

The Term Parya: Phonological and Ethnological Issues

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Relations between a language and the people speaking it – the forms and conditions of a language’s existence – are part of the linguistic research of Thomas Oberlies. This article is an attempt to follow a similar pattern, namely making conjectures about the connections of a language and its speakers to their past, although the past in this case is not as far distant as the Old and Middle Indian past explored by Oberlies.

Introduction

Parya is the name of a small ethnic group living in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. They are spread all over the Hisor Valley² and are mostly concentrated in the upper course area of the Surkhandarya River, along the border between the two states. There are more Parya settlements in Tajikistan than in Uzbekistan, and they are found in different regions of the former country. A part of the group, speaking the same language, reportedly lived in Afghanistan, mostly in the province of Laghman (Oranskiy 1977: 24). According to more recent information, Afghan Paryas live in several cities along the Tajik border.

As a rule, Parya settlements are clusters of houses of kin integrated into villages with predominantly Tajik and/or Uzbek populations. The population of the Hisor Valley is multi-ethnic and multilingual. The latter term is used with regard to both the numerous languages spoken there and the multilinguality of the people. Tajik-Uzbek bilingualism is widely spread; a part of the population, especially men, are also proficient in Russian.³ In the 1950s–1960s, when

1 I am deeply grateful to Mr Philip H. Pierce for his insightful corrections of my English and valuable comments and suggestions.

2 The Hisor Valley is usually defined as the territory between the Hisor Range in the north and the Bobotog and Gozi Malik ranges in the south, and between the tributaries of the Kofarnihon River in the east and those of the Surxondaryo in the west.

3 This not only applied to the situation in the Soviet period but applies also to the 21st century.

Oranskiy was collecting data for his book, Arabs, Pashtuns, Afghans, Central Asian Jews (*juhud, jowut*), and a number of further small groups of various stock – among them ones of Indian origin – were part and parcel of the varied ethnic landscape in this area. Unfortunately, there is no relevant information as to the present situation.

The following sections on the Paryas, their life, customs, and relations with the other parts of the population in this area and on their language are largely based on the book *Folklore and Language of the Hissar⁴ Parya (Soviet Central Asia)* by Iosif Oranskiy (1977), the fullest and, in fact, the only totally reliable source of scholarly knowledge about this ethnic group and its language. The information pertains to the period when it was collected, that is, in the 1950s and 1960s. A few notes are based on my written and audio recordings made during fieldwork with the Paryas in the 1970s and at the end of 2022. Accordingly, some statements in the present tense in the article should be approached with caution.

About the group: ethnological information

Among the peoples of Indian origin in Central Asia, the Paryas are an exception in that their Indo-Aryan language is preserved as a full-fledged means of oral communication, whereas the so-called Central Asian Gypsy argots have only retained some Indo-Aryan words. The argots emerged on the basis of the languages acquired by the nomadic migrants from India in the course of their wanderings through Asia and the Near East. Their initial languages had split from the Indo-Aryan continuum more than one thousand years earlier than the language of the Paryas, who migrated to the Hisor Valley from Afghanistan. Paryas considered Laghman province in Afghanistan the place of origin of most families, some of which had settled in Central Asia up to seven generations prior to the present middle generation [cf. (Oranskiy 1977: 20), with regard to the situation in the 1950s–1960s: “the grandfathers of the present middle and even eldest generation”]. Thus they have been living there since at least the mid-19th century, when the Hisor Valley, a province in the Emirate of Bukhara, was under the reign of the Hisor Bey. Obviously, until the late 1970s, there had been no communication between the Hisor Paryas and their kin in Afghanistan. During my field trip to Hisor and Tursunzoda at the end of 2022,

4 The transliteration here follows the orthography of the original translation of the title, Gissar there being rendered as Hissar.

I learned about three Paryas from Afghanistan who had visited these districts. The first of them had come in the late 1970s, the other two (separately) in the early 21st century. Reportedly, neither of the three visitors knew of Paryas in Laghman. All three belong to Kunduz and are descendants of those who had fled from the Soviet Republic of Tajikistan in the 1930s.

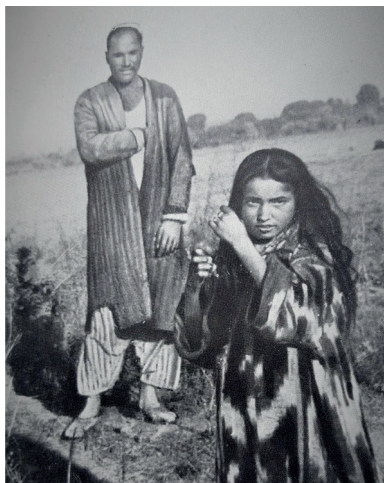


Fig. 1: A Parya girl with her uncle, late 1950s or early 1960s (Oranskiy 1977: inset between pages 128 and 129)

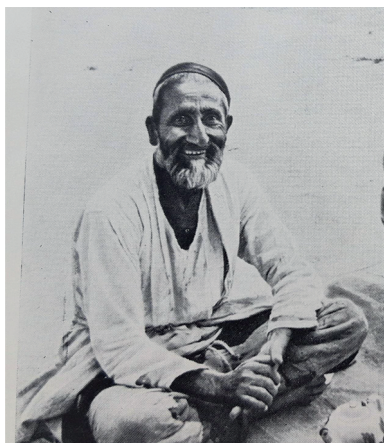


Fig. 2: An elderly Parya man, late 1950s (Oranskiy 1977, inset between pages 96 and 97)

According to the rough estimates made in the early 2000s, the Parya population in Tajikistan was 5,000 (Clifton 2010: 2, Table 1) and 7,500 “in all countries” (Abbess et al. 2005: 4). At present, the Parya speaking population in Tajikistan may be up to 4,000.

Parya is the main endonym of the group. The surrounding population knows them mostly under the name *Afghon* ‘Afghan’ (plural *Afghono*), pointing to their migration to the Hisor Valley from Afghanistan. Sometimes they,

too, call themselves by this name, but they clearly distinguish their group from the Pashto-speaking Afghans. Among the plethora of exonyms applied to the Paryas which they accept as identical in meaning with the word Parya is the term *Changar*. This term seems to be largely unknown to the main population of the area. It is used by members of small groups and individuals who migrated from Afghanistan: the *Shaix-momadi*, Central Asian Gypsies (*Jugī*, *Luli*), *Soḡ(ū)tarosh*, and immigrants from Peshawar (Oranskiy 1977: 30–31).

Several ethnic terms may be used reciprocally by Paryas and some other groups of low social status. Among these terms are *Chachgarak/Chashgarak*, which also Hisor Tajiks sometimes use as the name of the Paryas. The Jugis employ the terms *Kaltuk*, *Lum* (cf. Roma), and *Mazang*. The last term may take the argotic suffix *-tum* > *mazangtum* (cf. the argotic suffix *-tuk* in *Kal-tuk*).

Shahixel, lit. ‘king’s troops’ or ‘king’s kin’⁵, is another name Paryas sometimes call themselves. The term has a varying semantic scope. It may be applied to the group as a whole, to its four major subdivisions, or only to *Kalu*.

The Parya group had the following subdivisions, seven in number: *kalú/kaló*; *juṇí*; *jítāṇ/jitīyāṇ/jitīyā(n)*; *magara*; *bis(i)-yoṇ/bis'(y)āṇ/ bisiyāṇ/bisiyaṇ/bisiyon/bisiyan*; *musli/musallí*; *śuya*.⁶ The subdivision of a group into seven sections is typical of menial castes (Crooke 1890: 62). The major subdivisions forming the nucleus of the Parya group as a whole were *Kalú*, *Juṇí*, *Jítāṇ*, and *Magara*. They are said to constitute the (sub)group *Shahixel*. According to information from Kabul Pashtuns, a tribe of that name exists in Afghanistan, in the area of Laghman and the city of Jalalabad. They are agriculturalists, and their language is Inku (Oranskiy 1977: 23–24). A single, obviously unfinished sentence on one website reads, “The variety of this language that I am familiar with is the Inko dialect of the *Shahi Xel* tribe of Kabul and Peshawar, which is different from the Punjabi ...” (Socialrep).

The seven subdivisions reflect a hierarchical organisation among the Paryas, which, even though in decline, was still pretty well evident in the 1970s from the ideas of a proper marriage. The *Kalu* subdivision, for which the

5 The semantics of the ethnonym is reminiscent of the term ‘Rajput’.

6 All recorded phonetic forms are listed here to give an idea of the range of sound variation. *Jítāṇ* are said not to exist any more (2022).

broader appellation Shahi xel may be used, is the highest and most numerous one. Ideally, a Kalu should marry a Kalu and a Juni should marry a Juni. These two may, if worst comes to worst, intermarry, whereas marital relations with the other subdivisions, especially Bisiyan, are traditionally prohibited (Ibid.: 25–26). We see here a consistent endogamy on the decline. In the mid-20th century, Parya men felt no inhibition in marrying women of other nationalities, with the exception of the Central Asian Gypsies and Central Asian Jews. The most usual intermarriages were with Tajik or Uzbek women; more rarely Parya men married Russian or Ukrainian women. However, giving a Parya girl in marriage outside of the group was looked upon disapprovingly, and such cases were extremely rare. I know of two such marriages in the 1970s. At present such marriages are not unusual, at least for a part of the group.

Two further exonyms of the Paryas are extensions of the appellation Afghans: *Afghono-i siyoruy* (*siyopust*) ‘dark-faced (dark-skinned) Afghans’, as most Paryas have a darker skin than the local population, and *Afghono-i nosfurush* ‘naswar-selling Afghans’, the latter referring to their particular occupation of producing and selling *naswar* (*nasway*, *nas*) ‘chewing tobacco’, ‘snuff’.⁷

Like the majority of the Tajikistan and Uzbekistan population, the Paryas are Sunni Muslims. Their *pīr* was Sheikh Shamsi Tabrizi of Multan, where his tomb is. He is considered the *pīr* of the Changars,⁸ the ethnic term in this context being applied also to the Paryas (Oranskiy 1977: 21, FN 19). (The term Changar will be discussed further below.) The dargah in Mazari-i-Sharif (Afghanistan) was the main pilgrimage place of the Paryas (Oranskiy 1977: 22).⁹ Some connect the community known under the term Shahi xel with Shamsi Tabrizi and consider it his clan (Oranskiy 1977: 21, FN 18).

The Paryas are traditionally agriculturalists, growing wheat, rice, vegetables, and tobacco. From the last of these they make *naswar*. It is not known when they first started engaging in these occupations, which are hereditary and consistent with the low social status of the group, as is usually the case with ethnicities of Indian origin – low caste or tribal – that have converted to Islam.

7 There is a record from the 1880s mentioning the Lulis selling *naswar* at the bazar of Hisor referred to in Oranskiy (1977: 27, FN 44). Using *naswar* was seen as a habit of low classes in Afghanistan (ibid.). Cf. “[...] and, among the Lulis, who sell snuff and tobacco, the eye overcharged with pigment of the inhabitants of the hot plains of India” (Bonvalot 1889, 1: 226), implying the presence of low-caste Indians in Hisor, who mixed with the Lulis.

8 This is a strong argument for a connection between the Changars and the Paryas.

9 The name of the Sufi saint is not mentioned in the book, but it must be the tomb of Hazrat Ali ibn Abi Talib.

It is not possible to make out the exact time of the Paryas' exodus from India. The linguistic characteristics indicate that it probably happened around the middle of the second millennium. According to the results of an analysis using the lexicostatistics method, Parya and Hindi diverged in A.D. 850; Parya and Punjabi, in A.D. 700 (D'yachok¹⁰ 2002). These conclusions need to be thoroughly reviewed.

It should be taken into consideration that the group's migration from the subcontinent to Afghanistan was more likely not a single event but a series of events, involving in some cases travel back and forth, and connections with brethren in the homeland being in no case abruptly terminated. The same can be said about the connections between the Paryas in the Hisor Valley and the members of the group in Afghanistan. Obviously, the Paryas did not own land in Hisor province but were employed there as seasonal agricultural workers, returning to Afghanistan in the months when their labour was not needed. They customarily travelled with their families. This way of life became impossible when in the mid-1930s the border between the Tajik and Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republics on the one hand and Afghanistan on the other was closed, and those Paryas who at that point in time were in the Soviet territory had no choice but to stay there. It is not impossible that at first some of them might have had nothing against such a turn in their life: it is known that a pro-Russian attitude was popular with some Afghans and also some Indians. However, the purges, orchestrated from Moscow, hit also the Paryas. Nobody knows exactly how many of them were arrested as "Afghan spies" and sent to Stalin's labour camps. Almost none of these unfortunate people survived.

The group had obviously lived aloof from the local people even before this bitter experience, but afterwards they began to feel suspicious of any stranger. Of course, they might have treated their language as 'secret' during all the long time of living outside of their original social context, and maybe even before they left India, but the fact is that in the mid-1950s it took Oranskiy many months and a lot of patience and understanding to overcome their mistrust before he could start collecting language data. The mistrust was explained by the traumatic experience.¹¹

10 The transliteration of Russian names and titles is carried out according to the ISO 9: 1995, GOST 7.79-2000 (B).

11 This chapter of Parya history is not included in the book by Oranskiy (1977) I refer to in this article. I know it from his oral stories. In 1973, a Parya friend my age secretly showed me the passport for the whole family, which his grandfather had issued by the Consulate of Afghanistan in Tashkent in the late 1930s. Such documents were still things that were not to

About the Parya language¹²

Usually the language is named the same as the group: Paryá/Paryó. With the affixal element *-sadi/-sazi* the ethnic name is used in contexts with verbs of speaking and of cognitive activity, e.g. *paryá-sadi gal kar* ‘Speak (in) Parya!’; *tu paryasazi samjai?* ‘Do you understand Parya?’. The formant is not used in connection with any other words and its origin is unclear.

Parya may be most suitably classified as a language of the North-Western subgroup, along with Punjabi, Lahnda, Sindhi, Western and Central Pahari, and Nepali.¹³ The *Glottolog* classifies it as a member of the Indo-Aryan Central zone → Subcontinental Central Indo-Aryan → Rajasthani subgroup (Hammarström et al. 2021).

Parya is spoken at home and, when outside, only among community members. In the 2010s, a group of members of SIL International in cooperation with two Paryas developed the Parya alphabet by adding several signs to the Tajik alphabet (on the basis of the Cyrillic script). There are three publications in Parya, two of them children's primers. However, normally Parya do not write in their language. If they occasionally do, it's in messengers. So, as far as I could observe, they never use their alphabet. For centuries, the language existed surrounded by various Indo-Iranian languages. Among these are Punjabi, most probably Saraiki, and some other north-western Indo-Aryan languages. Its specific features evince similarities also with languages/dialects of Western Pahari and Rajasthani (Zograf & Oranskaia 2011).

As for the Iranian group, it is clear that Pashto and Tajik dialects were contact languages. In the course of their migration from South Asia to Central Asia, Paryas acquired some Tajik dialects of Afghanistan as their second mother tongue. For the last 100–150 years they have been living among Tajik- and/or Uzbek-speaking populations in the valleys of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, these languages being the medium of instruction in schools and – in some cases – college and university education. Besides Uzbek, some minor Turkic languages of Central Asia may also belong to the linguistic repertoire of sections of the Paryas. A Russian impact is seen in the vocabulary.

be discussed with outsiders. In 2022, I was told that the passport had been lost.

12 Registered in *Ethnologue* with the code ISO 639-3 and identifier paq (Eberhard et al. 2022).

13 Cf. (Masica 1991: 455), with a reference to Cardona. According to this classification, the subgroup includes also Kashmiri.

Parya grammatical categories are unstably mapped on every tier of the grammatical structure. Its vocabulary bears multiple traces of the contact languages, displaying now and again curious overlapping of the same lexemes borrowed in different periods in various phonological forms.

The specific features of Parya to be mentioned here are:

In the phonology it is the trinomial opposition of consonants, lacking the voiced aspirated consonants (which at some point changed to voiceless unaspirated). The question whether this change led to the development of tones in Parya, as in Punjabi and some other north-western languages, has not been explored yet. It looks like Parya does not have lexical tones.

Among the most significant morphological and morphosyntactic features, pronominal clitics, a special negative verb form in the present indefinite tense, and the particle *de* of the progressive aspect should be mentioned.

The nominal masculine singular endings (including those of participial forms) are *-o*.

The linguistic context

As is well known, language is neither the only nor the main factor determining the origin and genetic connections of a community. However, it can point the direction in which the search should proceed and, in combination with evidence from other aspects of an ethnic group's existence, provide at least hypothetically reliable results.

An array of alternations – phonological and phonetic changes – in multitudinous non-standardised forms of speech in South Asia provides space for conjecturing about whether one or the other ethnonym could be a cognate of the word Parya.

When we glimpse the linguistic landscape around the Punjab, in particular the unwritten languages and dialects of West Pahari, as well as idioms of Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Maharashtra, we see a plethora of alternations that destabilise some salient features of the Indo-Aryan phonological system: consonant aspiration, cerebral consonants, vowel quantity, and more.

Alternations lead to the dissolving of phonemic oppositions, including ones seen as the fundamental oppositions of Indo-Aryan. New oppositions are coming into existence. One of them, based on tone features, which replaced the opposition [+/- voiced] aspirated consonants, is present in Punjabi and several other languages/dialects in the Punjab and surrounding areas. This

phenomenon is connected with the processes of deaspiration and devoicing, which can be traced in different parts of Aryandom, as well as in the languages of European Gypsies and in Parya.

Some New Indo-Aryan languages in the Indian subcontinent (e.g. Punjabi, Dogri, Gojri, Kashmiri, and Shina) have three series of plosive consonants (instead of the ‘classical’ Indo-Aryan set of four) characterised by [+/- voice] and [+/- aspiration], cf. the section on Indo-Aryan phonology by Pramod Pandey (2011: 26). To these we should add Domaaki in India (Weinreich 2011: 167–168), a number of Dardic languages and further Western Pahari languages besides Dogri (Zoller 2011: 207–208). In most languages mentioned above in this paragraph, the loss of the voiced aspirated plosives and affricates and of the voiced glottal fricative is compensated by lexical tones with binary or three-way opposition (Zoller 2011: 207–208; Baart 2003; Khan 2017; Bhatia 1975). Similar processes affecting the segmental units are observed in eastern languages of India (Sharma 2014). Outside of the subcontinent, some Gypsy languages underwent devoicing of voiced plosives (Matras 2002: 35), and in some cases also their deaspiration (ibid.: 54; Matras & Tenser 2020: 135). The consonant system of Parya has the Punjabi type three-way opposition of plosives.

The phonetic processes in Indo-Aryan relevant in the search for possible correspondences of the term are: (1) deaspiration and devoicing of plosives and affricates, which is especially important; (2) elision of /h/; (3) alternation of the liquids r/l; (4) alternations r/n and l/n; (5) variation in vowel length; (6) fugitive /i/ in the position {-iyV}.

Examples¹⁴

(1) Deaspiration and devoicing of plosives

Punjabi, W. Pahari [kò:ɽa:], Parya *kōrō* ~ Hindi ghoṛa ‘horse’;
 Bhil dialects *pūtē* ~ Hindi *bhūt* ‘devil’; Molise Romani *tou-* ~ Hindi
dho- ‘to wash’;

14 Sources of the examples: For the Bhil dialects (Grierson 1907) and (in phonetic transcription) (Vunnamatla & Varkey 2018); for Parya (Oranskiy 1977) and notes of the present author; for Romani (Matras & Tenser 2020); for Hindi and Punjabi, from various printed sources; and for Bundeli, from the notes of the present author.

(1a) Devoicing of voiced aspirated plosives

Bhil dialects *khōrō* ~ Hindi *ghoṛā* ‘horse’, *phāī* ~ Hindi *bhāī* ‘brother’;

Romani *khas* ~ Hindi *ghās* ‘grass’, *thov* ~ Hindi *dho-* ‘to wash’;

(1b) Deaspiration of aspirated plosives

Bhil dialects *ādō* ~ Hindi *ādḥā* ‘half’; *gobi* ‘cauliflower’ ~ Hindi *gobhī* ‘cabbage’;

Parya *khā-/ka-* ‘to eat’;

(2) Elision of /h/

Bhil dialects [koŋi] ~ Hindi *kohnī* ‘elbow’; Parya *par/pār* ~ Hindi *pahār* ‘mountain’;

(3) alternation of the liquids /r/

Bundeli [nikəl/nikər gəjə] ‘went out’; Parya *kar/kal* ‘do’ – Imp. 2SG;

(4) alternations *r/n* and *l/n*

Hindi *Panmar/Parvar* ‘a Rajput clan’; Parya *liker-/nikil-* ‘go out’;

Bhil dialects [lōhī]/[nōhi] ‘blood’; *jalan/janam* ‘birth’;

(5) variation in vowel length

Bhil dialects [baḍi]/[bʌhri] ‘broom’; Parya [mi]/[mi] ‘rain’;

(6) fugitive *i*

Parya *biṭiya/biṭya* ‘girl, daughter’, *tiyān/tyān* ‘attention’.

These phonetic and phonological phenomena are present all over the subcontinent. Those characterising the languages in Aryandom’s north-west are the most relevant with regard to the subject of the discussion. Their existence in the west of its territory also deserves attention.

The level of phonetic fluidity is high. It may be – and, as a rule, is – correlated with the level of ethnic and social fluidity as well as group migration. Selection of ethnic terms to be tentatively correlated with the word Parya and a discussion of them are conducted with this in mind.

The phonological characteristics determining the selection of candidate ethnonyms are those of the initial consonant, which allows three interpretations: (1) [p] corresponds to the common Indo-Aryan *p*; (2) [p] corresponds to the common Indo-Aryan **bh*; (3) [p] is the fossilised variant of the alternation *p/b*.

The tangle of ethnonyms

Inhabitants of Central Asia and Indians, when shown photos of Paryas, relate them without fail to Gypsies. Of course, this connection, established rather intuitively, cannot be regarded as a scholarly argument, but it does underpin the idea of the peripatetic past of the group and its relation to other Gypsy(-like) groups, in the subcontinent often subsumed under the name Dom. What changes in composition, name(s), and language the group has gone through on its wanderings can only be hypothesised.

There is no doubt that the Paryas had at some point migrated from India, and it is a tempting task to try to trace back their relationship to a community in the country of origin. The hypothesis by Iosif Oranskiy (1977) relating the Parya group to the Changars is persuasive; however, the term Parya remains unaccounted for, as its correlate in the subcontinent is unclear. Hence an attempt to present a review of the Indian ethnonyms whose sound form is similar to ‘Parya’ and an assessment of each of them with regard to its possible – or impossible – relation to this term would have as its objective to arrive at a combination (or combinations) of both phonetic and ethnological characteristics which would be acceptable as the counterpart(s) of the Central Asian ethnonym and might point to a connection to the Parya group. The results of the procedure cannot be seen as a final conclusion. They will just be reflections on what the Paryas’ relationship to the peoples of the Indian subcontinent might be.

Let us first discuss Oranskiy’s hypothesis. Its strong side is, first, that the term Changar is used in reference to Paryas by individuals and low-status groups from Afghanistan and that the Paryas seem to accept it as a designation of their group. Second, five of the Parya group’s subdivisions have names similar to those of the “castes” of the Changars of Lahore. According to Leitner (1880: 1–2) the subdivisions of the Changars are: Kále, Magharé, Jiteyán, Jenú, Basiyán (cf. Parya: Kalu, Magara, Jitiyan, Juni, Bisiyan). Third, both Paryas and Changars are largely employed in agriculture, particularly as reapers [on Changars see (Ibbetson 1883: 574)]. Oranskiy suggests looking for the correspondence to the term Parya in the names of Jat clans with initial *bh-*,

which are mentioned by Rose (1911: 84–86, 90) as recorded in the Punjab [referred to by Oranskiy (1977: 27)]. As *bh-* corresponds to *p-* in Parya (as in Punjabi), such terms as Bhárah or Bharái would have the phonetic form similar to Parya: *Párah, *Parái. The major questions with regard to the hypothesis concern the phonetic form and the difference in the social status between the Changars and the Jats. It is unclear when the initial voiced aspirated *bh-*, existent at the end of the 19th century, could have changed to *p-*, this shift having already taken place in Punjabi. As to the ethnic aspect, the Jats occupy a higher position in the social hierarchy than the Changars. As reported in the works of the late 19th century, the latter were outcastes, whereas Jats were not radically distinguished from the noble Rajputs, and transits in both directions – up and down – between the two were possible. As summarised by Ibbetson, “it is impossible to define between Jats and Musalman Rajputs” (Ibbetson 1883: 105). On the other hand, the Jats in the west of the Punjab were seen as low people, unlike those of the central and eastern Punjab (*ibid.*: 109). Both names – Jats and Changars – are comprehensive appellations designating conglomerates of various groups. The name Changar was given to various wandering groups (Leitner 1880: 3). Many Muslim groups engaged in agriculture who had no idea of the ethnic particulars of their origin as converted Hindus were summarily called Jats. In view of the tangle of ethnic names and constant social restructuring, it is theoretically admissible that even a Changar group engaged in agriculture could fall under the designation Jat and bear the name of a Jat subdivision.

Changars are seen as related to the Doms (Rose 1911: 184), who are generally identified with the Gypsies and whose name is reflected in the word Rom(a), the designation of a branch of European Gypsies. These and several other low castes claimed to be indigenous in the area of Sialkot (*ibid.*), at the foot of the Himalayas. This information is consistent with the data of Leitner (1880), according to whose Changar respondents they had come from the Darap region (Sialkot), while Kashmir and the Patan mountains were the places of origin of their ancestors.

The postulated origin of the Changars in the Himalaya hills suggests a link between them and the Doms of the Hills with their various subdivisions, all of whom worked in the fields. Such minor agricultural castes were well represented among the population in the Hill tracts, where the Hill Rajput “looks upon agriculture as degrading”, while in the plains, where the Jat “prefers to do his own cultivation”, they were practically absent (Ibbetson 1883: 27).

Among the minor agricultural castes was Pahri/Paheri/Pahriya (Crooke 1890: 70). This caste name, meaning ‘watchman, guard’ (< Skr. *praharin* (Turner 1968: 500)), denotes a menial caste whose traditional occupations are watchmen and seasonal agricultural workers. The word *praharin* has only a few New Indo-Aryan derivatives. They appear in two sound forms: retaining the medial /h/ and those with elided /h/. The former is represented by the three variants of the word given above as well as Oriya, Kumauni *paharī*, Hindi *paharī*, *pahriyā*, and Bengali *pahari*; the latter sound form is seen in the Assamese *parīyā*, which is phonetically the closest to the term Par(i)ya.

The word *praharin*, a Sanskrit adjective form with the suffix *-in*, derives from the Sanskrit noun *prahara* ‘a division of time = about 3 hours, a watch’ (cf. Turner 1968: 499), which has more New Indo-Aryan derivatives than the adjective. Some of them reflect the same alternation between the variants of this word with and without the medial [h]. The variants with the elided [h] are present in western (Marathi *pār*, Gujarati *pār*, Lahnda/Awankari *pā`r*), north-western (Western Pahari *pār*), and eastern (Bengali, Assamese *par*) languages (ibid.). The geographical distribution of this [h]-less variant underpins the notion of an exodus of the Paryas from the north-western region of the subcontinent. It is conceivable that the Assamese word is not the only New Indo-Aryan derivative of the stem *praharin* with the dropped /h/, so that a generalised form **Pār(i)yā* can be reconstructed. It is a worthy candidate for the counterpart of the Central Asian group’s name; the phonetic similarity is supported by the ethnic and geographical context.

Another term phonetically close to Parya is P a h a r i y a (*pahāriyā*). It is a common name for mountain dwellers, usually pejoratively coloured, meaning ‘from/of the mountains (or hills)’. As an ethnic term, the word is applied to the hill tribes of eastern India and Bangladesh. These are S a u r i y ā P a h ā r (/ṛ) i y ā, M ā l P a h ā r (/ṛ) i y ā, and K u m ā r b h ā g P a h ā r (/ṛ) i y ā,¹⁵ who live in Jharkhand, Bihar, Odisha, West Bengal, and Bangladesh. In terms of its phonetic form, P a h ā r i y ā is another promising correspondence to Parya. Elision of intervocalic [h] and alternation [ṛ]/[r] are widespread phenomena, which are present also in Parya. It is on the socio-cultural side that the compound terms including the word P a h ā r i y ā are not compatible with the Central Asian group. The Paharias speak Dravidian

15 In Hindi sources the word is usually written with the sign ऋ /r/, rarely ॠ /ṛ/ (Cf. List of Tribals).

languages (varieties of Malto), no author mentions their presence in any other part of the subcontinent at the end of the 19th or the first half of the 20th century, they have never made their living from seasonal agricultural work, and they did not convert to Islam (cf. Tiwary 2020). Neither do they have any traceable connection to the Gypsies.

A large community related, like the Doms, to the Gypsies is the Bhils. They are found in the eastern regions – in the states of Bihar, Jharkhand, and West Bengal – and also in Madhya Pradesh, but the majority of them live on the western side of the subcontinent. Bhil is, like Dom, Jat, Rajput, etc., an umbrella term. The community includes a number of subdivisions, which may be registered as tribes or castes, depending on in what state or province they live. Their languages are distinct, and the speakers of them vary physically: the hill Bhils¹⁶ are described as looking purely Dravidian, whereas plains Bhils are hardly distinguishable from low-caste Hindus (Hassan 1990. Vol. 1: 66–67). There is an opinion that the Bhils, like the Doms, are of Dravidian origin. Their languages, like those of the Gypsy groups, are basically varieties of Gujarati (Grierson 1922: 6). These languages show the initial stage of the process which led to the restructuring of the consonant system in Punjabi and further languages in and around the region. Some Bhil dialects display devoicing of the common Indo-Aryan voiced aspirated consonants, e.g. *khōrō* ~ Hindi *ghorā* ‘horse’; *phāi* ~ Hindi *bhāi* ‘brother’, while the aspiration of voiced consonants is usually not realised, e.g. *ādō* ~ Hindi *ādḥā* ‘half’ (Grierson 1907: 10).

The Bhils were for ages infamously known as daring marauders, until in the mid-19th century the British gave them the facilities to settle down as cultivators and field labourers (Hassan 1990. Vol. 1: 69–70). In the second half of the 19th century, they were mostly found in Gujarat and the northern Deccan, where the majority of them live at present.

One of the Bhil subtribes is Bhilala. They trace their descent from the marriage of a Rajput with a Bhil woman and consider themselves to be of a higher social status than most Bhils (Enthoven 1990. Vol. 1: 153). Their language (or dialect) is mutually intelligible with the surrounding Bhil dialects. Among its varieties is Parya Bhilali, which was first registered, to my knowledge, by Vunnamatla and Varkey (2018). During my field trip to the village of Bhorwada, Raipur tehsil, Barwani district, Madhya Pradesh in February 2020, the

16 The hills are those of the Western Ghats (Sahyadri), Aravalli, and the western Satpura Range.

Parya Bhilalas living there explained the Parya ([pɑr(ɪ)jə/pəɾɪjɐ]) part of their ethnic name as derived from the word [pɑr] /pār/ ‘(on) the opposite bank or side’ and the ethnonym as ‘the Bhilalas living on the other bank of the Narmada’ as seen from the right bank. The village is indeed on the left bank of the river, so Vunnamatla and Varkey (2018) are most probably right in interpreting the name Parya as an outsider name.



Fig. 3: An elderly Parya Bhilala man, village Bargão (Badgaon), zila Barwani, M.P. (photo by Oranskaia, February 2020)



Fig. 4: Parya Bhilala ladies, Zila Barwani, M.P. (photo by Oranskaia, February 2020)

Ethnonyms – obviously exonyms – meaning people who live on the opposite side of a natural barrier are found also in the Himalayas. These are Gaṅgāpariyā (Gaṅgā-pariyā ‘the Ganges-on the other side’), i.e. ‘the language or country across the Ganges’, another name for Ṭehrī Gaṛhwālī (Zoller 2011: 198), and P a r m i (or P ā r i m) spoken in Baramulla district, in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. The latter term was used by the Kashmiris of the *Vale of Kashmir* to refer to the highlanders who spoke this language.

It is explained as a variant of the Kashmiri word *apārim* ‘from the other side’ (Akhtar & Rehman 2007). Both terms are formed with the same root *pār-* ‘(on) the other side’ as the word Parya used in combination with Bhilali.

Phonetically, each of the two words with spatial meaning – the Bhilali P a r y a ([pɑr(ɪ)jə/pɛrɪjɐ]) and Garhwali G a ṅ g ā - p a r i y ā – coincides with the name of the Hisor Paryas. Could either of them indeed be its counterpart? The first conclusion concerning both is that they are clearly ethnic exonyms. However, it is well known that exonyms may turn into endonyms. Considering each of them separately, we see that the Garhwali *-pariyā* might suit the search criteria geographically, as it refers approximately to the region where the Changars originated, but it does not look like a full word, and in combination with Gaṅgā relates to a concrete linguonym. This assumption does not work.

As for the Parya Bhilalas, the phonetic characteristics of the Bhil languages (devoicing and deaspiration of voiced consonants), the Bhils’ usual occupation as agricultural workers, and their relationship to the Gypsies – these three factors taken together – would be an argument for considering the Bhils as an ethnic milieu from which the Hisor Paryas could possibly have separated off. The issue of their religion may be brushed aside. It is true that the number of Muslim Bhils in India is small, but almost all Bhils in Pakistan’s Sind province are Muslims. They ended up in the south of it under the pressure of famines in the late 19th century. During the same period others of them moved to Rajputana and the Central Provinces (Enthoven 1990. Vol. 1: 151), but there is no mention of the Bhils in the Punjab or anywhere else in the northern parts of the subcontinent. This is a strong counterargument to the notion of the Bhil origin of the Hisor Paryas.¹⁷ It together with the fact that the term Parya is used only when compounded with Bhilala sways us towards a negative answer to the question whether the Parya Bhilalas may be identified as the community from which the Central Asian Paryas broke off. In spite of this conclusion some further information about the Bhils may be useful for the present discussion, namely concerning the five matching names of the Parya and Changar subdivisions.

As was mentioned above, the Bhilalas claim their origin on the paternal side from the Rajputs. They are not the only ones among the Bhils who do so. Those who could prove their claim were known as Ujwāla¹⁸ ‘bright’, ‘clean’,

17 However, given the conceded vagueness of the discussion here, it is admissible to assume scenarios, parts of which would have to be reconstructed, that would connect the Paryas with the Bhils.

18 Standard Hindi *ujjval*.

‘white’, whereas those whose Rajput origin was not recognised by the community were called Kāla ‘black’ (Enthoven 1990. Vol. 1: 153–154). The latter term must have the same meaning and etymology as the Parya Kalú. The difference between the two is that the terms, in spite of being virtually one and the same word, encode different attitudes. If Kāla as applied to the Bhils has a pejorative meaning, Parya Kalú designates the highest of that group’s subdivisions. This inconsistency might be explained by another dichotomy in the Bhils’ social organisation. A large, usually multiclan territorial unit of Bhils is called a *pal*.¹⁹ Those members of the community who rather strictly follow the traditional lifestyle and customs are called Palia Bhils; those outside the *pal* are known as Kalia (very probably from *kālā* ‘black’) Bhils. The former call themselves Ujle (pl.) ‘clean ones’ (same as Ujwāla, see above) and look upon the Kaliya Bhils as Mele (pl.) ‘dirty ones’. However, the Kalia Bhils see the relation from the opposite perspective and apply the word *ujle* (pl.) ‘pure’ to themselves, their reason being that they are exposed to the outside culture and thus are more enlightened than those sticking to the *pal* norms of life (Singh 1994: 120–121). Even though the connection between the Hisor Paryas and Bhils is highly doubtful, a similar shift in the ethnic semantics could be the reason why it is the Kalú Paryas who are in the top position within the group hierarchy.

Ethnic terms whose phonetic form strongly suggests the meaning ‘black’ in New Indo-Aryan are numerous and occur in various Indian communities. Thus, Kale is a subdivision of the Dhangars, a shepherd and blanket-weaver caste (Hassan 1990. Vol. 1: 166). In Spain and southern France, Gypsies are called Calé, in Finland Kaale (Pstrusińska 2013: 107). In India, there are still more terms comparable to Kalú.

Correspondences to other subdivisions of the Hisor Parya group are found among ethnic names within large mixed communities, although only sporadically. Among them are communities known under the name of Musale (cf. Musalli), which is a section of the weaver caste, which at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century was found chiefly in the Marathas’ territory (Hassan 1990. Vol. 2: 578); Musalli, which is used in the south of Afghanistan for Gypsy-like groups and is there synonymous with the term Jat (Pstrusińska 2013: 64, with reference to L. Dupree); the name M a g a d²⁰ (cf. Magara), the name of a section of the Marwari–Mesris (ibid.: 492);

¹⁹ Meos also display the *pal* principle of organisation.

²⁰ Maybe related to Magadh.

M á g a r , the name of a Bhil clan (Enthoven 1990. Vol. 1: 157); and J ú n (cf. Juni), the name of a subsection of the Jats (Ibbetson 1883: 130).

The above exemplify occurrences of one and the same ethnonym being used to designate entirely different groups. The opposite is also true: one and the same group may be referred to with entirely different names (cf. Crooke 1890: 70, 97–98).

Getting back to the discussion of the name Parya, I would like to give some ethnic names that look phonetically identical or similar to Parya, or may be interpreted as phonetic variants of it. Several ethnic names look, phonetically, fully identical with or similar to Parya, but on other grounds each of them resists interpretation as the correlate of the term for this group.

- Parya, used in Meerut for a low-status Brahman clan (Crooke 1890: 54);
- Pariah/Paraiyan (sg.), Paraiyar (pl.) – the name of a low caste in Tamil Nadu, which in European languages became a synonym for ‘outcaste’ (Yule & Burnell 1886: 513);
- Parya – a backward (Dalit) caste in Bihar listed in (Mathur 2004: 258) but about which, unfortunately, I could not find any information.

In the light of the devoicing and deaspiration in Gypsy languages, such names as Bárya, a subdivision of the Hill Doms (Crooke 1890: 70); Bária, a Bhil clan of Gujarat and Khandesh (Enthoven 1990. Vol. 1: 156); and Bharia, a Dravidian-speaking tribe in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra (Singh 1994: 110) could be regarded as phonetically corresponding to the ethnonym Parya. Given the alternations *r/l* and *r/n*, the same would be true of the term Palya, a subsection of the Bhils (see above), and Paniyan in Kerala (Singh 1994: 974–975). On other grounds, though, each of these terms resists interpretation as the correlate of Parya. Still, who knows with certainty what paths a peripatetic group has followed, with what other communities it has been in contact, what its staple occupation(s) have been, and what language(s) it has spoken?

By way of a conclusion

The rhetorical question closing the previous section summarises the essence of the present review. On the basis of the available information, it is impossible to arrive at a water-tight conclusion about the South Asian counterpart of Parya in Central Asia, one that delivers a place and ethno-linguistic milieu from which the group set off on its own. Several ethnic names have been selected on the basis of their phonetic-phonemic characteristics and discussed from an ethnological perspective. When the possible alternations, consonant shifts, metatheses, and elisions are taken into consideration, ethnonyms that have nothing to do with Parya can be interpreted as phonetic variants of this name, with seemingly credible ethnological interpretations being given that would not for their part exclude such a possibility. The phonetic jumble is aggravated by the fact that in most works of the 19th to early 20th century (the most important sources), ethnonyms are written in Roman letters without diacritic signs. The same is, unfortunately, true of a number of works of the last decades. However, all this does not mean that none of the assumptions may be taken seriously. The most probable connection of the term Parya is to the name of the menial caste Pahriya, whose main means of livelihood is seasonal agricultural wage work. More particularly, the caste forms a subsection of the Hill Doms in the area where Western Pahari is spoken. This connection would underpin the hypothesised relation between the Hisor Paryas and the Changars.

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