. Sometimes matches are found in other villages and even in other countries.

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