

The impact of the transition in central and eastern Europe on the Roma (1990-2010)

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ABSTRACT

The paper is a succinct and concise look at the effects of the transition in Central and Eastern Europe on the lives of the largest minority community of the region over a period of two decades from 1990 to 2001. The change from communist to liberal democratic systems was an all encompassing one touching all aspects of the lives of the Roma. While it was expected to be a positive development for a historically marginalised ethnicity, it brought with it a further deterioration in the conditions of the Roma whether social, political or economic. There are regional variations in the conditions of the Roma owing to high level of heterogeneity within the group itself. However, largely, the positive effects of the transition were offset by a range of negative developments leading to a dismal scenario for the Roma. The paper draws heavily from primary sources such as reports of various international organisations working in this field as well as secondary sources such as works of experts on the Romani people.

Key Words : Largest minority community, Roma, Romani people

INTRODUCTION

The profound changes accompanying the fall of the Iron Curtain significantly the lives of the people in this region. The initial period was marked by a sense of jubilation and anticipation and most Roma at the outset welcomed the changes. However, soon the realities of the transition dawned on a vast chunk of the populace, the Roma in particular. For a more systematic understanding, the democratic transition to market economies in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) countries and their impact on the Roma can be studied under two sections : political liberalisation and economic liberalisation. However, one must bear in mind that these two sections are not impermeable divisions, they often overlap in terms of how they impinge on the Roma. For instance, the economic costs of social welfare benefits for unemployed Roma have led to majority expression of anti-Roma sentiment in the political sphere in many CEE as well as Western European countries.

Political liberalisation :

This section attempts to look at the various aspects of political liberalisation in CEE

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countries and their impact on the Roma. The section has been studied under various themes within political liberalisation such as, political recognition and minority rights, freedom of speech and the role of media, political organisation and representation, rise of anti-Roma racism and nationalism and lastly, the presence of EU AND other international organisations.

Political recognition and minority rights :

The political charges in the transition have unleashed parallel and contradictory processes for the Roma (Gheorghe, 1991:830). On the brighter side, minority rights issues have gained unprecedented importance in Europe. Historically associated with individualism, and increasing emphasis on importance of group/ minority rights is a significant development for this part of the world. EU has become the foremost champion of human rights domestically as well as internationally. Several reasons account for such a heightened focus on Roma rights. Europe has been home to the worst kind of human rights violations and has witnessed the consequences of extreme nationalism and suppression of minorities. The continent comprises of states where political and ethnic borders are not coterminous rendering states vulnerable to conflicts and minorities to suppression and persecution at the hands of the majorities. The collapse of the Iron Curtain and the ideological vacuum created by the demise of socialism in CEE countries led to the resurfacing of ethnic conflicts; Balkans was a bitter reminder of the consequences of extreme nationalism. Conflict in one country would also impact others through the outpour of refugees as observed in the Balkan crisis. Minority and human rights were important from social justice perspectives. Also, CEE countries were deeply divided by ethnicity and peaceful coexistence of the minorities was essential to the peace and stability in the post communist period.

The presence of EU and the desire for EU membership in CEEs has been the most important influence in fashioning the approach of these countries towards their minorities. The European Council in 1993 listed the Copenhagen criteria, a set of non negotiable conditions to be fulfilled for EU membership. The Copenhagen criteria included the presence of a functioning market economy, adherence to the aims of a political, economic and monetary union, appropriate adjustment of its administrative structures, stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of the law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities. This unparalleled focus and appreciation of the importance of minority rights proved to be a blessing for the Roma.

All the candidate countries therefore, had to put in substantial safeguards for their minorities which included observance of the principle of equality before law and in all areas of social, political and cultural life, freedom to develop their own culture, tolerance and inter cultural dialogue, freedom of association, the right to manifest religious beliefs, free access to the media and use thereof, a series of language in private and public life, the right to use surnames and first names in the minority language, the right to education and the right to learn the minority language, the right to effective participation in cultural, social and economic life in public affairs, the prohibition of forced assimilation and the right to trans-frontier contacts.

Other than providing specific minority rights, these states became signatories to the anti-discrimination legislation aimed at providing equal opportunities for members of minority

groups and to combat discrimination and social exclusion. Two directives were passed regarding anti-discrimination in 2000: ' Framework Directive on equal treatment in employment and occupation' , and, more significantly, a ' Directive on equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin' (often called 'Race Equality Directive'). While the former covered only employment and occupational fields, the latter was a more comprehensive document providing for equal opportunities and protection from discrimination in all fields, including education, social protection and housing (Rechel ed., 2009:46).

The minority rights and protection mentioned above have ended the long standing political marginality of the Roma in CEE countries. Roma have been recognised as a distinct ethnic group and accorded minority status in most of these states except Bulgaria. Almost all the countries of this region have established separate departments and legislation to deal with minority issues and affairs. Furthermore, most of them have specific legislation exclusively targeting the problems of their Romani minorities.

Largely, states have followed two approaches towards their minorities: first, the minority rights model and secondly, the undifferentiated citizenship model. The minority rights model provides for group-differentiated rights for minorities with regard to culture, language, traditions and participation in the social and economic domain. Hungary is a classic example of this model. The 'undifferentiated citizenship model' is based on the idea that nobody should be exempted from generally applicable laws. Problems of minorities need to be disassociated from culture and be seen as problems arising out of socio-economic concerns. With regards to culture, it maintains that the neutral attitude of the state will help different cultures to coexist. The rights and minority legislation mentioned above don't imply a wholly optimistic and promising scenario as the process of political recognition, protection and minority rights has been influenced by internal factors in all these CEE states. These states have agreed to the specific minority rights and legislation mentioned above formally and substantively. However, the fundamentals of implementation are not dictated by the EU, rather they are deeply influenced by an amalgam of domestic factors. Some of those issues at hand include popular opinion political culture, bias, ethnic self identification, socio-economic standing and the political clout of the minorities, interpretation of Roma problems, minority-majority relations and so on. Often, there have been delays in introduction of laws and piecemeal changes through several legislation. For example, negative popular opinion led to a ten year delay in signing of the Framework Convention on Protection of National Minorities (Recheled, 2009 : 77).

The anti discrimination measures have produced mixed results as a lack of awareness bass has led to little litigation with regards to the discrimination against the Roma. Similarly, while there has been progress with regard to anti-discrimination measures, many states have only made half-hearted attempts at ensuring positive minority rights such as ensuring equal opportunities in services such as education, health, housing and employment. In a nutshell, political agreement has not translated into effective political action.

Political organization and representation :

Democratisation and political freedoms meant that Roma could organise themselves more freely at national and international levels (Gheorghe, 1991:830). There has been a

flowering of Roma community and advocacy groups, political parties and independent associations; their representatives are promoting their causes in their respective national assemblies while the new non-Roma parties also look to woo the Roma for their votes. Romani people despite high social exclusion have high rate of participation in elections in most states.

Political organization of Roma however, has suffered on various accounts; the immense heterogeneity among Roma groups means there has been a proliferation in the number of Roma political parties, organisations but they are divided on various issues. The large number of political parties and the absence of a loose electoral alliance between them have worked to the detriment of the Roma. The programs of these parties are more determined by individual aspirations which need not necessarily be beneficial for the Roma and there is little cohesion; this coupled with general apathy prevalent among the Roma have led to a general inefficacy in the utilisation of the political opportunities presented by the transition (Barany, 1994:332).

The Romani people are not represented in political bodies in proportion to their numbers. The non-Roma parties once elected often forget about the concerns of the Roma. Most of the countries have minimum electoral thresholds required for political parties to enter the parliament, given the fact that the Roma don't make up a large percentage of National population, their parties might not get elected even if they overwhelmingly vote for one party. Romani people have a better chance of representation at the local levels in areas where they have a substantial electorate (UNDP, 2002:75). Decentralisation in these states, a move contrary to centralisation promoted under socialism, has provided this opportunity and consequently, improved chances for their participation in policy making.

Most states in the CEE region have instituted some form of political organisation to ensure enhanced Roma participation in programs and policies that affect their lives; they range from minority self government in Hungary to consultative bodies at the national level in Czech and Slovak republics. In UNDP country surveys in several CEE countries, results however, indicate that the Roma value employment and freedom from poverty (economic concerns) as the main criteria of political equality rather than political representation in the parliament, media and newspapers.

International Attention to Roma Rights :

The fall of the Iron Curtain has led to greater international attention to the plight of the Roma; they, in absence of effective and sincere state action towards their concerns have moved to international organisations and NGOs for a better focus on their plight. This and the developments mentioned above have helped Roma become more visible in public life as well as more articulate and vocal in asking for respect for their human rights. There is also better organisation and articulation of Romani interests as a political and cultural minority group (Gheorghe, 1991:830). Roma are increasingly using legal recourse to seek redressal in cases of discrimination. They are more visible in media and there has been a proliferation of Romani newspapers in many states.

As mentioned above, the process of political and economic integration with the EU has offered the prospect of improved legal protection for the Roma and other minorities, through human rights laws and strict conditionality imposed on countries that were eager to join the

EU (Goldston, 2002 :147).

Political Liberalisation and Anti-Roma Sentiment :

Democratisation and political liberalisation on the other hand, have exposed the latent tensions of a region deeply divided along ethnic lines. Democratisation has allowed for resurfacing of anti-Roma prejudice and the entry of extremist parties and opportunistic leaders on to the political scene thereby , opening up avenues for more public discrimination against the Roma (Ringold 2005, 10).

There has been an increase in the prejudice and conflict against the Roma in most countries. There are also reports of overt violence or physical attacks on Roma in all the post communist countries esp erstwhile Czechoslovakia, Romania, Hungary and Bulgaria. Most states did not counter attacks by extremist nationalist elements on the Romani people one gave them adequate protection; violent physical attacks and collective punishment of the Roma by burning their houses and designed to put pressure on them to leave became commonplace (Amnesty International, 2009). The perpetrators of the attacks are extremist groups and skin heads, at times supported by the local populations (Stauber, 2009:1). On most occasions, they were not indicted for their crimes or were let off with minimal punishment (Barany, 1994:332). Roma, on the other hand, are disproportionately represented in the prisons and are often given harsh punishments as well as subjected to arbitrary arrests.

This resurgence in nationalism, anti-Roma prejudice and violence can be explained by the simultaneous occurrence of several propelling factors; firstly, the demise of Marxism-Leninism and end of Soviet political and military control over the region. The socialist regime though not very tolerant of Roma identity, protected them from overt discrimination. Other factors that contributed to the same were the revocation of the restrictions on state media and freedom of speech and association, increasing competition for scarce resources as well as jobs and lastly, the tendency to scapegoat during difficult times (Barany, 1994:321).

The anti-Roma sentiment has not decreased with time , rather the harsh realities of the recent economic crisis that began in the fall of 2008 only served to intensify it. Extreme right parties that emerged before the crisis have used anti-Roma rhetoric to serve their narrow agendas in these difficult times; their growing influence can be attributed to the growing popular support for them and the severe unemployment and cuts in public spending that accompanied the economic crisis .

Freedom of Speech and the Media :

The news freedom of speech for the media in these countries brought to the fore more frequent and more vehement expression of anti-gypsy prejudice and hostility; the newspapers often carry reports that encourage popular opinion or incite hate speech or warn of the gypsy danger. Gypsies are seen as a homogenous mass characterised by illiteracy, lack of work discipline, lack of respect for social and legal norms and that they often live solely on charity and welfare (Csepeli and Simon, 2004:133). The Roma were often projected as black marketers responsible for shortage of goods, draining goods out of the country and accused of criminality (Gheorghe, 1991: 832). Political discourse in these countries is full of overt and covert manifestations of hate speech. Such image of the Roma people affects the

relationship between Roma people and institutions of the state such as the police, courts, local governments and health services. There were twin processes involved in the creation of the Roma identity, one is by non Roma and the other is the self identification of the Roma (Csepeli and Simon, 2000:134).

Another trend witnessed in many of these post communist countries is that of the overestimation the number of Romani people. State censuses in several countries show exaggerated numbers of Romani people implying much higher growth rates for Roma than non-Roma. Though Romani people have a higher growth rate than non-Romani people but these censuses exaggerate the growth rate and numbers in a bid to provoke fears of a Romani 'take over'. This exaggeration is most where anti-Roma groups are strong.

Economic liberalisation :

The shift from central planning to market economies has led to unprecedented changes in the social and economic life of the inhabitants of this region. The Roma, as reports indicate, have lost out the most in this transition with a sharp decline in their socio economic status. This section attempts to assess the impact of economic liberalisation on the Roma under several themes.

Employment :

The most immediate change for the Roma during the transition was in terms of the labour market; Roma were mostly employed in low skilled jobs and were among the first ones to be laid off when restructuring began and subsidies for state owned enterprises were scaled back. Roma who had lost jobs found it difficult to re-enter or compete for jobs in the new market due to their low levels of education and skills (Ringold, 2000:14). As a result, unemployment rates grew significantly and in some places the rates of unemployment were as high as eighty five to hundred percent. This unemployment should be seen in the context of the legacy of the socialist system which often employed Roma in the least paid, most dangerous and onerous jobs due to their low levels of education. Their re entry into the labour market was also obstructed due to widespread ethnic and racial discrimination against them.

There was a wide gap between the levels of unemployment between Roma and non Roma in the transition countries. According to UNDP report in 2002, the rates of unemployment for Roma were far more than non Roma and they are eight times more likely to be unemployed in the long run than non Roma. For further illustration, the Hungarian government's census in 2003 put their national employment level for men at 72 percent while the employment rate for Roma men was a mere 32 percent. One must bear in mind that the employment levels for Roma were as high as eighty five percent under the communist regime in Hungary until 1985 when differences began to emerge (Kertesi and Kezdi nd:7). The employment rates for Roma men and women had been the same as non Roma men and women throughout the communist rule; the state offered guaranteed employment to all its citizens. However, the job security offered by the state disappeared with the collapse of the communist systems.

It must be noted that a large number of Roma are employed in the informal sector

which is not taken into account in official statistics on unemployment. According to UNDP report in 2002, a large number of Roma are employed in the informal sector and unemployment rate excluding them put their unemployment rate at about 25 percent aggregate for the CEE region. However, this number is still very large when compared with the unemployment rates of non-Roma in the region and this rate implies that one out of every four Roma does not find employment in both formal and informal sectors.

The high levels of unemployment made the Roma dependent not only on informal sector jobs but also poorly funded state assistance and working abroad (Ringold *et al.*, 2005:9). Their dependence on social assistance led to a widespread public belief that the Roma are living solely on state welfare funds and charity and a major portion of state's social expenditure is spent on them at the cost of other old and vulnerable members of the majority. This further fuelled public hostility against the Romani people (Csepeli and Simon, 2000 :134).

Housing :

Roma also fare low on proper housing; the houses of the Roma in these CEE countries are generally of much lower standard than the non-Roma. In many countries like Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Macedonia and Hungary, they live in overcrowded conditions and their houses lack proper sanitation, drainage, heating, electricity and telephone services ¹. These Roma neighbourhoods have ghetto like conditions; they are impoverished and unhygienic.

The great diversity in Roma communities consequently implies equivalent diversity in housing patterns of different Roma groups across these states. Sedentary Roma share some of the housing problems with other non Roma groups however, some problems are unique to the Roma; the housing policies of regimes before the Second World War, the communist government and the successor regimes have led to regional and geographic isolation and segregation of the Roma (Ringold *et al.*, 2005:34).

Segregated settlements create barriers in access to public services as well as employment opportunities. Roma, wanting to move from these isolated settlements often encounter obstacles and discrimination by the public officials. Some settlements, like those in South eastern Europe were created under the Ottoman empire that divided settlement areas according to ethnicity, the divisions have disappeared but many of those settlements remain in countries like Bulgaria. Many settlements also have their roots in the socialist housing policies. The socialist state provided free or subsidised housing along with employment, often near the site of the work; Roma living in these quarters were evicted when these state owned enterprises were shut down and housing subsidies were withdrawn. Many lost jobs leading to deteriorating conditions within these settlements, coupled with little attention from state and municipal authorities (Ringold, 2000:12).

The transition created legal troubles for Roma as lack of clear property rights during the communist regime meant few Roma could file claims to these lands and houses as they were transferred to their former owners or privatised (Ringold *et al.*, 2005:35). Due to deteriorating economic conditions, many Roma sold their homes and moved away into already crowded flats of relatives. Illegal tenancies, ignored by the communist regime, were no longer tolerated. (OSCE, 2000:102).

Many dispossessed Roma had difficulty in finding rented accommodation as now mom

Roma did not want them as tenants or neighbours while several others were unemployed and unable to afford housing. Under these circumstances, many Roma moved into unoccupied property rendering them vulnerable to evictions as well as evoking antipathy from the non Roma in those areas (OSCE, 2000: 103).

Another trend noted with regard to housing during the transitional phase was the migration of the Roma to urban areas to look for employment as many lost their jobs in state owned enterprises leading to the growth of large scale ghettos and the consequent problems of crime, drugs and diseases in most cities of the region (Ringold, 2000:12).

In some countries like Slovakia, Spain and others, the local governments have sought to solve the problems of housing, illegal occupancy and non payment of rent by the Roma through their relocation to segregated settlements on the outskirts of towns. This move has been controversial and has evoked a lot of criticism from international, European and human rights organisations. Several local municipalities have also expelled Roma from their areas either through formal policy or informally. For instance, Roma willing to purchase houses are driven away by some excuse while non Roma are encouraged to purchase properties in the same area (OSCE, 2000: 106).

European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) in its reports raised the issue of adequacy of halting sites for nomadic and semi nomadic Roma. The ERRC highlights the fact that many of the sedentarised Roma are at the risk of being subjected to housing policies based on the presumption that all Roma are nomadic. These sites are being used to relocate sedentarised Roma far away from the city centres and public services. Such segregation in degrading and inhuman environment, as pointed out earlier, leads to marginalization of the Roma from political, social and economic life of the area.

Health :

Poor socio-economic status of the Roma has a direct impact on their health status. The unprecedented collapse in their living conditions in the transitional phase due to high rates of long term unemployment has led to deterioration in their health status as well. There is very limited literature available on the health of the Roma , especially during the transitional phase as most of them live below the poverty line and their access to preventive and curative medical services in most of these CEE countries is limited. However, even the limited research indicates wide disparities between the health outcomes of the Roma and non Roma in these countries (Walsh and Kreig, 2007:13).

Roma are highly susceptible to many diseases on the account of poor nutritional standards, poor living standards and poverty which cause and exacerbate illness as and poor health by limiting access to preventive health care, medication, hygienic material and proper nutrition. Discrimination along with other factors can limit the success of various programmes regarding health education, testing and treatment. The most common health problems in Roma are smoking, alcohol drinking, physical inactivity, stress or mental ill health, obesity, heart and asthmatic predisposition (MEHO, 2010:45). OSCE report on 2002 indicates that Roma across the OSCE region have higher than average incidence of infant mortality, lower than average life expectancy and higher rates of malnourishment and disease.

The substandard living conditions, pointed out in the section on Roma housing, make

Roma more prone to communicable diseases like tuberculosis and hepatitis. Discriminatory and prejudicial attitudes are one of the key factors in marginalization and exclusion of the Roma from public health programmes. For instance, the immunisation programmes in many of these states do not reach out to all the Roma population, in some cases, rates of non-immunisation have been found to be as high as 20 percent. There has been higher incidence of some of these communicable diseases in the transitional phase as living standards deteriorate with most Roma settlements lacking proper sanitation, running water and electricity. Demographic trends indicate that Roma have a higher growth rate than non Roma groups and consequently, Roma population is younger than other groups. This is mostly due to the fact that Roma women marry younger and their reproductive span begins in their teenage years. They are less likely to use contraception than non Roma women and consequently have more live births; socio-economic factors including poverty, lack of education and cultural preferences account for the high fertility rate (MEHO, 2010:47). There have been contrasting reports as to whether fertility rates in Roma have increased or declined during the transition period however, they continue to be higher than that of the non Roma populations in the region (Ringold *et al.*, 2005:49).

Romani women are the most disadvantaged when health issues are concerned. They are less likely to have access to preventive, reproductive and sexual health information and care. Cultural factors and Romani concerns about purity and modesty meant that most Roma women don't get proper prenatal care during pregnancies (MEHO, 2010:47). Unhealthy lifestyles and poor living standards coupled with high abortion rates account for more pregnancy related complications in Roma women than non Roma women in the region. Poor and negative pregnancies and newborn outcomes have a higher incidence among Roma women. Maternal health is a serious issue; a large number of Roma women continue to smoke through their pregnancies and use of contraception continues to be limited (Ringold, 2000:21). Poor maternal height and weight also implicates the health of the future generation; Roma have more babies with low birth weight than non Roma. Roma have a higher rate of infant mortality; the rates had experienced some decline during the socialist period from 1960s to 1989 however, the numbers for Roma were still higher than non Roma in most of these countries.

Roma communities are at a higher risk of genetic disorders because of a higher level of inter marriages and consequently, a higher level of inbreeding. There has been little documentation on the prevalence of non communicable diseases in the Roma however, limited research indicates that mortality rates due to non communicable diseases were high, particularly due to conditions associated with poor diet, smoking and alcoholism (Ringold *et al.*, 2005:52, Ringold, 2000:21).

Employment in hazardous occupations, a legacy of the Soviet era puts Roma at a higher risk of illness and health concerns. Roma in the 1960s and 1970s came to face health hazards due to employment in heavy industry as low skilled or semi skilled labour. In the transition phase, due to an increasingly tight labour market, Roma accepted jobs as seasonal or day labour lacking health or social insurance. Others are employed as cleaners, sweepers, sewer maintainers which require additional public health measures, often ignored. Many Roma live near work sites, abandoned mines and factories and waste dumps putting Roma at risk of exposure to hazardous materials and highly polluted environments (Ringold *et al.*, 2005:52,

OSCE, 2000:122).

There is little research available on the incidence of sexually transmitted diseases among the Roma people in this region. However, there has been a rise in the number of Roma women employed in prostitution due to lack of employment opportunities which increases the risk of STDs and HIV/AIDS among these women. Also there has been increasing reports of drug addiction among Romani youth; exact numbers are difficult to ascertain as very few Roma undertake counselling and testing at clinics (Ringold *et al.*, 2005: 53).

One must be able to establish a co relation between education, health and employment. Low level of education means poor living standards, poor hygiene and poor health. It has been established through research that a higher level of education often leads to a longer life expectancy and better health. Illiteracy often means that Romani people cannot access public health services, read public health notices and are consequently, unaware of the public health programmes. Lack of education implies that many Romani communities don't realise the importance of public health programmes. These people are also at times distrustful of such programmes, various beliefs like that vaccination will lead to spread of diseases and experiences like the forced sterilisations during the socialist period have made the Roma wary of state authorities and their intent. Education among Romani community, especially among the young people will not only help in improving their employment and living conditions but also help in ensuring the success of preventive health programmes like immunisation. It can help the Romani people better appreciate the dangers of intravenous drug use, the measures needed to check the spread of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases and increase the social approval of contraception.

The transitional phase has led to reduced access to health services for Romani people as public funding for such services has been scaled back. State provides health care for those who are employed, pay social security and those unemployed who are registered with the state. However, many of the unemployed Roma are not registered with the state and do not have birth certificates, identification proofs and proof of registered residence required for accessing public health care services. Many Roma communities cannot access public health care services on the account that their segregated settlements are often not connected by public transport and they cannot afford to pay the fares. In many cases, these settlements do not have a resident doctor and are not visited by public health officials; such a scenario implies that Roma visit the clinics and state hospitals only under the most pressing circumstances (OSCE, 2000:124 and UNICEF, 2007: 23).

Education :

The most pressing challenge in long term development of the Roma community is perhaps, their low levels of education. Historically, Romani people have had low levels of education ever since their arrival on the European continent. In the previous sections, the importance of education and its relation to other aspects of Romani development have been emphasized. Lack of education means Romani community is poorly placed in the job market and consequently more vulnerable to poverty and unhealthy lifestyles as witnessed in the transition.

The problems Romani children face in education differ across states regions however,

certain commonalities can be ascertained. Romani people across the region experience low education levels and wide disparities with the non Roma populations of these states. A complex set of factors restrict access to education in general and quality education in particular for Roma children. Several of these factors owe their origin to the socialist rule in this region. As mentioned earlier, education and literacy among Roma improved in the communist period. This happened as the state made provisions for free and compulsory education for all; there were political pressures to comply. The state provided for all the educational and teaching material along with free meals. However, the Roma children often did not care as well as non Roma children due to various reasons: the schools did not account for migration in Roma, the medium of instruction was often a language foreign to the Romani children and this coupled with infrequent of class attendance and lack of pre school education affected the performance of Roma children. By 1980s, a large chunk of Roma children were not even functionally literate and only one out of ten students cleared college. The socialist state assumed that the difference in performance of the Roma and non Roma children was due to disability and not environment. As a result, Roma children in many socialist states like erstwhile Czechoslovakia came to be put in schools for children with mental disabilities, a legacy that has survived transition in many states. Roma, therefore during transition, experienced a steeper decline in their education levels. There have been reports of declining school enrolment as state funding and subsidies for schools were withdrawn and fees were introduced. Romani, already facing harsh realities during the transition were unable to pay costs of school education (Ringold, 2000: 18). Most Roma in these countries have only primary education or less; such a grim scenario requires a look at the set of complex and intertwined factors that restrict the access of Roma people to education and quality education in particular.

Pre school education is important in preparing children for school and Roma children in most of these countries form a miniscule percentage of children going to kindergartens and nurseries. Pre school education can be extremely helpful for Roma children who have been socially excluded and prepare them for primary schools in a better way. It can help break language and other learning barriers. Pre schools can also sometimes mean additional discrimination for Romani speaking children. During the socialist period, most of these pre schools were funded or subsidised by the state and attached to state owned enterprises. The collapse of the communist system as pointed out earlier, led to a cut in public funding for schools, this had a particularly harsh effect on pre schools as many of them were either shut down or handed to municipalities which were already in dire financial conditions (UNICEF, 2007:46-49, UNDP, 2002: 60-61).

In terms of primary education, there has been a sharp decline in enrolment rates of Roma children even in states where such education is free because the Roma cannot even afford the additional requirements for sending their children to school such as textbooks, uniforms, equipment and travel (UNICEF, 2007: 49-50).

Contrary to popular perception that Roma do not value education, Roma believe in the importance of education however, poverty and discrimination are colossal barriers to education. However, the negative experiences of Romani parents in school as well as bleak employment opportunities for educated Roma act as a deterrent.

Lack of access to quality education is another key problem; most schools do not have

an intercultural understanding and Romani language is not taught in most schools. Only recently, some progress has been made in this regard. Most schools do not appreciate the Romani culture and they are nothing of value in their culture and language. Romani students often encounter discrimination because of this negative perception of their backgrounds. Romani parents complain that their children face discrimination, ostracism, bullying, harsh treatment or lack of attention (UNICEF, 2007: 51).

Segregated schools for Roma present another barrier to quality education as these schools are overcrowded, poorly resourced with shortage of equipment, poor facilities and less skilled and motivated teachers. These schools are of two types: firstly, the majority schools where there are separate classes for the Roma and schools with majority of Roma populations. The second type is generally located near Roma settlements and the number of students completing primary and secondary school here is low. However, in some states like Bulgaria, Romania and Serbia, this policy is gradually decreasing with active state intervention and plans aimed at integration of Roma children. In many south east European states, schools for teaching basic skills to adults are filled with Roma children, this constituting another variant of these segregated schools (UNDP, 2002:55, UNICEF, 2007:53, Ringold *et al.*, 2005: 45-46).

As mentioned earlier, socialist regimes instituted special needs schools for mentally retarded children where most Roma children came to be enrolled, this legacy has continued in form of gross over representation of Roma children in these schools during the transition. These schools have low quality education, modified curriculums and children from these schools can hardly contemplate higher education elsewhere. Another reason for overwhelming number of Roma in these schools is that they receive some sort of state subsidy and poor Roma families can only afford these. Most of them are assigned these schools not on health related grounds but because either they are not prepared for primary school or they don't know the language of instruction. Education from these schools implies there is little chance of higher education or employment in the formal sector (UNICEF, 2007: 54-55, Ringold *et al.*, 2000: 45-46, UNDP, 2002 :55).

Another problem that needs rectification is the high primary school drop out rate among Roma children esp girls. The primary reason given for these is the cost of education that the poor Roma families can not afford. There are other reasons too, for instance, in countries like Serbia, Romani families have a higher drop it rate because of the traditional role of a female in a patriarchal Romani household. Early marriage is the norm and taking care of the children and the household is a female's responsibility. Also, when there are too many children and less money for education, often the education of the girl child gets curtailed. Roma families also blame the high drop out rate on illness, discrimination by teachers, peers, lack of decent clothing and the fact that their children have learnt what they needed to learn. Roma children have to care for younger siblings and engage in some income generating activities. The number of drop puts between primary and secondary education is also high implying that only a miniscule number of Roma children will go for secondary education and even lesser number will finish college. A large number of dropouts mean most of them will be employed in the same jobs as their parents however, they will face a market with an ever increasing emphasis on skills (UNDP, 2002: 53-54, UNICEF, 2007: 54-57).

The education levels of the Roma therefore, have worsened during the transition leading to declining school enrolment and rising dropout rates. More and more Roma children have come to be assigned to segregated classes and special schools. The lack of well educated and successful models in the community as well as lack of employment for skilled and educated Roma continues to discourage Roma parents. As the high unemployment rate in CEE countries illustrates, even higher education has not been a guarantee for employment in the right labour markets. There have been various programmes at national and international level involving the governments of CEE countries, UN, EU, World Bank and several other NGOs and international organisations to rectify the scenario however, a lot remains to be done. Meanwhile the Romani community is trapped in a vicious cycle, low education levels mean unemployment which in turn leads to poverty and lack of good education coupled with discrimination in the education systems and labour markets.

Access to Social Services :

Long term unemployment and poverty implies Roma dependency on state social services including health, education and social protection in case of unemployment. During the transition, the Roma facing even higher rates of long term unemployment have become dependent on state unemployment benefits as well as labour market programmes aimed at facilitating their re entry into the labour market. As Roma were over represented in the unemployed population, the popular perception is that most Roma are dependent on state welfare and that they have easy access to social services. However, this is a myth as several problems limit or restrict Romani access to social services. These factors include lack of documentation such as proof of residence and identification, discrimination, poor communication with the service providers and also, in general, the limitations of national resources and protection programmes. Though these programmes are critical in poverty alleviation, their impact for poor households is often limited by problems of coverage, target efficiency and benefit adequacy (Ringold, 2000: 31-34).

These CEE countries under socialist systems maintained incomes through guaranteed employment and state subsidies on housing, consumer goods and utilities. Therefore, social assistance in the form of cash payments for the poor households was a new concept in these countries; the coverage of this assistance has been limited due to financial constraints in the transition period.

World Bank report in 2002 stressed the need for child allowances for poor Roma households with a large number of children emphasising the close link between poverty and family size. All CEE countries have child support in some form or the other; the efficacy of these programmes is affected by the level which determines the qualification for such support.

An important outcome of welfare benefits is over Reliance on these in some cases thereby, promoting a culture of dependency. It has created disincentives for work in cases where the payment in social assistance has exceeded the minimum income of poor households. Roma run a risk of falling into the dependency trap if the level of income they expect in the market is lower than other workers. The issue has been dealt differently in CEE states, some states have required participation in public works or job counselling services.

Popular perception often holds that payment of cash benefits promoted reliance on

social benefits and stigmatizes social assistance as well as promotes negative stereotypes against the beneficiaries (Csepeli and Simon, 2004:133). Another form of care is residential institutions for the marginalised and disadvantaged groups like old people or children who are in great difficulty and Romani children in several states are over represented in such institutions. Active Labor Market Programmes (ALMPs) aimed at facilitating the 're entry into the labour market are yet another form of social assistance. They range from job search, assistance, training and retraining programmes, support for small businesses, public works and unemployment subsidies for employers (Ringold, 2000:33-34).

Conclusion :

The ouster of the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe was seen as ushering in an era of human rights, democracy and market economy. However, for the Roma groups of the region, this transition has neither meant enjoyment of democratic rights or has it improved their living conditions. Rather, it is ironical that the transformations to liberal democracies with market economies in CEE countries has led to dire living conditions and worsened the political, social and economic exclusion of the Roma.

Politically, the transition brought in new opportunities for ethnic minorities in terms of expressing their identity and participation in society. It led to recognition of minorities as distinct ethnic groups and national minorities . Consequently, there was a flowering of Roma political parties, NGOs, community and advocacy groups at both national and international levels. However, the transition also brought in new hardships for this vulnerable community; political liberalisation allowed for the entry of extremist and xenophobic elements on to the political scene and opened new avenues of discrimination against the Roma. Growing anti Roma violence and speech have been recorded in all the countries of the region.

Roma, today are in the throes of an economic crisis; transition has brought in case unemployment and rising prices leading to unprecedented levels of poverty and deprivation in Roma groups across the region. A multiplicity of reasons in close interconnection are responsible for such a grim scenario: the legacy of the communist policies in areas of education and employment, the policies of the post communist states and the widespread stereotyping and discrimination against the Roma.

In a nutshell, as a World Bank report states,

“ The situation of Roma, or gypsies, in Central and Eastern Europe is one of the most challenging issues to emerge during the transition from socialism. While living conditions have deteriorated for many across the region, perhaps no single ethnic group has been so consistently excluded from the opportunities brought about by the transition than the Roma” (Ringold, 2000:1).

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