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Journal for Cultural Research

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rcuv20

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To cite this article: Anchal Meena & Smita Jha (12 Mar 2025): ‘This matter is not just about the policy frameworks but the intricate tapestry of prejudices woven within the social fabric’: Roma community and Yaron Matras, an interview, Journal for Cultural Research, DOI: 10.1080/14797585.2025.2477518

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14797585.2025.2477518

Published online: 12 Mar 2025.

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JOURNAL FOR CULTURAL RESEARCH
https://doi.org/10.1080/14797585.2025.2477518

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'This matter is not just about the policy frameworks but the intricate tapestry of prejudices woven within the social fabric': Roma community and Yaron Matras, an interview

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ABSTRACT

The Roma have been a people most misunderstood and misrepresented in history. Professor Yaron Matras is an unwavering figure dismantling these myths about the Roma. He founded the Romani Project in 1999 and has authored meticulously researched books on Romani culture. To name a few, *I Met Lucky People, The Romani Gypsies, Open Borders Unlocked Cultures, Romani: A Linguistic Introduction, Language Contact*, are widely acknowledged. In this interview, the essential feature of Roma's uniqueness in the discourse on diaspora is expressed by Prof. Matras in dialectical terms of their non-territoriality and uncommonness. The Roma disqualifies appropriative measures of the non-Roma (gadze) socio-political hegemony through self-subjectivisation that Prof. Matras expresses through the comparativist socio-anthropological framework. The inclusion and exclusion of the Roma people are multilayered and complex, resulting in them being representative of a world community defying limitations of boundary, nation, religion, class, caste and so on. The Roma, in his words, escape even definitions of diaspora and rest somewhere in the liminal tensional space of self and the other, reclaiming 'systems of values' whose preservation through features of language, customs, kinship structures marks their resilience and sovereignty, while outlining their history and their presence without origin and return except that which is self-defined. With no land to profess, yet dispersed in almost every part of the world, the Roma continue to resist prejudices of the non-Roma (gadze) population. Roma activists have a long trail to lead.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 11 November 2024
Accepted 6 March 2025

KEYWORDS
Roma; Romani; 'mother tongue'; diaspora; 'other'; identity

There are diverse Roma groups, yet they appear unified based on a few commonalities that they share with each other. These commonalities more or less emerged from the said Indian origin of the Roma (Matras, 2015). In this context, can they be called an Indian diaspora?

Yaron Matras: The categorisation of the Roma community as an Indian diaspora is inherently subjective. Establishing on the definitional framework of diaspora given by notable scholars in the realm of social anthropology and cultural studies, such as Robin

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Cohen[1], Rogers Brubaker2, and Stuart Hall[3], being a diaspora neither necessitates a link with a specific geographical location nor the desire to return thereto. Although, it is a common phenomenon to observe that modern diasporas show a certain degree of interrelatedness based on their shared ancestral roots. However, the Roma community digresses from this pattern. While the activists working for the cause of the Roma community show an informed acknowledgement of a common origin, the general Roma population lacks awareness of the Indian association, and it does not act as a common theme.

Moreover, as Werbner[4] delineates the concept of 'community of co-responsibility', that transnational and trans-local communities maintain connections to exert collective political influence, this concept is uncommon in the case of Romani communities. In their case, individual activists assume a more prominent role than the collaborative community effort. While the last few decades have witnessed some leaps in diasporic networking, it has not expanded to a broad segment of Romani society. Few well-known diasporic communities, like the Jews and Armenians, exhibit a commitment towards maintaining inter-community connections and following collective endeavour. The Romani community's organisational fabric deviates remarkably from this characteristic; there are instances of intra-familial collaboration but not community-based interactions per se.

Finally, Brubaker expounds on the diasporic stance that a set of distinct practices demarcate them from the host communities. In this aspect, the Romanis indeed display traits congruent with a diasporic identity. However, it must be acknowledged that the Romani identity encompasses a myriad of sub-groups rather than a singular entity. To conclude, although the Romani communities upheld specific characteristics of the diaspora in a superficial manner- namely, a shared ancestral origin and dispersion- such features do not encompass the totality of what the diaspora scholars have strived to define.

Would it be correct to say that all the sub-groups of Roma have been able to maintain their well-structured Romani communities? If yes, what can be some reasons for this sustenance of ethnic ties?

Yaron Matras: The act of theorisation seems challenging in this context. The Romani communities are extensively dispersed along with diverse constituent segments; hence, asserting an unequivocal uniform behaviour to all of them becomes unfeasible.

However, it is germane to observe that the Romani language emerged as a prominent hallmark of shared cultural identity among the Roma. There are communities that exhibit some kind of affinity to certain cultural customs and maintain a set of separate identities but have lost the language over the past few generations. However, in the case of Roma, the Romani language acts as a principal criterion to recognise fellow Roma, signifying a commonality that holds sway in most instances.

Speaking of language, it will be almost two decades since the 'The status of Romani in Europe' report was submitted by you to the Council of Europe's Language Policy Division (Matras, 2005). Do you feel that the status of Romani in the education

system has changed for the better now? Secondly, what about the status of Romani kids in school?

Yaron Matras: Lamentably, there has been no detectable improvement in the status of Romani language since the submission of the said report. Diverse programmes and experimental initiatives have been introduced, yet these have yielded meagre transformation in the extensive landscape.

Secondly, multifarious factors must be considered for the situation of the Romani children in the school. There are many reports on the European Commission website under the Roma National Strategies for Roma inclusion where details can be found. However, an undercurrent of bottom-up discrimination is running through most of them. Notably, the locus of discrimination oozes not exclusively from the state; it fairly permeates through individual schools and educators. Teachers usually have a low aspiration of Roma. Although the policy-level delegations do not endorse discrimination against the Roma explicitly, the current efforts do not prove to be adequate protective measures. The Roma are facing racism, and the kernel for this racism lies in the majority population, the host population, at the root level. The states are generally reluctant to adopt policies conflicting with the sentiments of their majority populace, with whom the onus of curbing the discrimination lies. While gradual breakthroughs may be episodically visible, a widespread picture uncovers that the Roma community as a whole continues to grapple with educational deprivation and segregation as compared to others.

In the popular media, the Roma have always been portrayed as living a particular way of life, which was very different from the majority of the people (Matras, 2015). Has the media played a role in degrading their existence?

Yaron Matras: Yes, certainly. Throughout history, before the advent of mass media, the Roma have been portrayed stereotypically in art, music, theatre, and literature. The Roma people undertake a disputable place characterised by simultaneous projection as subjects of romanticised ideals of freedom, fascination, and envy on the one hand, as well as the alternative lens casting them as figures of non-conformity, disloyalty, defiance, and even peril on the other. Such depictions have persisted for numerous centuries and have seamlessly travelled to the domain of modern media, cinematic narratives, and journalism as well.[5]

There are many reports suggesting that Roma communities struggling with abject poverty find themselves residing in substandard housing conditions, leading to a vicious cycle preventing them from coming out of the dark pit of marginalisation (Matras & Leggio, 2018). Does this discrimination, marginalisation, and poverty arise as a result of the state's policy?

Yaron Matras: Discrimination does not only come from the state, but it also comes from the people. It must be acknowledged that non-state factors in terms of societal biases also play a pivotal role. For example, employers are reluctant to extend job opportunities to

the Roma, and educators are sceptical about their potential to achieve. Furthermore, it becomes a reciprocal phenomenon wherein the Roma do not trust the institutions. This matter is not just about the policy frameworks but the intricate tapestry of prejudices woven within the social fabric.6

The Roma have been portrayed as people who are very stiff to other communities; they draw the lines between themselves and the *gadze* (non-Roma). Perhaps this is a mechanism of self-preservation, or perhaps, as you have suggested, the other communities do not want the Roma to be assimilated into theirs because of prejudices (Matras, 2015). In the past, the Roma have always preferred to live in their own community. What is the case now?

Yaron Matras: It is complicated to generalise because different Roma people choose different trajectories for themselves. This is like asking if all Indian people prefer to take water out of the well and cook whatever vegetables they grow in their garden or if some Indian people go to schools and design computers and send satellites to the atmosphere. The reality is that there are both types and many more.

First, yes, the concept of boundary holds some validity, but it is not all-encompassing. Let me give you an example from my field of expertise, which is language. All Romani people embrace bilingualism or multilingualism, learning the languages of the majority surrounding them. Unfortunately, the reverse is hardly observed. This instance brings to us the integration of Roma, surpassing the conventional boundaries.7

Similarly, religious practices amongst the Roma demolish the notion of strict boundaries. The Roma display a disposition to blend in the local religious fabric. So, Roma in Turkey are Muslims, Roma in Balkan are Orthodox, Roma in Central Europe are Catholic, and so on. This remains true despite the majority of the population's reluctance to adopt Romani customs.

In terms of economic services provided by Roma, they tailor it to cater to the demands of the majority population. Their historical roles as tinners and utensil artisans have been aligned with the contemporary needs of drainage and roof repairs. There is always a dynamic process. The Roma do not just randomly keep apart; they negotiate the boundaries to always find some kind of access to the majority society.

At the same time, most Romani communities are united by robust value systems, manifested through their language, customs, and familial ties, and bifurcated into divisions of honourable and shameful. These traditions that are safeguarded in Roma communities are always subject to change; they change among generations and between different Roma groups. However, there is a code which makes out a Romani identity. Strikingly, such identity-defining codes have been preserved by the Roma, who continue to be the Roma today. On the other hand, where we do not observe such codes, there is an ingression of assimilation with the non-Romani communities. So, there has been a perpetual interplay of preservation as well as defiance of a boundary by the Romani. There has always been assimilation.

So, after these years of assimilation, are they still seen as the 'other'?

Yaron Matras: The European social structure is organised within the parameters of an institutionalised identity where participation means compliance with respect to a hierarchy grounded in behavioural codes and socialised individual roles. Navigating the terms of this society for the Roma implies the development of a specific hybrid identity where techniques of adaptation like learning the mainstream language and practising local customs are balanced with defiant signatures of uniqueness that are nothing more than simple preservation of their own customs. This hybridity, when seen as a contradiction, is often misrepresented as disloyalty by the locals. Their relative autonomy from institutionalised roles has crystallised envious perceptions of the majority that the Roma are unreliable, only illumining the constraints of that society, which vacuously perceives mobility and non-conformist self-referentiality as a threat to *their* social order.

This perception ossified into the *fact* that a defiant and non-compliant Roma produces a stratified social order which ostracises Roma systematically, in a manner legitimised by an order based on a transactional model of power relation where the elevation of a particular group in the social hierarchy is earned through suppression of the weaker Roma. However, a contesting social fact also remains that the historical resilience of the Roma through tropics of conflict and their continued presence in the continent testifies, if nothing else, to the persistence of a power equilibrium against such systemic violence, which tends only to eradicate. Though unexplained, such historical tolerance for Roma indicates, perhaps, a subterranean continuum of a contrafactual conviviality between a community that is as non-territorial as Europe imagines itself to be.

While experiencing this 'othering' in the equilibrium (Matras & Leggio, 2018), can there be some spots where the trauma among the Roma community can be located?

Yaron Matras: There is a distinct Romani mother tongue despite apparent differences among individuals. Although I am not an expert in Trauma Studies, one facet of the trauma of the home environment versus the educational milieu demands attention. Romani language is essentially oral in nature and holds a prominent place in Roma households; however, it remains oblivious to the outside world and is not given its due status. Consequently, Romani people embarking on their educational journey must engage in a medium that diverges from their oral heritage.

A similar situation can be observed in India, where people acquire education in English medium. Nevertheless, the educational interface remains accommodating as the teachers are proficient in the native language(s) as well. But the Roma are bereft of that support, which leads to inequality in educational trajectory. Their educational encounters become a site of potential trauma. The eruditions cultivated in the home environment must be unlearned. Moreover, the schools generally project an antipathetic attitude to their culture and language. Empirical observations substantiate that almost all Roma, falling in the broad spectrum of elementary education and attaining higher education, hold on to residual psychological impacts from their early educational years.

Further, customs and family bonds kindle deep-seated allegiance in Romani society. The educational sphere that aligns with the majority society apparatus stirs up contrasting ethos. It discourages creative thinking; it makes them basically comply with norms and behaviour that are abstract, set by strangers, and very alien to the Romani culture. This inherent contradiction effectuates a conflict wherein the need to comply with extrinsic norms stirs up the pre-existing loyalty to familial values, contributing to the complex dynamics of trauma within the educational realm.

Is Roma a nation in itself? Is their self-identification an ethnic label per se?

Yaron Matras: In one perspective, this assertion may hold some weight. However, it depends significantly on how one defines a nation. Should one's conception of a nation be synonymous with a territorial state, the proposition falters. Many entities globally, for instance, the Navajo Nation and the Iroquois Nation, lack territorial states.

In my view, affirming the Roma as an ethnic group is conceivable. It is imperative to note that traditionally European as well as non-European societies have often regarded the Roma as a lifestyle. From the theory of their Indian origin, they are Doms, which has been considered a caste historically. In India, despite the constitutional prohibition against caste-based discrimination, there exists a de facto cognisance of such practices. However, in Europe, the paradigm of caste structure is not overtly acknowledged, yet the Roma seem to be a caste in a certain way. In principle, they follow distinct customs and specialise in specific trades. What catches sight of them in the European setting, arguably much more than their Dom counterparts in India, is their distinctive linguistic, sartorial, and phenotypical attributes, which render them conspicuous. In India, a stranger can be identified in terms of caste based on visual cues. The same is the case with the Roma in Europe, accentuated by their apparent status as societal outcasts. This delineates the foundation of stigma against them, which coexists with their utilitarian need in the majority society. In India, the Doms might still be perceived as a caste, as there is a caste system or there was. Nevertheless, within the European milieu, the Roma assume the status of an ethnicity because of their salient cultural practices and physical attributes. The Roma, as an ethnicity, are unified by attributes beyond geographical territoriality.

For the first time, a class of Romani intellectuals emerged in the post-war period (Matras, 2015). What role has it played?

Yaron Matras: I would refrain from classifying it as a class; instead, they can be characterised as circles and networks, hence Romani activists. While the classification of intellectuals remains uncertain, there was a surge of activists from the early twentieth century, especially after the 1960s.

To a very modest extent, they have undeniably appeared as agents of engendering awareness about the Roma plight on various platforms of international organisations and governments. This has kindled a certain level of consciousness among the masses and the media. Their stature has also prompted an echo in the younger Romani generation in various locales. These figures have occasionally positively influenced human rights

advocacy and monitoring. Nonetheless, it remains imperative to underline that their influence is chiefly localised, remaining a subset in a broader context.

Notes

1. Cohen (2008) classifies the Roma as an ambiguous case of being called a diaspora (5). He further proposes the expression 'deterritorialised diaspora' for populations who have lost their conventional territorial reference points and exist as multi-located cultures. This concept is particularly relevant in the case of the Roma who are known for their itinerant lifestyle and whose home has always been on the move (18, 124). Cohen emphasises, ' … the Roma (popularly known as Gypsies), who have a narrative of ethnogenesis in India, but have lost any sustained connection with the Indian sub-continent. Treating the Roma/Gypsies as a diaspora provides a stimulating challenge' (124).
2. Brubaker (2005) considers that there are three core elements majorly used to identify a diaspora, 'The first is dispersion in space; the second, orientation to a "homeland"; and the third, boundary-maintenance' (5). However, with the surge of discourse on hybridity and fluidity in diaspora studies, he advocates 'to speak of diasporic stances, projects, claims, idioms, practices, and so on' (13). Instead of defining a diaspora in watertight compartments of either tying them to a fixed homeland or fixing their identity even without particular territorial borders, attention should be paid to the ongoing process of their political, social and cultural struggles which shape their identity.
3. Hall (1990) advocates a constructivist approach to defining cultural identity, 'Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a "production", which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation' (222). Taking cues from Michel Foucault's power/knowledge couplet, he further explains that identity is always 'positioned' in history and discourse (226).
4. Werbner (2002) evokes the notions of allegiance and unanimity in a diaspora across the spaces through the use of the phrase 'community of co-responsibility'. Such communities display characteristics of materialistic exchange as well as political connections (121).
5. A recent shift is evident where few contemporary works provide alternative portrayals of the Roma. To mention a few, the Italian movie *A Cambria* (2017) directed by a non-Roma director Jonas Carpignano garnered attention. Drawing from Italy's neo-realist cinematic heritage, the movie won many accolades for depicting the authentic existence and disposition of a 14-year -old boy Pio in a Roma family set in Southern Italy (Vivarelli, 2017). Previously, Tony Gatlif, himself belonging to the Roma ethnicity, has produced and directed movies focused on the life of Roma people in Europe. Also see, the British Film Institute's curated selection for a broader list of films depicting the Roma and Traveller community (BFI, 2018).

   Moreover, a parallel transition can be seen in literary purview as well. Hristo Kyuchukov's picture book My Name Was Hussein (Kyuchukov, 2004) deals with the emotions of a Roma child belonging to the Muslim faith who is forcibly ripped off his identity one fine day. Gianni Jovanovic's nuanced autobiographical work Ich, ein Kind der kleinen Mehrhit (Jovanovic & Alashe, 2022) engages with his life revolving around prejudices and discrimination, 'So when I think back to my childhood, I think of skirts, poverty and violence. And I think about the eternal worry that today could be the last day' (28, translated from German via Google Translate).
6. The main ways of removing prejudices against minorities within the social fabric can either be through media or government initiatives. Vermeersch (2001) discusses the Roma representation at domestic and international levels. Since the 1990s onwards, a surge can be seen in their representation in Central and Eastern European parliaments, however, their numbers remain inadequately low for their population in the entire region. International organisations like the International Romani Union, several non-governmental organisations and self-help groups form an advocacy network and bring to the attention of the world as well as national

think think-tanks for policy-making the issues of the Roma community. Vermeersch ultimately argues that steps such as reserved seats in the parliament should be taken to ensure their representation in the democratically elected bodies for real change, even though there is an increasing presence of Roma voices in current politics and policy-making.

Recent developments indicating progress can be seen through the active working of Roma activists in scenarios such as the election of six Roma members of parliament (highest to date) in Slovakia's parliamentary elections. See Poduska's et al. (2024) report.

7. Kyuchukov (2007) asserts, 'Roma children all over the world are bilingual. From a very early age, children learn one or two other languages in addition to Romani and, very often, they will use multiple languages in everyday communication in the Roma community or in mainstream society' (30–31). Though Roma bilingualism is well-acknowledged, the question of whether Roma communities actively seek non-Roma to learn Romani might be more complex. Kyuchukov argues that the bilingualism of the Roma is unrecognised in mainstream education (Kyuchukov, 2000, p. 273), and has been rather used as a tool to acculturate and assimilate Roma children in school (2007, 29). Willems and Mayall (quoted in New et al., 2017) maintain the negative connotations of the Romani language itself, as it was regarded 'as gibberish, a secret language for criminals, or a kind of slang' (16). Given this context, the lack of reciprocity in language might be of historical mistrust as well. The past misuse of Romani, such as by racial hygiene scientist Eva Justin (Benedict et al., 2018), suggests some Roma might be apprehensive of letting the non-Roma use and learn their language.

Acknowledgments

The authors heartfully acknowledge the time and efforts of Professor Yaron Matras in conducting this discussion over MS Teams and sharing his opinions. The authors feel immensely grateful to the reviewers for their valuable insights and comments.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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