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CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE FOR
HIMALAYAN
STUDIES

Issue Brief

No.12

July 2025



The Meyors of Arunachal Pradesh: Identity Struggle in a Militarized Borderland

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Cite this publication as:

Rimi, Tadu. 2025. 'The Meyors of Arunachal Pradesh: Identity Struggle in a Militarized Borderland'. Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies, Shiv Nadar University, Delhi NCR. *Issue Brief*. No. 12. July.

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Abstract: The Meyors of Arunachal Pradesh are reasserting their identity. Their oral narratives reveal that in spite of their small numbers, the Meyors resisted Tibetan annexation. They have managed to sustain their distinct indigenous belief system despite their adoption of Buddhism. However, much has changed after the 1962 India-China War. Located in an extreme corner of the India-China border, their entire landscape has become a memorial to the conflict, replacing the community's history. This paper, based on interviews, offers an oral history narrative about the identity struggles of the Meyors in this changing context.

Keywords: local history; oral history; borderland tribes; militarization; identity struggle; 1962 India-China War

After years of tension building across the India-China boundary, and India's forward policy of active military and administrative engagement in North East Frontier Agency (NEFA, now Arunachal Pradesh), war broke out in 1962. China led the attack on Indian military posts on 20 October that year, and under challenging circumstances, India withdrew from NEFA. The war ended after China unilaterally declared ceasefire and withdrew from the region. The war became one of the most well-documented events in India, leaving a complicated military history which has been revisited several times from different angles.

Decades after the event, the memories of the 1962 India-China conflict still linger in mainstream public memories. They are invoked again and again to gain insights into what transpired, how it affects current affairs and to predict future relations between India and its neighbours, and larger international politics. Another way of mainstream remembering is through the military history records, war memorials and emotional homage in entertainment media. What lies outside the mainstream narratives are those of the people who live in border states like Arunachal Pradesh.

What has not been documented, or rather taken for granted, is the impact the conflict has left on the local communities of the contested borderland who live under the 'shadow' of two competing countries (Guyot-Récharde 2017). When looked from above, these communities are presented as passive victims or recipients of state decisions. Without any voice and representation, they are deemed as passive recipients of events, history and narratives.

This issue brief attempts to present the lived reality of a small border community in Arunachal Pradesh - the Meyors - whose way of life is constantly and closely affected by their location in borderlands which have become militarized. This paper highlights their struggles to preserve their community identity when their land/territory is only earmarked as a military zone, not as a habitat and heritage of an old and living community. How do the Meyors remember and experience these transformations? Their struggles for recognition of their identity and control over their lives is presented here in the form of narratives this author conducted in the course of field work collecting oral histories of 1962 war in Arunachal in April 2019 and in February 2025. The snow-balling method was used to approach and conduct in-depth oral history interviews of community members - elderly men and women, village priest, Gaon Bura, teachers, and interviews with subject experts and scholars. Archival documents available in the State Archive in Itanagar, the War Memorial

located in Walong, and document and newspapers available in Nehru Memorial Museum, Teen Murti, New Delhi were also consulted.

The Meyors

The Meyors are one of the least studied communities in the region with their language being listed as a critically endangered language (Centre For Endangered Language 2018). Their population is recorded as 4,993 according to the 2011 Census, with 2,434 males and 2,559 females. This enumeration has always been questioned by the locals, however. According to the Primary Health Centre record for Walong jurisdiction, as recorded for November 2024, the total Meyor population is 1,931, with 990 males and 941 females). They are settled in their 14 ancestral and traditional villages of Walong block, which is also the block headquarters and is further divided into Walong and Kibithoo (traditionally Kibitho) circles, with Kibitho round 30 kilometers further ahead towards the border. Agriculture and animal husbandry are the mainstay of the community. Traditionally, the community has practiced sedentary cultivation of rice and wheat, along with a few *jhum* plots or shifting cultivation. Hunting and foraging for food, medicines and necessary daily items such as for colouring ingredients, fibres for weaving, etc. are part of their traditional life. They have mastered a unique architecture of building an entire house of wood and stoned without using a single metal object.

The religious life of the community is distinct, too, as they practice the Mahayana sect of Buddhism with a synthesis of Buddhist and pre-Buddhist traditions and belief systems. While Buddhist traditions are recorded in scripts and they respect and perform Buddhist traditions and respect the monks or Lamaist traditions, the Meyors have also been able to preserve strong oral traditions and the traditional belief system of their ancestors. This author attended the *La-Chutt* at Bara-Kundan village in 2019 and at Walong in 2024 - a festival organized at village level where the whole community is invited for a feast. The priest offers the sacrificed blood, meat and rice with prayers to the spirits (*deo*) of hills, forests, river, animal, and earth in all directions, for prosperity and wealth. These small village festivals are celebrated with fervour.

The synergy between the Buddhism and this traditional religion is complex in nature and goes back to pre-British colonial history. A small community like Meyor could not resist the dominion of Buddhism like the Dengs of Zayul across the border in Tibet, who are a comparatively bigger, autonomous community. It is possible that the moving away from big townships like Rima, from where the Meyors are believed to have migrated, and settling in Walong area was the only way for the community to preserve their traditional belief system. However, in exchange for this relative autonomy they had to accept Buddhism and the suzerainty of Tibet, and to pay an exploitative tax to Tibet.

The relationship of India with the Meyor community and their lands began only during the colonial period, with its existence in national memory only since the 1962 war when the region became part of military developments. However, for the Meyors, their history and way of life go far back beyond this colonial or national memory.

The first colonial record about Meyors appear in a report by Noel Williamson of his expedition along the Lohit river to visit Mishmi areas. He was informed by a Mishmi village head at Panghan village that the region further up known as Walong belonged to him and at present a few Tibetans were living there who paid taxes to Rima (Williamson, 1908: 372). Aiyadurai (2011) highlights how these colonial records have set in motion the ongoing struggles of claims and counter-claims on territory and identity. Such documents, passed as official record, created ambiguity till later visitors such as Jean F Kingdon-Ward, who finally

reached till Walong in 1926 and in 1928, acknowledged the Mayors (Meyors) as a distinct ethnic group from the Tibetan and Mishmis (Kingdon-Ward 1952).

Even the official census of India, for a long time, has recorded the community as Zakhings as well as Meyors or even as Charumba (though less known). The community members, however, contest this and identify themselves only as Meyors. According to Grop Meyor, the primary informant during the research and a Trained Graduate Teacher in the lone secondary school in Walong, the Zakhing are a small community who had migrated from Tibet more recently and follow Buddhism. He expressed his sadness that he had helped many scholars coming to Walong to study the community but despite his repeated interventions most of those scholars have still referred to Meyors as Zakhing as it is recorded in official documents. He said, "People have blindly followed and trusted the written papers over our own testimonials." Though, recently the government census had made the correction and recorded the Meyors as a separate community, they are still struggling for Scheduled Tribe status so as to be able to claim benefits from the central government.

Meyor history according to their oral traditions begins with the story of origin of the humanity itself - passed on through generations - where they morph the centuries of timeline into a single line story. This is a common system of oral traditions among the tribal communities in Arunachal. Each community trace their history right from the very origin of the world and lead to their present existence. This is how they base their claims on their land and heritage, rights and identity. The coming of Britishers, followed by the Indian government and the India-China war are merely a continuation of their story unlike how outsiders coming to their land would record them in writing. Their lived experiences are woven into their stories and oral traditions. Newer memories are created and narrated to pass on their knowledge to younger generations. Therefore, while the object of this study was to get the narratives of the 1962 war, the people, instead, wanted to tell the stories of their origin, past and continuity, and of their struggles.

The Battle of Walong and the Aftermath

The battle of Walong took place when the Chinese army attacked at Kibitho (Dichu as per local accounts) in the early hours of 21 October. Kibitho is the last military outpost overlooking the first village Kaho on the other side of the Lohit River. The Indian army retaliated and held off the intrusion for four hours but eventually had to withdraw. The villages on the other side of the river like Kaho and Mushai were occupied by the Chinese army immediately. Then they started finding ways to cross the river towards Kibitho and Walong.

After withdrawing from their forward posts, the Indian army had garrisoned at the Namti plains, seven kilometres away from Walong. The battle resumed with the Indian army holding out for seven days long with fierce resistance but it eventually had to withdraw again as the Chinese army managed to ambush and attack the Indian post from multiple directions. During the period, all the civilians, the labourers and administrative staff, were evacuated. Then all the villagers were hurriedly rounded up. All women, children and elders - in shock and surprise - were rounded up and forcefully evacuated by Otter helicopter and taken to Tezu and then to the Sadiya relief camp. All able-bodied men were put to carrying military loads. These men ultimately managed to escape and ran down to Tezu to reunite with their families.

As a result, during the fieldwork, many did not have detailed accounts of the war. It was not their war and there was also no attempt on the Indian army's side to establish any relationship with the locals so that there was any sense of loyalty towards them. After the

1962 India-China war, the Walong region was heavily militarized - the military occupation of the fertile lands here is on-going struggle for the Meyor community. Other economic activities like agriculture, horticulture or running a small business are challenging considering the small population and long distance from any towns. Tourism has picked up a bit in recent times as Walong presents mesmerising scenic beauty and unique socio-cultural attractions but even here, it is the army that has taken over all the prime locations.

Today, Walong has a military air landing field which lies just along the Lohit river bank, several military bases, a memorial in honour of the soldiers who lost their life during the war and army establishments that have become the main landmarks of the town in maps, with a few government quarters, an Inspection Bungalow, a recently-upgraded secondary school, and a few small shops and restaurants along the road. Of late, a few homestays have been coming up. A few *katcha* houses are also strewn along the road. The main Walong village is little ahead and above this settlement.

The local young entrepreneurs feel that they are losing their prospects of developing their land for any economic activities. The younger generation do not see Walong to be attractive enough for their future plans. All the working population or government servants are posted outside and most of the villagers send their children off to the district headquarters at Tezu or to the Arunachal capital, Itanagar, or to Assam for their education. While there are not many options to earn money, the parents have to bear expenses for school fees, hostel fees or for rent and travel expenses. Most children end up dropping out and returning to their villages to work as labourers for the Border Road Organization. Substance abuse has been an increasing trend among the younger generation and parents dreading losing their children. Most elders fear losing their culture and long history as younger Meyors feel disconnected to their traditions, while others feel that maybe this new attitude is better to ensure the survival of such a small community.

Conclusion

The Meyors have faced many challenges in the past but now they are facing the fear of losing control over their lives as administrative and military interventions in their way of life grow. The people were very happy to share their stories and knowledge of their traditional history for they feel the urgency and the need for their preservation and continuation. There is a fear that the younger generation of Meyors are getting more and more attracted to modern ways of life - in the pursuit of education and jobs, they are beginning to move out to towns and the plains. Many elders lament that those who leave Walong never return.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Interview with Grop Meyor, 6 April 2019, Walong.

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