

The Indian Origin Debate

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There is great debate around the origin story of the Romani people; some believe we descend from a single migration from Northern India, some do not believe we descend from a single migration from India. Science has revealed, beyond any doubt, that Romani carry Indian ancestry.

However, there are some issues that remain unsolved.

Based on our DNA testing of 10 different European Romani ethnic groups (Slovakian Romungro, Piedmont Sinti, etc.), the average Indian ancestry across all groups is approximately 15.9%. This means that the people we have tested, are on average, 84% non-Indian ancestry. Because 84% is greater than 16%, we feel the 84% is important and worth examining. Looking at the ancestry with the greater percentage may reveal the greater history of a great people.

Moreover, ancestry DNA testing has come a long way in the last 10 years. We now know more about what the “15% Indian” ancestry means. We can now determine what part of India it comes from; what ethnic group in India it comes from; even the professions and religions of those ethnic groups. Today we know that people who show Telugu or Kannada ancestry descend from hereditary goldsmiths, silversmiths, and blacksmiths. (Many of our participants test positive for both!)

Having ancestry DNA tested over 350 Romani, from 12 countries, several key facts regarding the “other” 84% have come to the fore.

1. In the first instance, our Indian ancestry is not primary; it is a part of our ancestry. Based on our ancestry DNA testing of various Romani groups in Europe, the percentage of Indian ancestry versus non-Indian ancestry looks like this is across the several groups:

	Indian Ancestry	Non-Indian Ancestry
Lovari	24.72%	75.28%
Romungro	22.5%	77.5%
German Sinti	19.40%	80.6%
Spanish Gitano	18.17%.	81.83%
Manouche	14.27%	85.73
Piedmont Sinti	10.39%	89.61
Anglo Romani	9.43%	90.57%
Jenish	8.1%	91.90
Average	15.8725%.	84.1275%

The groups we have tested are between 75.28% and 91.90% non-Indian in ancestry. Our research indicates that of all the Romani we have tested, Indian ancestry is a smaller part of their ancestry. Our focus has been on the larger, 75%-91% non-Indian ancestry.

Our research with the Romany groups we have tested has revealed something odd; most of the ‘non-Indian’ ancestry comes from the Jewish diaspora and includes European (Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jewish), North African (Moroccan, Algerian, Tunisian, and Libya Jewish), Arabian peninsula (Yemenite Jewish), Iranian Jewish, Caucasian (Georgian and Azari Jewish), Central Asian (Uzbeki Jewish), Indian (Benei Menashe and Cochin Jewish), and Asian (Kaifeng Jewish).

The super-abundance of Jewish ancestry, with no written account of how that ancestry came into the Romani community, and the diversity of those Jewish ethnicities, raises more than one question. How could a group be so overwhelmingly Jewish and not know it? Or do they know it? More than one participant, when told they are primarily Jewish in origin, say, “Oh we always knew that.”

This finding may only be true for the groups we have tested. Other groups may not have this ancestry outcome. But it is most assuredly true for the 350 people who have volunteered to be tested.

2. Initially, we divided the ancestry of the 350 people tested into Indian and non-Indian ancestry. At a point, it became clear that the line between Indian ancestry and non-Indian ancestry was blurred.

Our Indian ancestry has proven more complicated than originally imagined. In the first instance, most individuals tested had a small percentage of Yemenite Jewish ancestry. This is interesting because the Yemenite Jews established the Indian Jewish communities between 100 B.C. and 200 A.D. on the southern coast of India. In addition to Yemenite Jewish ancestry, we found that in all the groups we have tested, Jewish Indian ancestry predominates their Indian ancestry.

Thus, the distinction between Indian and non-Indian ancestry, rather than a dividing line, indicated a continuum. The 16% Indian ancestry, in many cases, was revealed to be Jewish Indian ancestry. And the 84% of non-Indian ancestry was revealed to be Jewish ancestry of all sorts. It appears that we descend from the Jews of Europe, Jews of India, and the Jews living between those two points. What was once a hard and fast line, Indian ancestry versus non-Indian ancestry, became not very hard and fast. What erased the hard line was Jewish ancestry in both Indian and non-Indian percentages.

3. All 350 persons tested so far demonstrate a layered Jewish ancestry from the four corners of the Jewish diaspora (between 75.28% and 91.90%). There is only one historically and academically established model that could explain this peculiar ancestry. It is possible we descend from the migratory Jewish merchants, who from 1000 BC to 1500 AD, travelled in Caravans (a rolling home and a place of business), in family groups (Caravans), from England to India, and from India to England. It is likely, over the centuries, these international merchants absorbed Jewish DNA from throughout the Jewish Diaspora. There may be other explanations, but this is the one that stands out.

Bidirectional Radanite–Romani migration network model

Instead of:

Northwest India → Persia → Central Asia → Byzantine Empire → Europe

An alternate, and historically and genetically accurate model is:

Northwest India ⇌ Persia ⇌ Central Asia ⇌ Byzantine Empire ⇌ Europe

with additional eastward and southward branches:

Persia ⇌ Mesopotamia ⇌ Levant

Central Asia ⇌ Afghanistan ⇌ Northwest India

Byzantine Empire ⇌ Anatolia ⇌ Persia

Europe ⇌ Byzantine Empire ⇌ Central Asia

If one entertains the thought our ancestors were once Jewish travelling merchants, one Jewish ethnicity, found in almost all participants, becomes especially relevant.

Uzbekistan and Uzbeki Jews

Of the 350 participants in our genetic studies, on average, 80% carried Uzbeki Jewish ancestry. As an example:

Romani Ethnic Group	% of group with Uzbeki Jewish ancestry
Anglo Romani	100%
German Sinti	100%
Slovakian Lovari	100%
Slovakian Romungr	90%
Spanish Gitano.	90%
Manouche	70%
Jenish	60%

What is the significance of this Uzbeki Jewish ancestry?

Uzbekistan and Uzbeki Jews

Uzbekistan occupied a central position in the Silk Road trade. It lays at the geographic crossroads connecting China, India, Persia, and the Mediterranean world. Major cities such as Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva became thriving commercial hubs where merchants exchanged silk, spices, precious metals, textiles, glassware, and manuscripts. These cities were not only markets but also centers of finance, translation, and cultural exchange.

Uzbekistan was a place where traders from East Asia, the Islamic world, and Europe interacted. Samarkand was renowned as one of the wealthiest and most cosmopolitan cities in Eurasia, serving as a key relay point for caravans crossing the deserts and mountains of Central Asia. Because of its strategic location, Uzbekistan enabled goods, technologies, religious ideas, and languages to move in multiple directions. It linked distant civilizations and sustaining the economic networks that defined the Silk Road for more than a millennium.

During the age of the Silk Road, the Jewish community in what is now Uzbekistan, especially in the cities of Bukhara and Samarkand, played an important role in long-distance trade and cultural exchange across Central Asia. These Jews, often referred to today as Bukharan Jews, were part of a broader network of Jewish merchant diasporas that connected Persia, Mesopotamia, India, and the Mediterranean world. They spoke local Iranian languages, particularly Judeo-Persian dialects, which facilitated communication with Persian and Central Asian trading partners. Their strategic location allowed them to serve as intermediaries in the exchange of goods such as silk, spices, precious stones, textiles, and metals.

In addition to commerce, they maintained religious institutions, schools, and communal leadership, preserving Jewish religious life while adapting to the diverse cultural environment of Central Asia. Historical accounts from Islamic geographers and travelers indicate that Jewish merchants were respected participants in Silk Road commerce, and their communities endured for centuries. This indicates Uzbekistan's importance as a stable and influential center within Eurasia's interconnected trade networks.

The Uzbeki Jews stood at the center of the Silk Road. The travelling merchant Jews, who traded from England to India and back, travelled through Uzbekistan and had dealings with Uzbeki Jews. The best way to cement trade relationships was through marriage. For this reason, it is likely the travelling merchant Jews married into Uzbeki Jewish families.

If the Romani we have tested are in fact the descendants of the travelling merchant Jews, their high percentage of Uzbeki Jewish ancestry would make sense. Uzbekistan, during the days the Jewish travelling merchants travelled, was a major destination on their route. They would have likely absorbed Uzbeki Jewish DNA staying over, trading, and passing through.

As Uzbeki Jewish heritage is core to all of the Romani populations tested, it seemed sensible to examine the ancestry of 10 Uzbeki Jews. The test set of 10 Uzbeki Jews included people with two Uzbeki Jews as parents. Moreover, their parents were related to each other. So, the Uzbek Jewish sample was pure Uzbek Jewish.

Average Ethnicity Composition of 10 Uzbeki Jews

Ethnicity Component Average %

West Asian	36.84%
Mediterranean	22.91%
Southwest Asian	15.84%
South Asian	10.87%
West European	7.41%
East European	2.97%
Northeast Asian	0.94%
East African	0.78%
Northwest African	1.09%
Southeast Asian	0.39%
Neo-African	0.26%

If you compare the ancestry composition of Uzbeki Jews to that of many of the Romani we have tested, the results are very similar. Some Romani, from a genetic standpoint, look very similar to an Uzbeki Jews. Here is the ancestry result for 10 Slovakian Romungro.

Average Ethnicity Composition of 10 Slovakian Romungro

Ethnicity Component Average Percentage

South Asian	21.82%
West Asian	20.59%
Mediterranean	21.16%
West European	13.98%
East European	8.95%
Southwest Asian	7.61%
Southeast Asian	3.55%
East African	1.28%
Northwest African	0.82%
Northeast Asian	0.89%
Paleo-African	0.27%
Neo-African	0.06%

9/10 Slovakian Romungro have Benei Menashe Jewish ancestry (90%), and 6/10 had Cochin Jewish ancestry (60%), and 9/10 (90%) had Uzbeki Jewish ancestry.

Comparative Ethnicity Composition Uzbeki Jews vs Slovakian Romungro

Ethnicity Component	Uzbeki Jews Average %	Slovakian Romungro Average %	Diferencen	Higher Population
West Asian	36.84%	20.59%	+16.25%	Uzbeki Jews
Mediterranean	22.91%	21.16%	+1.75%	Uzbeki Jews
Southwest Asian	15.84%	7.61%	+8.23%	Uzbeki Jews
South Asian	10.87%	21.82%	+10.95%	Romungro
West European	7.41%	13.98%	+6.57%	Romungro
East European	2.97%	8.95%	+5.98%	Romungro
Southeast Asian	0.39%	3.55%	+3.16%	Romungro
Northeast Asian	0.94%	0.89%	0.05%	Nearly identical
East African	0.78%	1.28%	+0.50%	Romungro
Northwest African	1.09%	0.82%	+0.27%	Uzbeki Jews
Neo-African	0.26%	0.06%	+0.20%	Uzbeki Jews
Paleo-African	0.00%	0.27%	+0.27%	Romungro

This comparative analysis demonstrates that Uzbeki Jews and Slovakian Romungro share a similar ancestry structure but differ in ancestry proportions.

Uzbeki Jews are overwhelmingly dominated by Iranian and Near Eastern ancestry, which comprises 75.59% of their total genetic composition, reflecting their long-term historical presence in Persia and Central Asia. In contrast, Slovakian Romungro exhibit significantly higher South Asian ancestry (21.82%) as a result their Jewish origins in Southwest India. Romungro also possess considerably greater European ancestry (22.93%), reflecting admixture acquired following migration into Europe.

The differences are as a result of the groups living in different locations over the last centuries. Uzbeki Jews stayed in western Asia and Romani moved through Europe. Both populations retain strong Mediterranean and West Asian components, indicating shared ancestry layers derived from populations associated with historical Silk Road regions.

One significant take away is that Uzbeki Jews, are on average, 10.87% South Asian ancestry. That is a minimum. In some cases, it is as high as 18% South Asian ancestry. In addition to this, of that South Asian ancestry, 80% is Indian Jewish ancestry. (Cochin Jews, Benei Menashe). This genetic finding is consistent with trade history; the Uzbeki Jewish community was linked by trade to the Indian Jewish communities.

As an aside, here we find a paradoxical situation. The percentage of Indian ancestry found in Uzbek Jews is equal to that found in some Romany ethnic groups. And yet, no one calls the Uzbek Jews Indians. No one says, Uzbek Jews are from India. They call them Uzbeki Jews. No one would consider Indian ancestry, albeit Jewish Indian, to be the “dominate” ancestry of the Uzbek Jew. And yet, with Romani people, the same percentage of Indian ancestry results in Romani people being labeled Indian?

Conclusion

In summary, all of the Romani groups tested revealed a substantial genetic connection to the Uzbeki and Southern Indian trade centers. In particular, to the Uzbeki Jewish and Indian Jewish communities. Some groups more than others. While all groups show traces of the Uzbeki Jewish community, the Slovakian Lovari remain the most like Uzbeki Jews. Here are examples of this.

Slovakian Lovari

Average South Asian ancestry:	24.72%
Benei Menashe: 10/10	100%
Cochin Jews: 10 /10	100%
Uzbek Jews: 10 /10	100%

Slovakian Romungro

Average South Asian ancestry.	22.5%
Benei Menashe 9/10	90%
Cochin Jews 6/10	60%
Uzbeki Jews 9/10	90%

Spanish

Average South Asian ancestry:	19.1%
Benei Menashe: 9 / 10	90%
Cochin Jews: 7/10	70%
Uzbeki Jews: 9/10	90%

German Sinti

Average South Asian ancestry:	19.04%
Benei Menashe: 10/10	100%
Cochin Jews: 4/10	40%
Uzbeki Jewish ancestry: 10/10	100%

Manouche

Average South Asian Ancestry:	14.91%
Benei Menashe: 9/10	90%
Cochin Jews: 8/10	80%
Uzbeki Jews: 7/10	70%

Anglo Romani Romani

Average South Asian ancestry:	9.43%
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Benei Menashe: 10/10	100%
Cochin Jews: 7/10.	70%
Uzbeki Jews 10/10	100%

Jenish

Average South Asian ancestry: 8.10%	
Benei Menashe 7/10	70%
Cochin Jews 8/10	80%
Uzbek Jews 6/10	60%

Looking at one facet of the Romani-Jewish connection, the Uzbek Jewish connection, three clear population tiers arise.

Tier 1 — strongest affinity to Uzbek Jews (closest to ancestral population)

- Lovari
- Romungro
- Spanish Gitano

Characteristics:

- Highest South Asian ancestry (~23–25%)
- Strongest Uzbek Jewish affinity
- Least diluted by later European admixture

Tier 2 — intermediate affinity to Uzbek Jews

- Piedmont Sinti
- German Sinti
- Anglo-Romani
- Manouche

Characteristics:

- Moderate South Asian ancestry (~14–20%)
- Strong but reduced Uzbek Jewish affinity
- Significant European admixture

Tier 3 — weakest affinity to Uzbek Jews

- Jenish

Characteristics:

- Lowest South Asian ancestry 8.1%)
- Lowest Uzbek Jewish affinity
- Highest European admixture

Jenish are the most genetically diverged from the Uzbek Jewish population.

In summary, we will return to the central thesis of this article. On average, Romani people are 84% non-South Indian in their ancestry. And that 84% matters. Here we have demonstrated, through genetic testing, that all tested communities have links to the Uzbeki and South Indian trade route. More specifically, they are tied to the Jews that moved goods from Jewish Uzbekistan to Jewish South India.

We have further genetic evidence, which connects the far reaches of Europe, Spain and Germany included, to Uzbekistan. All participants in the study have substantial North African Jewish ancestry (Libyan, Tunisian, Algerian, Moroccan) and European Jewish ancestry (Sephardic and Ashkenazi). Moreover, due to recent archeological finds, we know all tested Romani have DNA connections to medieval Jewish trade centers in England (11th century Norwich cemetery) and Germany(12th century Erfurt Germany Jewish cemetery).

This brings us back to what our DNA testing is revealing. It would appear Romani origin story looks more like this:

Northwest India ⇌ Persia ⇌ Central Asia ⇌ Byzantine Empire ⇌ Europe

Than this:

Northwest India → Persia → Central Asia → Byzantine Empire → Europe.