

An Account of the Meyor Community of Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

At the heart of this research is a description of the Meyor community, one of the least known tribes of the world. Geographically, this community is found in the Walong and Kibattoo circles of Anjaw district of Arunachal Pradesh. Drawing upon ethnographic research, supplemented by interviews, this article aims to describe an account of this hidden tribe.

Keywords: Meyor, Zakhring, Ethnographic Observation, Anjaw District, Arunachal Pradesh, India

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Introduction

Meyor is one of the hidden frontier tribes geospatially found amidst the rugged landscape of Walong, a cantonment and an administrative town and Kibattoo circle in Anjaw district, Arunachal Pradesh of India's North East. One can, of course, imagine as to how the sequestered habitation of this rarely known tribe are shaped by terrain, topography and translocation. By translocation, I mean that this tribe is believed to have migrated from the northern part of Tibet to settle in the Dri Valley (Chakravorty, 2015; Choudhury, 1978; Singh, 1995). According to the Tribal Welfare Committee, 1952, Government of India (GOI), there are four categories of tribes. They are: tribal communities (adhering to traditional patterns of life); semi-tribal communities (although these communities have settled down in rural areas by engaging in agriculture and other allied activities, but by living amongst the Hindus, who follow a *jati-varna* system, the tribal communities have also considered themselves as a form of castes by engrossing themselves into the concepts of purity and pollution, that are keys to the *jati-varna* system); acculturated tribal communities (these communities have migrated to urban and semi-urban communities in order to work in formal organisations); and assimilated tribes (these groups have assimilated into the wider world and have now detribalised themselves) (Tizianna and Baldizzone, n.d.). In the light of these categories, Meyor tribe, perhaps, broadly fall under the first category, as our observation reveals that, being a frontier tribe, their habitats have suffered from encroachments by activities of Army and Border Roads

organisation (BRO), now known as General Reserve Engineer Force (GREF). At the same time, one can argue that the elements of the second category are also visible amongst the Meyor community. This article aims to portray the challenges of the community. The article begins with a brief background with North East India in general and Arunachal Pradesh in particular.

Background

Needless to mention that the whole North East India is home to 357 ethnolinguistic constitutional communities (Bhattacharyya, 2018a; 2019; Taher and Ahmed, 2001). It is "connected to the mainstream India by a narrow corridor (Siliguri corridor or Chicken's neck) of 33-km width on the eastern side and 21-km on the western side, covering approximately 7% (or 255,036 sq.km) of the total geographical area of the country" (Bhattacharyya, 2018a: 37; 2019; Fernandes and Barbora 2002a, b; Taher and Ahmed 2001). Arunachal Pradesh is the 29 states of India and shares international boundaries with Myanmar (erstwhile Burma) in the east, Tibet in the north and Bhutan in the west. At the time of India's independence in 1947, the political map of North East India comprised of undivided Assam including North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) and the princely states of Manipur and Tripura (Bhattacharyya, 2019). Although, NEFA was created in 1954; the Arunachal Pradesh was carved out of NEFA as a Union Territory in 1972, and subsequently, on 20 February 1987 Arunachal Pradesh was granted the status of the full-fledged state. Table 1 outlines a brief statistics of the state (Census of India, 2011).

Table 1—Arunachal Pradesh: Population, Growth Rate, Density, Sex Ratio and Literacy Rate in NE Region

The area in Sq. Km	Population (Person)	Growth Rate	Density per sq. Km	Sex Ratio (females '000 males)	Literacy (%)
83743	1383727	26.03	17	938	65.38

Source: Census of India, 2011

Out of the total geographical area of 83743 sq.Km, forests cover stands at 79.96%. Table 2

is a detailed demonstration of forest cover in the state of Arunachal Pradesh and its

comparison to with the Indian nation as a whole. It should be noted that all the states of North East India have more than 33% of forest cover— Mizoram (86.27%); Manipur (77.69%); Meghalaya (76.45%); Nagaland (75.33%); Tripura (73.68%); Sikkim (47.13%); and Assam (35.83%).

One can undoubtedly imagine that because of its remote locations covered by forests in addition to being one of the frontier states hindered not only academic research but also lacked historical enquiry (see, Aiyadurai, 2011). Hence, the Meyor community is highly under-

researched except for some information published in the Gazetteers of Lohit district and the series titled *People of India* (Aiyadurai, 2011; Chakravorty, 2015; Choudhury, 1978; Singh, 1995). It remains well documented that the communities dwelling in the fiercely contested volatile international borderlands/margins of North East India are looked upon with an element of ambiguity and often considered as migrants or refugees (Aiyadurai, 2011; Chakravorty, 2015; Sarkar, 1996). The following section describes the origins of the Meyor tribe.

Table 2—Forest Cover of Arunachal Pradesh and India

	Geographical Area	Very Dense	Moderately Dense	Open Forest	Total Forest Area	Percentage of Forested Area	Percentage Change since 2015
Arunachal Pradesh	83,743	20,721	30,955	15,288	66,964	79.96%	-0.23%
All-India	3,287,469	98,158	308,318	301,797	708,273	21.54%	+0.21%

Source: India State of Forest Report, Forest Cover 2017, Forest Survey of India, retrieved 31 December 2018 from, <http://fsi.nic.in/isfr2017/isfr-forest-cover-2017.pdf>

Meyor or Zakhring

As per the demography of Arunachal Pradesh is concerned, the state is home to 26 major tribes in addition to over 100 sub-tribes.¹ There is a perception that Zakhring and Meyor are now the same tribes, although earlier, they were two different tribes. They identify themselves as Charumba and practice Mahayana-sect of Buddhism (Aiyadurai, 2011; Barua, 1995; Chakravorty, 2015). One has to note that the development policies of India are based on Five-Year Plans of the Planning Commission of GOI instituted in 1950, which has now been replaced by NITI Aayog. During the fifth (1974-79) and the sixth (1980-85) five-year plans, the GOI realised that each tribe is different and so the development requirements of each tribe should not be the same (Tizianna and Baldizzone, n.d.). However, statistics unravelled that the population of many politically and economically weaker tribes have dwindled for

various factors including poor health and nutrition (Tizianna and Baldizzone, n.d.). Using four criteria— decreasing or near constant, pre-agricultural economy, extremely low level of literacy and a general state of social backwardness, the GOI prepared a list of the 'lowest layer' amongst the tribes and identified 74 tribes. Although there is no rigorous evidence, there is a perception that over the years, the Zakhrings and Meyors have assimilated as Meyors with an aim to seek the benefits of the development programmes of GOI (Chakravorty, 2015).

There are many narratives as to the origins of the Meyors and Zakhrings. As stated in the introduction section, during 1906-07, a large group of immigrants crossed the Indo-Tibetan border to settle permanently in the Dri valley. Adverse cold and hostile climate forced them to migrate northward, and as a consequence, many of them lost their lives. In addition, the Mishmi tribe ambushed the Zakhrings and Meyors with bows and arrows, albeit Zakhrings and Meyors defended themselves with guns. Nonetheless, only 90 Zakhrings and Meyors

¹ List of notified Scheduled Tribes, retrieved 30 September 2017 from, http://censusindia.gov.in/Tables_Published/SCST/ST%20Lists.pdf

survived “who somehow managed to reach and settle at Mayu, and those who were captured by the Mishmis were enslaved and sold to the Adis. The [Zakhrings and Meyors] moved further southward and ultimately settled in the Walong area (Choudhury, 1978: 55). In his book, *My Hill So Strong*, Jean Kingdon-Ward (1952), tried to distinguish the Zakhrings/Meyors from the Tibetans (see, Chakravorty, 2015). There is another narrative as to the origin of Meyors—some believe that the Meyors escaped from the Zayal district of Tibet as the Dzungpon of Rima imposed taxes on them, in this way, free themselves from the oppressive Tibetan authorities. However, after their immigration to the Lohit district, they faced hostilities and raids in their settlements by the Mishimis, who were then at fierce conflict the people of the Zayul district forcing many to move from the Walong area to Rima. “A few Mayu villages, now known as Walong, Dong, Tinai, Mishmi, Champrang and Kahao, withstood the Mishmi raids. Eventually, the Mishmis and the Meyors came to an agreement by which the Mishmis bound themselves to allow the Meyors to settle in the Walong area and to give them protection, and the Meyors, in return, agreed to pay annual tributes to the Mishmis. It was decided that the Imu river should form the boundary between the two people, and demarcating stones were erected. According to the terms of the agreement, the new settlers were also required to serve as herdsmen of the Mishmis” (Choudhury, 1978: 55-56; Singh, 1995). The methodological issues entailed are outlined in the following section.

Nonetheless, according to the Census of India (1971), there were only 23 Zakhring people and 100 Meyor people. While the population of Zakhrings declined to 14, the Meyor population increased to 238 as per the Census of India, 1981 (Chakravorty, 2015). After two decades, Aiydurai (2011) mentions that the total population of Meyor stood at 300, but my survey revealed that the total population including the newborns is around 1000. In the next section, the methodology is outlined followed by a brief description of the study area.

Methodology

The study is based on ethnographic methods (LeCompte and Goetz 1982; LeCompte and Schensul 2010), and informal interviews selected randomly using snowballing and in consultation with the Meyor Development Society from 14 villages considering a proportion of the population and at least 50 knowledgeable elders along with village *Gaun Burahs* (village heads), teachers and community leaders.

Study Area

The state of Arunachal Pradesh comprises of 22 districts. According to district Census 2011, out of 640 districts, Anjaw, the study area is the second least populated districts in India; Dibang Valley, another district of Arunachal Pradesh is the least populated district of India.² Anjaw is one of the new districts carved out from the northern part of Lohit district (Hayuliang sub-division) in December 2003 covering an area of 6190 sq.Km. The district headquarter is located at Hawaii at an altitude of 1296 m above sea level with most places covered were mountainous tracts. It is located between Lower Dibang Valley on East, Changlang and Lohit on the South and China occupied Tibet on the Northwest. It has seven administrative units— Hayuliang, Hawaii, Manchal, Goiliang, Walong, Kibithoo, Chaglogam with a total population of 21,167 as per Anjaw District, Census data, 2011.³ Table 3 sketches data linked to the district. Within the district, there are 14 Meyor villages—Kheroti, Tinai, Chapung, Pangaong, Walong, Tilam or Tariyap, Kaho, Kibattoo, Mashai, Dhanbari, Kundan, Bara kundan, Namti and Dong. Walong is situated at an altitude of about 1094 metres. Kibithoo, as mentioned above is a small Circle Headquarter located close to the Indo-China Border at an altitude of about 1305 m above sea level.

² District Census 2011, Census 2011, retrieved 12 September 2018 from, <http://www.census2011.co.in/district.php>

³ Anjaw District : Census 2011 data, Census 2011, retrieved 12 September 2018 from, <http://www.census2011.co.in/district.php>

Table 4: Anjaw District Data

	2011	2001
Total Population	21,167	18,536
Male	11,507	10,209
Female	9,660	8,327
Population Growth	14.19%	7.84%
Proportion to Arunachal Pradesh Population	1.53%	1.69%
Sex Ratio (Per 1000)	839	816
Average Literacy	56.46	38.33
Male Literacy	66.81	51.56
Female Literacy	43.71	21.57

Source: Anjaw Table Data, Census 2011, retrieved 12 September 2018 from, <http://www.census2011.co.in/census/district/480-anjaw.html>

The Findings

The demographic mapping of the Meyor community is presented in Table 5. The Meyors are primarily agriculturist, and they usually practice permanent wet rice (*Oryza sativa*) cultivation. This is because it is easier to get more return, putting less physical effort. The wet rice is cultivated in the flat terrain amidst the irregular topography, but both at high and low terraces. This is, of course, a form of sedentary farming and complementary to slash and burn agriculture (Jhum cultivation). This observation is similar to the findings of Ramakrishnan (n.d.) and Kala et al. (2008) and that the wet-rice cultivation of the Apatani tribe is of the advanced form (Ramakrishnan n.d.). Although rice is the staple food, the Meyor community, also produce wheat, maize, millet and barley. Indeed, their agricultural practice is of a superior type, the Meyors are competent in animal husbandry too. The cultivation of these agricultural products are based on traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) which is also termed as local ecological knowledge (LEK) or the indigenous knowledge (IK). Meyors like other tribes of Aruanchal Pradesh have been managing and preserving natural and agricultural ecosystems. Indeed, the forests and fields are the sources from which they gather their basic food for daily needs. This observation is similar to the findings of the

scholars working on other tribes and *Pahari* (hilly) people (Dyson, 2008; 2014; Fernandes, and Barbora, 2002a,b; Singh, 2014; 2015; Sharma, 2013; also, Bhattacharyya, 2015). The TEK/LEK/IK is transferred from generation to generation either orally or through observations (see, Kala et al. 2008).

To a visitor in the Anjaw district, the landscape is haphazard— as soon as one ends of the landscape ends, the other ridge starts either parallel or in the opposite direction. The wide and narrow valleys share 35% each to the total geographical snow-clad peaks of the region. Due to typical rugged topography, the rivers are undulated. There are numerous streams and rivers —mainly river Lohit, known as Telu by the local Mishmis. Other rivers are Lam, Tidding, Dalai, Krowti, Dichu, Lati, Klung, Dav, Telua, Ampani and Sarti. The westerly flowing Brahmaputra drains these principal rivers of the district. Though these rivers are geographically isolated, they possess high hydropower potential.

Notwithstanding, the Meyor landscape has suffered from Army encroachments. Increasing dominance of Army, BRO (GREF) activities have engaged the land and forest areas in Meyor area making them landless and depriving them of forest resources. As stated above, the encroachment has destroyed their traditional patterns of life (Tizianna and Baldizzone, n.d.).

Table 5: Village-wise Population Distribution of Walong and Kibattoo Circle, Anjaw District

Sl. No.	Name of the Village	Under Circle	Total population	No. of House hold	No. of Male	No. of Female	Children below 14yr Age	No. of person Migrated	No. of SHG
1	Kaho	Kibattoo	136	12	64	72	23	2	1
2	Kibattoo	Kibattoo	59	17	25	34	24	3	0
3	Mashai	Kibattoo	228	18	127	101	53	2	0
4	Dhanbari	Kibattoo	17	1	9	8	6	1	0
5	Kundan	Kibattoo	31	4	18	13	11	0	0
6	Bara Kundan	Kibattoo	23	2	12	11	5	0	0
7	Kheroti	Kibattoo	44	3	26	18	14	2	0
8	Namti	Walong	18	2	13	5	7	0	0
9	Chapung	Walong	53	5	28	25	17	1	0
10	Pangaong	Walong	11	1	4	7	5	2	0
11	Dong	Walong	47	7	24	23	21	0	0
12	Tilam	Walong	61	6	39	22	18	1	0
13	Tinai	Walong	138	13	71	67	23	0	0
14	Walong	Walong	123	11	56	67	38	0	0
15	Yakung	No people of Meyor community now live in this village; they used to live earlier but now Mishmi community of Kri clan have occupied the village.							

Source: Field Study

In order to glean information as to how much land has been encroached by Army, a Right to Information (RTI) was filed at the Deputy Commissioner office of Anjaw district (Figure 1). In response to the RTI (LRE-5520/08/2268 dated 21st May 2012) shows that as per notification under section 4 (1) issued on 7/9/2007 vide No. LM-91/2007, a total of around 767.16 acres of land under the two Meyor dominant circle of Walong and Kibattoo is occupied for Army use. In addition, un-notified land of around 2306.73 acres is also occupied by the Army in these two circles. Arguably, the acquisition of land has been crucial for the survival of the Meyor community, which in turn has caused hardships and the current generation have lost their indigenous skills. For instance: the forest areas comprises of bamboo trees. As Kingdon-Ward (1952: 54- 55) argued:

In Walong the rainfall is only fifty inches (1270 mm) a year, or even less, and the value of the bamboo increases accordingly. Without a doubt, it is one of the most useful raw materials known to man, and together with cane (and opium) is the hub round which the whole Mishmi universe revolves, besides that of several other jungle tribes of the Assam-Burma-Tibetan border. Where, in those rain-sodden jungles will you find a house that is not of bamboo, or a bridge, or a basket, which is not made of cane? A hundred other things, great and small, for use indoors and out, are made of the same materials. Bamboo is also used for bird-scares in the fields.

GOVERNMENT OF ARUNACHAL
OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY COMMISSIONER ANJAW DISTRICT; HAWAI

No. LRE-5520/08 / 2263 Dated Hawai the 21TH May'2012.

To,
Shri Chung Meyor, President
Meyor Welfare Association
Walong / Kibitho Circle.

Sub :- RTI Information.

D/sir,
With reference to your RTI Application Dated 17/5/2012, it is to inform you that, the following information are available as per records. Details are as follows :-

A. DETAILS OF ARMY LANDS IN ANJAW DISTRICT OCCUPIED
As per Notification Under Section 4 (1) issued on 7/9/2007 Vide No. LM-91/2007.

1	Ashi Hill (Wlg)	60.00 acres	Occupied
2	Yapak (Wlg)	104.85 acres	Occupied
3	Namti (Wlg)	211.22 acres	Occupied
4	Tilam (Wlg)	164.48 acres	Occupied
5	Kraoti (K T)	1.58 acres	Occupied
6	Chota Kundan (KT)	63.21 acres	Occupied
7	Bara Kundan (KT)	161.82 acres	Occupied

DETAILS OF OTHER OCCUPATION OF ARMY IN ANJAW DISTRICT.

1	Sheroti (Wlg)	21.57 acres	
2	Dichu, Kaino, Gumpa, Thocho & Naclunga (KT)	2019.61 acres	Some portion is under occupation as per the report of Range Officer
3	Kibithoo Out Side Town Ship	21.06 acres	
4	Kibithoo Within Town Ship	159.52 acres	
5.	Dong	7.22 Acres	
6.	Dong	68.00 Acres	
7.	Ledgo (Lasse)	3.75 Acres	
8.	Walong Township		To be ascertained after conducting ground Cadastral survey.

3. Not available.
4 Not yet formally acquired.
5. No compensation Paid as per available records.
6. Notification U/S 4 was issued.
7. No compensation Paid as per available records.
8. Not available.
9. Walong and Kibithoo Township was Notified during 1991.
10. After Notification, Walong and Kibitho Township are Govt. land.
11. Not available.
12. ALG Walong falls within notified Township area.
13. Not available.

Yours faithfully,
A.P.D. 21/5/2012
For Deputy Commissioner,
Anjaw District, Hawai.

Figure 1: Right to Information To Gather Information on Land Occupied by Army, Anjaw District, Arunachal Pradesh

It is to be noted that the Meyors are excellent artisans. They create wooden images of Lord Buddha, which reflect their belief in Tibetan Buddhism — that is, 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. Our observation reveals that the bamboo craft is gradually becoming a skill of the past and the young generation is losing the skills.

Besides, it is apparent from Table 5 that there is only one self-help group in the Kaho village. Noted anthropologist Verrier Elwin (1959: 59) had urged for the preservation of the rich tapestry of 'tribal art, religion and culture'. To accomplish this, he had suggested for the building of 'tribal reserves' with no access to outsiders regarding the acquisition of land or establishment of business including missionaries and religious institutes. This, in turn, would help in protecting the tribal population from being exploited. Elwin (1959) further forwarded a number of suggestions, such as—the creation of tribal councils who would be responsible for resolving all forms of

conflicts; the government should not use the tribal leaders as agents; introduction of the issue of a licence to the non-tribals entering the tribal belt; and the tribal areas should be free from official stationed (Tizianna and Baldizzone, n.d.).

Nonetheless, Elwin's (1959) suggestions were viewed by the critics "as isolating tribal societies... by those who favoured the assimilation of tribes into mainstream Indian society. The supporters of assimilation thought that anthropologists were interested in keeping the tribes as they were so that they could study their customs in what was effectively an anthropological zoo" (Tizianna and Baldizzone, n.d.: 14). The research findings also reveal that the problems faced by the Meyor community are multifarious. The dominant tribes or the educated elite community dominates the Meyor community. It is also evident that with diminishing traditional livelihood, the number of marginal labour has increased noticeably. This is leading to a steady increase in child labour, migration and human trafficking (see, the article by Bhattacharyya, 2017 on India's missing children where she has unravelled as to how children and young women from North East region are lured, trafficked or kidnapped

to serve as domestic labour or sold into brothels; see also, Bhattacharyya, 2018b), which has led to increased poverty and loss of community identity.

This small Meyor community has faced demographical transformation with intermittent pressure to merge with a neighbouring tribe, outsiders and mainland Indian working under BRO/GREF. This, in turn, has caused in shrinking of the Meyor community. For instance, men from Nepal, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, etc. working in the Indian Army, BRO/GREF and ancillary/allied services or other men from other tribal communities have married Meyor women. Also, as mentioned above, outmigration of male members for better livelihood opportunities is also adding the cause of plummeting population. This observation matches the findings of Singh (2014) and Singh (2015), where they have shown that as a result of the outmigration of the *Pahari* males of Uttarakhand, it is the women who have taken the leading roles in agricultural activities.

Again due to non-availability of educational opportunities (except for few primary schools in the villages), the community send the majority of their children to hostels located at nearby towns such as Tezu, Hayuliyang and Namsai for education. These children can seldom understand Meyor dialect. However, the strong presence of Indian Army/BRO and Bollywood movies has spread Hindi in these remote parts.

The Meyor Welfare Association is one of the leading organisations that actively participate in community development in Walong and Kibattoo divisions of Anjaw district. There is no strong political organisation within their community, but those people, who possess repute, wealth, wisdom, and are powerful are requested to arbitrate in the case of dispute, where rationality takes the backseat. 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 member of the household

of the community. Ethnographic observation unfolded that like the fellow tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh, the Meyors too, follow societal 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.

For any form of paid engagement (formal/informal), the whole Meyor community depends on the Army/BRO. As stated above, the region is poorly connected with poor infrastructure and network. So, the community highly depends on the Indian Army in “making calls and other services” including transport. For instance, in an interview to the ANI and as published in the Times of India (31 March 2018), the village head of the Kaho village added:

The nearest mobile network is 65 kms at Hawaii. We receive a lot of help from the Army as they help us in making calls. This village has six to seven bikes which we use to cross rope bridges.⁴

On 14 November 2018, ISRO has launched GSAT-29 aimed at providing high-speed connectivity in remote areas of India.⁵ The question is: will this connectivity reach the remote areas of Arunachal Pradesh. Dyson (2008; 2014) compared the disconnection of Bemni village of Uttarakhand (her field study) from the increasingly globalised world with David Harvey’s notion of time-space compression signalling that though the world is

⁴ This village in Arunachal is home to only 76 people (31 March 2018). *Times of India*, retrieved on 31 March 2018 from, http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/63556595.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=txt&utm_campaign=cppst

⁵ ISRO’s communication satellite GSAT-29 to provide high-speed connectivity in remote areas of India; launch today (14 November, 2018). *The Hindusthan Times*, retrieved 14 November 2018 from, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/isro-to-launch-india-s-latest-communication-satellite-gsat-29-today/story-i7zm81B7kVI35ILNc6RvPM.html>

shrinking in terms of time and space (Harvey, 1989), these remote areas remain detached with little or no access to electricity, mobile phones, television, running water, poor sanitation, etc.

Conclusion

This study set out to sketch an account of the challenges faced by the Meyor community in their everyday life. The observations suggest that this numerically insignificant community will perhaps further dwindle because of the transformation faced by their community in terms of loss of tribe-specific skills faced through encroachments, loss of Meyor dialect amongst the younger generation, inter-community marriage/inter-tribe marriage.

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