

## **Cultural Parallels in Costume and Jewellery: A Comparative Study of Indian kalbeliya and Roma community**

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### **Abstract**

The Roma community of Europe, which migrated from India centuries ago, continues to maintain a cultural structure that closely parallels Indian traditions. Elements of Indian influence are still evident in their dance, music, clothing, and jewellery. Traditional attire not only reflects an individual's identity but also conveys the cultural and ethnic heritage of the community. Even after generations, a strong sense of Indianness can be observed in the traditional dress and ornaments of the Roma people. This is particularly apparent in Gypsy folk dance, where the similarities in costumes and jewellery with Indian styles are striking.

This research paper presents a comparative study of the traditional clothing and jewellery of the Indian and Roma communities. Through interviews and other primary sources, the study highlights the cultural continuity between the two groups and explores the shared symbolism expressed through their attire and adornments.

**Keywords:** Kalbeliya costume, jewellery, Roma community, Romani Dance, Gypsy Dance, Folk costume, Romani culture, Indian culture, dance gestures, India.

### **Introduction**

This research paper analyzes the cultural similarities and parallels between the costumes and jewellery of India and the Roma community, with particular focus on the attire and ornaments worn by Indian folk dancers and Romani performers. Echoing the words of the renowned Indian poet Ramdhari Singh 'Dinkar' — "*Culture is as inherent in human life as milk is in butter and fragrance in flowers*" — this study underscores the profound cultural connection between human beings and their clothing and adornments.

The culture and civilization of any society are clearly reflected in its lifestyle and social behavior. While literature mirrors the ethical values of a community, traditional attire serves as a symbol of its way of life and cultural consciousness. Even today, garments such as the Ghaghra, Choli, Salwar, and Dupatta remain widely worn by Romani women, serving as living proof of the influence of Indian sartorial traditions and the enduring pride associated with them.

"The Roma community first migrated from India a millennium ago. However, their ethnic culture still resonates with that of India. Even today, in their dance, music, attire, and jewellery, an Indian influence is strikingly vivid. By looking at the clothes of any person, one can get an idea about his/her community. The traditional apparel of a person reflects cultural and ethnic characteristics. Even after many decades, Romani clothes and jewellery remain strongly linked to the Indian sense of bodily adornment. Roma/Gypsy folk dancers are a paragon of the aesthetic values and beauty embodied by Indian women. The article aims to explore the parallelism in clothes and jewellery between Romani and Indian women, drawing on interviews through fieldwork and close observation of the community." Traditional kalbeliya clothes and jewellery.

### Historical Background and Cultural Continuity: Roma Origins and the Kalbeliya Connection

The Roma, often referred to as the Romani people, are a traditionally nomadic ethnic group whose ancestral roots lie in the Indian subcontinent. A convergence of linguistic, genetic, and cultural anthropological evidence supports the theory that the Roma originated in northwestern India—particularly the regions of Rajasthan and Punjab—between the 5th and 11th centuries CE. Linguistic analysis shows that the Romani language, an Indo-Aryan tongue within the larger Indo-European family, shares deep structural and lexical similarities with North Indian languages such as Hindi, Punjabi, and Rajasthani<sup>\*</sup>. This linguistic kinship is further corroborated by genetic studies linking the Roma to Indian populations, particularly among Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities<sup>†</sup>

The Roma's migration likely began around the 10th century CE, propelled by a combination of socio-political disruptions and entrenched caste-based marginalization. Invasions by foreign powers such as the Ghaznavids and later the Delhi Sultanate contributed to destabilizing conditions that may have encouraged the Roma to leave their homeland<sup>‡</sup>. As they moved westward, Romani groups passed through Afghanistan, Iran, and the Middle East before eventually arriving in Europe, where they settled—most notably in the Balkans—by the 14th century. Despite centuries of displacement, forced assimilation, and systemic marginalization across Europe, the Roma have succeeded in preserving vital aspects of their cultural identity, particularly those connected to their Indian heritage.

One enduring expression of this cultural continuity can be seen in the traditional clothing and jewelry worn by Romani women. Typical garments include the *ghañā* (a flared skirt), *choli* (a fitted blouse), and *odhni* (a decorative scarf or veil), which closely mirror the

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<sup>1</sup> Matras, Y. (2002). *Romani: A linguistic introduction*. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Mendizabal, I., Lao, O., Marigorta, U. M., Wollstein, A., Gusmão, L., Ferak, V., ... & Comas, D. (2012). Reconstructing the population history of European Romani from genome-wide data. *Current Biology*, 22(24), 2342–2349. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2012.10.039>

<sup>3</sup> Gagliardi, L. (2004). Romani and Indian traditional dress: Cultural echoes and identity. In D. Kenrick (Ed.), *Roma culture: Identity, politics and representation* (pp. 85–102). European Cultural Studies Press.

traditional attire worn by rural women in Rajasthan and other parts of India<sup>§</sup> These outfits are often adorned with vivid embroidery, mirror work, and layered fabrics—elements that signify cultural memory and shared origins.

Jewelry, too, holds profound symbolic and social meaning in both Indian and Romani contexts. Beyond decoration, it signifies marital status, social role, and cultural affiliation. Romani women frequently wear elaborate metallic ornaments, such as bangles, anklets, earrings, nose rings, and headpieces—styles that are visually and symbolically akin to those found in Indian folk and tribal traditions<sup>\*\*</sup> The transgenerational transmission of these cultural elements underscores the resilience of Roma identity and highlights the continuity of Indian aesthetic sensibilities in Romani dress and ornamentation.

### **Kalbeliya Dance and the Romani Connection**

Among the most striking artistic connections between India and the Romani diaspora is Kalbeliya dance—a folk performance tradition from Rajasthan, India. The Kalbeliyas are a community historically associated with snake charming, music, and itinerant lifestyles. Their dance form is renowned for its improvisational style, serpentine body movements, rapid spinning, and expressive hand gestures. Kalbeliya women typically perform in ornate black costumes embellished with mirrors and embroidery, enhancing the hypnotic rhythm of their performance<sup>††</sup> In Western discourse, comparisons have often been drawn between the Kalbeliya community and the Romani people. Both share a history of nomadism, marginalization, and performance-centered livelihoods. These parallels have led to the emergence of romanticized narratives that position the Kalbeliyas as a kind of ancestral link to the Roma, particularly through the shared idiom of dance and music<sup>7</sup>

The global visibility of Kalbeliya dance began with the pioneering efforts of Gulabo Sopera, who became the first Kalbeliya woman to perform internationally, debuting onstage in the United States in 1986. Her performances ignited global interest in Kalbeliya culture and prompted international initiatives that sought to connect Indian and Romani artists in collaborative platforms. This intercultural framing, often described by scholars as “Gypsyfying,” aimed to reinforce the perception of the Roma as part of a broader, transnational Indian diaspora<sup>§</sup>.

The so-called “Gypsy furore” peaked in the 1990s, when international festivals and cultural programs began showcasing Kalbeliya performers as representatives of this imagined heritage connection. The number of Kalbeliya dancers performing internationally expanded dramatically during this time—from a single performer (Sopera) to over fifty<sup>2</sup>. While these performances have played a role in increasing visibility for both Roma and Kalbeliya communities, they have also raised questions about authenticity, appropriation, and the global consumption of marginalized identities as exotic spectacles.

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<sup>§</sup>Hancock, I. (2002). *We are the Romani people*. University of Hertfordshire Press.

<sup>\*\*</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Lieges, R. (2007), pp. 120–124.

Nonetheless, Kalbeliya dance continues to serve as a living testament to the artistic and cultural synergies between India and the Roma. Through dance, both communities articulate histories of resilience, displacement, and pride. The stage becomes not only a site of performance but also of identity reclamation, bridging centuries of migration and cultural transformation.

The Roma, often referred to as the Romani people, constitute a diaspora and traditionally nomadic ethnic group whose origins are deeply rooted in the Indian subcontinent. Linguistic, genetic, and cultural anthropological evidence converge to support the theory that the Romani population originated in northwestern India—particularly in regions such as Rajasthan and Punjab—sometime between the 5th and 11th centuries CE. Linguistic studies of the Romani language, which belongs to the Indo-Aryan branch of the Indo-European family, reveal structural and lexical similarities with North Indian languages such as Hindi, Punjabi, and Rajasthani<sup>‡‡</sup> This connection is further supported by genetic analyses that link Romani DNA markers to Indian populations, especially those from Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities<sup>§§</sup>

The migration of the Roma is believed to have begun around the 10th century CE, likely driven by socio-political upheavals, including the destabilizing effects of foreign invasions—such as those by the Ghaznavids and, later, the Delhi Sultanate—and systemic caste-based oppression within Indian society<sup>\*\*\*</sup> These migrations carried Romani groups through regions of the Middle East, including present-day Afghanistan and Iran, before they eventually dispersed into Europe, particularly the Balkans, by the 14th century. Despite centuries of displacement, marginalization, and forced assimilation across European societies—especially during the medieval and early modern periods—the Roma have managed to preserve significant elements of their Indian cultural heritage.

One of the most enduring expressions of this cultural continuity can be observed in the traditional clothing and jewelry worn by Romani women, which show distinct parallels to Indian folk traditions. Garments such as the *ghañā* (a flared skirt), *choli* (a fitted blouse), and *odhni* (a decorative scarf or shawl) continue to be worn by Romani women, particularly during ceremonial events and cultural performances<sup>†††</sup>.

These garments, often adorned with mirror work, vibrant embroidery, and multiple layers of fabric, closely resemble the traditional clothing of rural Indian women (Lieges, 2007; Gagliardi, 2004). Jewelry plays an equally significant role in both Indian and Romani cultures, where it is not merely an aesthetic choice but also holds symbolic importance in rituals, social identity, and cultural expression. Romani women often wear ornate metal

<sup>‡‡</sup> Matras, Yaron. *Romani: A Linguistic Introduction*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.

<sup>§§</sup> Mendizabal, I., Lao, O., Marigorta, U. M., et al. "Reconstructing the Population History of European Romani from Genome-Wide Data." *Current Biology*, vol. 22, no. 24, 2012, pp. 2342–2349. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2012.10.039>.

<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Cavalli-Sforza, L. L., Menozzi, P., & Piazza, A. *The History and Geography of Human Genes*. Princeton University Press, 1994. Gagliardi, Laura. "Romani and Indian Traditional Dress: Cultural Echoes and Identity." In Kenrick, D. (Ed.), *Roma Culture: Identity, Politics and Representation*. European Cultural Studies Press, 2004.<sup>†††</sup>

ornaments, including bangles, anklets, earrings, and headpieces, which are visually and symbolically linked to Indian jewelry traditions. The continuity of these cultural symbols through generations serves as a powerful reminder of the enduring link between the Roma and their Indian origins, illustrating resilience and the preservation of cultural identity amidst the challenges of migration and adaptation (Hancock, 2002; Gagliardi, 2004). **Kalbeliya dance**<sup>+++</sup> is an improvised art form that originated in Rajasthan, northwest India. The term *Kalbeliya* refers to the community traditionally associated with this genre. However, it is the dynamic dance—marked by rapid spins and acrobatic movements—performed by young Kalbeliya girls in ornate black costumes that has brought this community international acclaim.

A popular Western narrative connects the Kalbeliyas to the Gypsies (Romani people) now spread across Europe and the Middle East. This idea is rooted in their nomadic lifestyle, musical occupations, and marginalized position in Indian society. It was this romanticized perception that initially led to the development of Kalbeliya as a staged performance.

After the “discovery” of **Gulabo Sopera**<sup>§§§</sup> the first Kalbeliya woman to perform onstage in the United States in 1986, many international initiatives began incorporating Kalbeliya dance into projects aimed at uniting Romani artists globally. This process of “Gypsyfying” aimed to present the Romani people as a transnational community with shared Indian origins. The resulting “Gypsy furor,” which peaked in the late 1990s, increased the number of Kalbeliya dancers on international stages from just one (Gulabo Sopera) to around fifty.

### Traditional kalbelia clothes and jewellery

**Rekha Sopera**, a celebrated and iconic kalbeliya dancer of India, is resplendent in a traditional black *ghaghra* (skirt) crafted from approximately 15 meters of fabric. This voluminous garment is composed of triangular panels (*kalis*) intricately stitched together, showcasing a harmonious blend of traditional embroidery techniques.

Among these, the **gota-patti** work stands out, featuring vibrant hues of red, black, yellow, blue, and white. The skirt is ingeniously designed in three distinct circular sections, each highlighting a unique arrangement of the 24 stitched panels that create captivating geometric shapes. The upper section, near the waist, is marked by a striking yellow strip adorned with delicately embroidered floral motifs rendered in multicolored threads—primarily red, blue, and yellow.

The middle and lower tiers of the *ghaghra* emphasize a palette dominated by red, sky blue, and yellow, further enhanced with **round mirror work** that shimmers with every movement. A decorative lace borders the hem of the skirt, followed by a vibrant fabric strip in shades of

<sup>+++</sup>[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/391392784\\_PARALLELISM\\_BETWEEN\\_INDIAN\\_KALBELIYA\\_FOLK\\_DANCE\\_AND\\_EUROPEAN\\_ROMAGYPSY\\_DANCE\\_JNU](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/391392784_PARALLELISM_BETWEEN_INDIAN_KALBELIYA_FOLK_DANCE_AND_EUROPEAN_ROMAGYPSY_DANCE_JNU).

<sup>§§§</sup> <https://hindi.feminisminindia.com/2022/07/21/padmashri-gulabo-sopera-kalbelia-dancer-interview-hindi/>

yellow, blue, pink, and white. The elongated forms and color contrasts of these strips amplify the overall elegance of the ensemble.

Rekha pairs this with a **half-sleeved choli** (blouse), a patchwork of vivid fabrics—yellow, blue, green, and pink—stitched onto a black base, creating a vibrant and visually rich appearance. The sleeves are detailed with four horizontal bands, each echoing the colorful palette of the garment.

Her hands are adorned with **bangles** in green, red, yellow, and white, adding rhythm and color to her expressive gestures. With both hands, she gracefully lifts the ends of her ghaghra, embodying a romantic and playful mood. Her look is completed with a traditional **maatha patti** (forehead ornament), a **black chunari** (veil) bordered in yellow draped elegantly over her head, a delicate red **bindi** adorning her forehead, and a warm smile touched with a hint of red on her lips.

In this captivating pose, Asha Sapera not only showcases the rich heritage of Rajasthani attire but also brings alive the emotional depth and celebratory spirit of traditional Indian dance.



Rekha Sapera kalbeliya dancer  
Image source : Rekha sapera

### Russian Romani Dance

Russian Romani dance, commonly known as Russian Gypsy dance, is a spirited and evocative performance tradition that originated among the Romani communities in Russia.

Distinguished by its passionate intensity and theatrical expressiveness, it is one of the most enduring and visually captivating styles within the broader spectrum of Romani dance.

Rooted in cultural storytelling and emotional expression, the dance is typically accompanied by live music—most notably the resonant sounds of string instruments such as the guitar, which enhance its rhythmic and dramatic effect.



### Choreographic Elements:

The structure of a typical performance follows a compelling arc: it begins with slow, graceful movements, gradually accelerating in tempo and emotional intensity before culminating in a powerful, climactic finale. The dance is characterized by:

- Intricate footwork and percussive tapping
- Expressive hand and arm gestures
- Nuanced shoulder isolations
- Floor work and dynamic use of space
- The theatrical swirling and manipulation of wide, layered skirts
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### Costume and Aesthetic

Costuming plays a central role in the visual narrative of the dance. Female dancers don voluminous, ruffled skirts in vibrant hues such as crimson, emerald, gold, violet, and fuchsia—colors chosen for their dramatic visual appeal. These skirts are designed to respond fluidly to movement, creating ripples, spirals, and circular motifs. At times, the dancer lifts the skirt overhead to form a full, flowing circle, symbolizing elegance and power.

Traditional adornments include:

- Coin necklaces that jingle with movement
- Oversized earrings and stacked bangles
- Floral hair accessories and boldly tied scarves or fringed shawls
- Coin belts worn at the waist to accentuate hip movements

Russian Romani dance is not merely a display of technique or costume—it is a living expression of cultural resilience, freedom, and the unspoken emotional narratives of the Romani people. Through its choreography and aesthetic, it continues to captivate audiences and preserve a rich legacy of artistry and identity.



Russian Gypsy dancer Saeeda kasym,  
**Image source: Saeeda kasym**

The dancer is wearing a red *ghaghra* (traditional long skirt). It is made using 12 to 15 meters of fabric, which has been cut and stitched in *kabaliya* style to give the *ghaghra* a flared shape, making it comfortable and attractive. The *ghaghra* incorporates red, green, black, and pink colors. It is paired with a loose-fitting pink *choli* (blouse). The *ghaghra* features a black border and floral designs in green and red. During the dance performance, the dancer wears black shoes. woman in the image is wearing a vibrant, traditional-style dress that appears to be inspired by Romani or Kalbeliya dance attire. The outfit consists of : A wide, flowing skirt (lehenga-style) with bold floral prints in red and green on a black base. Ruffled layers with striking red and black borders, enhancing the movement and drama of the costume—ideal for spinning and dance. A matching blouse with flared sleeves and coordinated red accents. Gold jewelry, including thick bangles and a statement necklace that adds a traditional yet theatrical flair. Loose, curly hair, adding to the natural, expressive aesthetic often seen in Romani and Kalbeliya dance styles. This kind of costume is often used in folk or fusion dance performances where visual impact is essential. The mix of colors, prints, and textures creates a sense of rhythm and storytelling through clothing. This creates a symmetrical pose with both hands. A smile adorns the dancer's face, and she is expressing a romantic emotion. Kasym has a soft, enigmatic smile and intense eye contact with the viewer. Her slightly tilted head and hand gently placed near her lips add a sense of **grace, flirtation, and charm**. The expression suggests confidence and mystery—typical of performers who are aware of their allure and stage presence. It evokes a feeling of **poetic seduction**, often used in traditional and fusion dance photography to captivate the audience.



Roma Iron Man

Image source: Rimjhim sinha

Mihai silver confctii. jewelry restorer rudimentary technology Bucharest





### Choker Necklace

Mihai silver confetii. jewelry restorer rudimentary technology Bucharest

Image source: Rimjhim sinha

The image showcases an elegant gold-toned necklace displayed on a black velvet stand. The necklace features a distinctive and ornate design, highlighted by a central circular pendant in a deep pink or red hue—possibly crafted from a gemstone or enamel. Intricate metallic detailing surrounds the pendant, enhancing its visual appeal. A fine, wire-like element appears to support the central ornament, suggesting that the piece might be in the process of assembly or temporarily mounted for display purposes. Adjacent to the stand are intricately carved wooden boxes and a translucent plastic container, likely used for storing jewellery or related accessories.



### Indian Kalbelia choker

Image source: Rekha sapera

The ornament shown in the image is known as a “**neck torque**” or “**kanthi choker.**” It closely resembles traditional jewelry styles from Rajasthan (especially among the Kalbeliya community), Gujarat, and South India, where rigid metallic neckpieces have long been an integral part of cultural attire. In the Indian context, such jewelry is a symbol of a woman’s marital status, nobility, and cultural identity. More than mere adornment, these pieces embody deep-rooted traditions and social symbolism. Silver, the primary material used in this choker, is considered in rural India to represent purity, coolness, and the energy of the moon. Silver ornaments are commonly worn by married women and folk dancers, serving

both as decoration and cultural expression. The design of the choker is distinctly circular, with a semi-rigid form. It features floral motifs on both ends, each embedded with a pearl-like element. The centerpiece includes a darker bead, likely black, which enhances the visual appeal of the piece and adds contrast. The intricate patterns along the curved body suggest craftsmanship inspired by natural forms. In Indian tradition, such spiral or coiled designs often symbolize snakes (naga), energetic flow, or the kundalini shakti — the latent spiritual energy said to reside at the base of the spine. This makes the ornament not just an accessory but a representation of spiritual power and feminine energy.



**Roma Ring**

**Image source : Rimjhim sinha**

**Mihai silver confetii. jewelry restorer rudimentary technology Bucharest**

Ring shown in this image appears to be handcrafted. It features an oval-shaped red or coral-like stone, intricately carved with a floral and leaf design. The setting seems to be made of a silver-like metal, with decorative patterns on both sides of the band.

This type of ring is commonly found in traditional or artisanal markets and seems to be inspired by vintage or ethnic styles.



**Indian kalbelia Ring**  
Image source: jyoti sapera

his is a beautifully crafted ring featuring an intricate floral design. The central part is made of a red material, likely **cinnabar** — a traditional **Chinese carving art** in which layers of lacquer are delicately engraved. The ring showcases fine carvings of flowers and leaves, reflecting elegance and artistry.

The edges of the ring are adorned with a gold-toned metal border, enhancing its overall appeal. Such craftsmanship is often found in vintage or antique jewelry, especially within Asian cultures, where handmade pieces are highly valued as symbols of tradition and art.

In many parts of Asia, cinnabar is traditionally considered a symbol of good fortune, health, and prosperity. Jewelry of this kind was often worn with kimonos or traditional attire, particularly on formal occasions. This ring is not just an ornament—it is a glimpse into cultural heritage and timeless beauty.

### Conclusion

There is a notable similarity in the costumes and jewelry used in both Russian Gypsy dance and Indian Kalbeliya (Gypsy) dance. In both traditions, dancers wear colorful ghagras (long skirts) and cholis (blouses). The fabric of the ghagra typically measures around 15 meters in length, allowing the dancer to manipulate its shape and flow freely during the performance.

Both dance styles feature complex footwork, rhythmic tapping, expressive hand gestures (mudras), swirling of the wide skirts, shoulder movements, and floor work. The dances begin in a slow and graceful manner, gradually increasing in speed and intensity until reaching a climactic end.

It is evident that there are significant parallels between the clothing and jewelry of the Roma (Gypsy) people and Indian traditions, strongly suggesting that Roma dance has been

influenced by Indian dance. The strongest points of similarity are found in the dance gestures (mudras), the popular names of the dance forms, and the costumes and ornaments used.

This article analyzes and discusses these elements of resemblance to highlight the cultural connections and shared heritage between the two traditions.

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