

The Zakhring Community of Arunachal Pradesh: Notes on a Lost Tribe

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Abstract

This research deals with the Zakhring tribe, one of the least known tribes of the world. They are found in small numbers (less than 1000) in the remote and frontier areas of Arunachal Pradesh, geographically located in India's North East. This is a tribe, perceived to have migrated from Tibet and settled in the Walong and Kibito circle, Anjaw district of Arunachal Pradesh, whose numbers seems to be decreasing over time and, thereby, facing gradual disappearance. Drawing upon ethnographic research and interviews in the Walong and in the Kibito circle in Arunachal Pradesh and in Tibet, I attempt to describe this tribe.

Key words: Zakhring, Meyor, Ethnographic Research, Interviews, Arunachal Pradesh, India

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Introduction

This article makes sketches of the largely unresearched tribe of the world called Zakhring (or as Zackrinc as referred to by Jean Kingdon-Ward, 1952, an English botanist). Geographically, Zakhings are positioned in Walong, a cantonment and an administrative town and Kibito circle, Anjaw district located in the frontier of Arunachal Pradesh. It is to be noted here that, Arunachal Pradesh is one of the remotest states of North East India, sharing international boundaries with Bhutan in the west, Tibet in the north and Myanmar (erstwhile Burma) in the east. The very remote (with limited metaled road access, rugged and hilly landscape, frequent landslides, little or no public transport) and the sensitive geographical location of this tribe in itself reflects the impediments posed on the academicians in gaining access to study this tribe, thereby, the scholars remain disinterested and the result is that the Zakhings remained a 'least studied' tribe. In the said context, Aiyadurai (2011: 459) argue that "because of limited accessibility and lack of anthropological enquiry" in the border areas continue to hinder academic research. Besides, Zakhings are 'numerically insignificant' and have been considered either as 'migrants' or 'refugees', and therefore, neglected in academic research (Aiyadurai, 2011). However, this group of tribe is nearly on the verge of extinction, therefore, it remains paramount to learn about them. Based on ethnographic research and interviews conducted in 2013 with the Zakhings and Meyors in Walong and Kibito and in the border areas of Tibet, this article is an attempt to draw upon the Zakhring tribe—how this tribe lost its identity and came to be labelled as Meyors. The following section discusses a brief background of this tribe.

Background

The 1978 Gazetteer of Lohit district mentions that Zakhings and Meyors are separate groups. The Census of India (1981) could find only 14 Zakhring people which declined from 23 (Census of India, 1971), while the population of the Meyors increased from 100 (Census of

India, 1971) to 238 (Census of India, 1981). My ethnographic field observation reveals that Zakhings and Meyors are considered as synonymous. Therefore, taken together the total number of both the tribes stood at 249 (Singh, 1995). Evidence suggests that in 2002, the total number of both these groups stood at 300 (Aiyadurai, 2011). The empirical observation in 2013 further reveals that the total population, including the newborns, was below 1000 (Chung Meyor, Meyor Welfare Association, Walong). In 1988, the Meyors were officially recognised as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) of Arunachal Pradesh. In the wake of the plummeting numbers of Zakhings on one hand, and perhaps the economic need to avail the conveniences provided for ST status by the Government of India (GoI) could have roused the Zakhings to label themselves as Meyors. These two tribal groups are also referred to as Charumba (Barua, 1995). In the next subsection, I discuss the historical background related to Zakhings.

Historical Background

It remains unclear as to the origins of the Zakhings, who are traditionally paddy cultivators, strictly profess and practise Buddhism (Hinayana sect). It is assumed that the Zakhings immigrated over to Arunachal Pradesh in two waves from the north of Tibet. The first group perhaps arrived in the later part of 1800, and the second group is perceived to have arrived in the early part of 1900 and settled themselves on the banks of the river Lohit. This is evident from the distinct dialects the two groups speak— Lower Zyphe and Upper Zyphe.¹

¹ Peoples of the Buddhist World-Asia harvest, available at:<http://asiaharvest.org/wp-content/themes/asia/docs/people-groups/India/Zakhring.pdf> (accessed 23 September 2015)



Figure 1: A ZakhringMan in Walong (Source: Author)

However, Jean Kingdon-Ward (1952) commented that Zakhings bear dissimilarity with that of the Tibetans. In the words of Jean Kingdon-Ward (1952: 104), “[t]hey [Meyor/Meyer and Zakhing] as are known variously as Maiyi or Zakhing....They are neither Mishmi nor Tibetan, though they speak a language that is understood (with difficulty) by Tibetans”. Kingdon-Ward (1952) also argues that although the Zakhings might wear outfits and dresses like the Tibetans and follow Buddhism, however, Zakhings are “much darker in complexion and coarser in feature” (104). Again, to further establish the difference between a Zakhin and a Tibetan, Kingdon-Ward (1952) argue that Zakhing women, who are mainly from the peasantry background, are obviously, and, from a common sense, very different from the posh Tibetan women of Lhasa. In other words, Pierre Bourdieu’s cultural capital² (Bhattacharyya, 2009; 2013; 2014) that signals social assets in the form of power and status of Tibetan women are much higher than Zakhing women—the way the Tibetan women talks, their voice, their sense of dressing, etc. (Kingdon-Ward, 1952; see also, cultural capital, Bourdieu, 1984).

Notwithstanding, some believe that linguistically, the Zakhings belong to the Sino-Tibetan/Tibeto Burman. Another theory as to the origins of Zakhings, (although could be speculative) emerge from the fact that the 20th Century kingdom of sPobo, also referred to as sPoyul, located in the river gTsangpo, in the eastern region of Tibetan Himalayas was also a home to Tibeto-Burmese ethnic groups—Mon pa and the Klo pa³ (Lazcano, 1966). The sPobo monarchy was so powerful that its influence

often felt beyond the great Himalayas “and the kingdom received tribute from the Klo pa (mainly Adi) and Mon pa tribes from the southern part of the frontier. sPobo enjoyed a great level of autonomy in its relationship with the government in Lhasa; so much so that the region could almost be considered independent” (Lazcano, 1966: 42). However, likewise, the differences chalked out by Kingdon-Ward (1952) between Tibetans and Zakhings, Lazcano (1966) too argues that the physical appearances of the sPo bas are different from the ‘standard Tibetans’—the sPo bas are short in their stature with darker skin colour and long and loose hair. Lazcano (1966) even goes on to describe the sPo bas as ‘uncivilised’ and that the sPo bas bear similarity with the Klo pa tribes of Eastern Himalayas. Evidence suggests that in 1913, the immigrants from Eastern Bhutan, that is, the Dkupas reached the powerful land of sPobo. With mounting pressure of population on the sPobo, the Klo pas were pushed further to the south, which is indeed the India’s state of Arunachal Pradesh. As stated above, though it could be speculative, it is suggested that the Klo pas could bear some close connection with the Zakhings. This is because the Zakhings maintain close-knit relationships with the Mon pas and the Tibetans. Driem (2007) argues that Zakhing as a language bear similarity with Midzish language (Blench and Post, 2011; Landi, 2005), while others believe that the language of the Zakhings is bodish and they perhaps came from Zayul district of Tibet (Aiyadurai, 2011). However, further research is required to unfold the origins of the Zakhings.

In the following sections, based on the findings from my interviews intertwined with ethnographic research, I analyse the discussions on Zakhings, first from a Tibetan perspective, and, second, from an Indian perspective.

Tibetan Version of Zakhing

The Tibetans consider that the Zakhings only live in a small county named Zayul (current location is Chayu county, Linzhi, Xizang province). This county is normally divided into

² Pierre Bourdieu’s cultural capital as opposed to economic capital, is a mediator of social mobility, accrued and stimulated via an individual’s appearance, educational level, the sense of dressing, the way of talking, walking, etc (Bourdieu, 1984; see also Bhattacharyya, 2009; 2013; 2014).

³ In Tibetan, Klo pa means ‘barbarian’—referred to as Lobha in Chinese implying ‘Southern’. The Klo pas in sPoyul were known as Abors, who are now known popularly as the Adi, and the Mishmi. In Chinese, the Mon pas are known as Moinba

two parts— Upper Chayu township and Lower Chayu township. The extreme lower region of lower Chayu Township is mostly controlled by Indian military, whereby very few of them live in the Tibet's side. As per government records of China, administrative translation name of three last villages of Chinese states are SōngGū , LāDīng and TǎMǎ. While some researchers believe that Dengs, in Tibetan side are referred to as Miju and Digaru Mishmis of India. While Idu Mishmis in Tibet are categorised as 'Lhoba' or 'Yidu Lhoba', their language Zaiwa (is not to be confused with Zaiwa from Yunnan and Myanmar), and also their religion seems to be a mixture of Tibetan and Mishmi's. Some authors consider their language being Mishmic or Kachinic, and it could indicate an arrival from northern Myanmar. Landi (2005) recorded a migration narrative from Khamti Long), while other authors say their language is bodish and they came from Zayul district of Tibet. In China, the Zakhrings are considered neither as minority nor as an ethnic group. They are in fact confused with Meyors in India and another tribe named Deng in Southeast Tibet of China. Indeed, people often confuse between Deng, Mayor and Zakhring as one tribe, while none of them are specific to any nation as yet. Dengs are without nationality until now, being the biggest tribe of Chayu country, which is the largest nation of south Tibet, (http://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/18436/CH and few others). Thereby, one can imagine and well understand the situation of Zakhring, the minor tribe in India (Aiyadurai, 2011).

To gain access to the Lower Chayu township of China is not easy because of its location in border areas, where only armed officials are allowed legally. Chinese citizens do need government permission to visit upper Chayu Township, although most of the local people of Upper Chayu have never visited lower Chayu in their lifetime. The total numbers of Dengs and Zakhrings in Chinese-occupied Tibet are not clearly known, but according to my verbal conversation with the local people of Upper Chayu, it is more than 391.

In a conversation with the people of Shangri-La, Yunnan Province, I was told that they are not related with Zakhring, as they followed Tibetan Buddhism for a short period. Tibetan citizens do not understand their fellow citizens due to geographical differences. Basically, they live in four different provinces under Chinese administrative prefectures of Tibet as Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR)), Qinghai and Sichuan, originally known as U-Tsang, Kham and Amdo and Shangri la is far away from Chayu. The most important information is that although there are some ethnics in Yunnan who speak Zaiwa, but they are definitely not related.

In another case, people from Chayu have given very little, information. They consider that Zakhrings belong to Deng and they have not heard of the Zakhrings before. Few people narrated that Zakhrings are more related to Meyors, and most Meyors are now half-blooded because of cross-cultural marriage with the Dengs. However, they bear no knowledge if the Zakhrings marry the Dengs. A villager from Lower Chayu Township narrated that there were some Zakhrings in the area before, who called themselves as Zaiwa, but the Government of China never counted them. Now they have vanished, may be, they have married the Tibetans and now labelled themselves as Tibetans. The natives of these areas do consider Zakhrings as legends.

Indian Version of the Zakhring

In India, it is believed that the Zakhrings bear close racial and cultural similarity with that of the Tibetans. As stated above, in 1906-07, they probably had emigrated from the Zayul district of Tibet (Aiyadurai, 2011). After migrating over to the present Arunachal Pradesh, the Zakhrings perhaps had to face opposition from the Mishimis (or Deng), an indigenous group of Arunachal Pradesh but eventually came into agreement and were allowed to settle in the Walong and Kibito circle, in return of paying annual tributes to the neighbouring Miju Mishimis. Their language thus gradually evolved as a mixture of Tibetan and Miju Mishmi. Unlike the Khasis of Meghalaya, who follow a matrilineal system based on mother's lineage

and kinship (Bhattacharyya, 2009), the Zakhrings follow a patrilineal/patrilineal social systems, where the lineage is from the father, who is considered the authoritative head in all matters within the family (Bhattacharyya, 2009; 2013). Only the male members of a family have the ancestral property rights. However, if a man dies without any son, then his property passes on to his daughter. The ancestral ornaments, which are reserved, are gifted to the girls at the time of their conjugal life.

Notwithstanding, as already shown earlier, Jean Kingdon-Ward (1952) had mostly described the Zakhrings with a negative connotation. The following excerpt further reinforces this:

At 3.30, the same day there arrived in Rima a bedraggled procession of fifteen tired and hungry men - the Diphu La patrol of eight Assam Riflemen from Walong, and their seven Zakring porters from the villages of Kahao and Mashei. Their clothes were torn and dusty, their boots worn out; but they marched in with all their equipment, and their heads high. It did us good to see them. (187)

Nonetheless, joint family is common among these tribes. Their marriage system is monogamy (where polygamy is not prohibited) and conducted via the *Driupum Driyok*, the mediator. Contrary to the dowry system prevalent in other parts of India, the bridegrooms in the Zakhring community instead require to pay a bride price in the form of goods, Mithun(s), cow(s), pig(s), etc. The Zakhrings consider conceiving as a blessing of God and thereby, in order to prevent bad omen, the couple observes rituals and taboos and pray for the safe mode of delivery and long life for both the mother and the child.

As stated above, their main occupation is agriculture. They practice terrace cultivation. The English botanist, Jean Kingdon-Ward (1952), made constructive criticism about their agricultural practice and terrace cultivation. The following snippets are a witness to the same:

The Zakring, like the Tibetans, plough their land, and cattle are kept for the purpose. The Mishmis merely poke about with wooden hand implements within an inch or two of the surface. To tell the truth, though, the Zakring land is so stony that a blunt wooden plough with no appreciable weight behind it cannot penetrate much further than the Mishmi hoe, and the superiority of the Zakring method lies more in the fact that they practise terracing and irrigation. It is also noted that in Kahao, there was a small herd of cows and young calves, but neither the Mishmis nor the Zakring can be bothered to milk their cattle, and the children are thus deprived of a useful addition to a deficient diet. (144)

[T]heir struggle for survival is becoming more severe as the annual burning of the forest is continued. At frequent intervals, one sees signs of abandoned cultivation - carefully terraced fields where once wet rice was grown. The irrigation streams exist no longer, and as families moved from the old sites, their numbers dwindled. The Zakring peasants are themselves largely to blame for the present lamentable state of affairs, and in some respects, they are even more destructive and thoughtless than the Mishmis. (104-105)

The Zakhrings, however, build their houses in the flat land available within the rugged landscape. Their houses are built of pine and wood. Using a self-locking system, the wooden planks, brims and roofs are secured. Stabs of stone placed under each post strongly support the structure and the foundation of the houses. Due to the extremely cold climatic conditions, every household maintain a fireplace, but based on their traditional belief system, the fireplace is positioned towards the wall facing the hills and mountains.

It is to be noted that the Zakhrings are excellent artisans. They create wooden images of Lord Buddha, which reflect their belief in Tibetan

Buddhism — that is, Zakhring Buddhism has shades of animism and Shamanism. Their community deity is called Yong. They also worship *Gompa*—in the form of the images of Lord Buddha, Dalai Lama and his disciples. In addition, like other tribes they venerate nature and environment—the hills and water.



Figure 2: A View of a Wooden Wall in the Living Room of a Zakhring Family (Source: Author)

As mentioned above, the Zakhings of Arunachal Pradesh are largely known as Meyor. They speak “Zakhring and Meyor language, which belongs to the Bhotia group of the Tibeto-Burman family of languages” (Blench and Post, 2011), although they speak Hindi and Nefamese as their *lingua franca*. Traditionally, they used the Tibetan script, but now they use the Devanagari and Roman scripts too. The staple cereals of Meyors (and Zakhings) are rice and wheat, but now they prefer rice to wheat. Large varieties of wild leafy vegetables, roots, tubers, pumpkin, chillies, mushroom, bamboo and cane shoots are included in their diet. They eat fish and meat including beef, and consume *andok* or *bunak* (their local alcoholic beverages).

Associated with agriculture, with Yaudaak as their key God, LhaChhuuth is the main festival of the Meyors (Zakhings), where Lha means their God Yaudaak and Chhuuth signalling veneration. LhaChhuuth, the marker of development—for good harvest and best of health to everyone is celebrated with full rituals and merriment on the first moon night (*Yarsith*). The society of the Zakhings and

Evidently, they were excellent in handlooms and weaving practices but due to remote geographical location apace with their plummeting numbers and perennial presence of army activities, they are gradually losing their skills.



Figure 3: A Zakhring Woman Sticking a Flyer in the Wooden Door (Source: Author)

Meyors, however, is free from class, caste or clan. There is no strong political organisation within their community, but those people, who possess repute, wealth, wisdom, and are powerful are requested to adjudicate in the case of dispute. Nonetheless, they have a village council (known locally as Tsongo). It comprises of *Kenang*, the headman, *Rembuzerro*, the council members and *Rintochoy*, the village priest, who is respected by every members of the household of the community. Ethnographic observation unfolded that like the fellow tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh, the Zakhings and Meyors too follow societal mores, norms, oaths and ordeals. Examples of some ordeals conducted under the supervision of *Rintochoy* are taking out stones from boiling water, placing of a heated iron knife (similar to a Bowie-class knife) onto the palm, etc. These ordeals are practised to free an individual from the clutches of suspicion.

Similar to other tribes and clans, Meyors (Zakhings) too believe in funeral system. They regard death as an ‘inevitable phenomena’ but premature/sudden death of an individual is

plunged into the superstitious belief ascribed to an evil spirit's action. While the dead body of an adult is cremated, the body of an infant or newly born is disposed of into the water. The ashes and the charred bones are collected from the cremation site and are preserved in a small hut built in the entrance to the village.

Conclusion

This research has outlined a brief description on the Zakhrings. Based on the notes presented herewith, I urge upon for further in-depth academic research that will help in better understanding of a lesser-known indigenous group of Arunachal Pradesh.

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