

## Understanding the Political History of Memba Tribe of Menchuka in Arunachal Pradesh, India from 1866 to 1951 AD

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**Abstract:** This article explores the history of political system of Memba from mid 19th century to mid 20th century A.D. The paper also presents a lucid account of the factor that shaped political changes in the Menchuka region in the mid twentieth century's. The paper covers the history of its geographical and political position prior to India independence. The paper shed light on the following question. What was the position of Menchuka before 1952? What was the political set up of Menchuka? What role did Tibetan authority play in the appointment and functioning of Deb in Menchuka? What were the various function played by Deb? And what was the function of subordinate official called Chim in Menchuka?.

**Keywords:** Mc-Mohan Line, Pachakshiri (Baechakshiri), Gacha (Gaza), Tsari, Cheri-Neh-Nang (Tsari-Neh-Nang), Nyem Nyoku (The Place of Women), Lhalu family, Yabshi family, Deb (Kongik), Chim, Dung-yek, Gozo-karma.

### INTRODUCTION

More than half a dozen of tribes of the Northeast state of Arunachal Pradesh in India are the followers of Buddhism. They can be divided into two groups viz., Mahayana Buddhism and Theravada Buddhism. In Arunachal Pradesh, the followers of Mahayana Buddhism inhabits predominately in the districts of Tawang and West Kameng.

But some cluster of ethnic Group known as Memba and Khamba inhabit the higher reaches of central part of the State, which is mostly inhabited by the animistic group like Nyishi, Tagin, Galo, Adi, and Apatani etc. It is interesting to note that the followers of Mahayana Buddhism also practice indigenous *Bon* religion along with the former and have their literature in Tibetan script. On the other hand, followers of Theravada Buddhism are settled in the eastern part of the state. As known from their literature, they have migrated from South- East Asia in late medieval period and have a script called Tai Script.

The Memba tribe is among one of the *Bodic* group of tribes of Arunachal Pradesh and are followers of Vajrayana Buddhism. They belong to Tibeto-Burman linguistic family of mongoloid race [1]. It is important to know that the Memba tribe languages are one of the definitely endangered languages in a list of UNESCO (United Nation Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) interactive atlas of the world's language in danger [2]. The Memba have a script of their called *Ume* script. The script is of Tibetan origin. However, the literature of the Memba is predominantly religious but it also deals with their origin and some aspect of their socio-cultural life. Historically they had migrated

to Menchuka in early 17<sup>th</sup> Century A.D from different places of Bhutan, Tibet and Tawang district of present Arunachal Pradesh in India.

It is generally believed that tribal area people practice primitive type of political institution based on clan and kinship system. The political set up of most of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh cannot be differentiated from the social customs. In fact the political system emerged out of the social mores and customs of the tribe. They strongly believe in the clan organization. Therefore it is moral obligation for a clan member to support each other and extend cooperation in times of need. Therefore, if any crime were committed or if there is any dispute the clan member before going to the traditional village council tries to sort out the problems within the clan members by saying that "it's a matter of family, so let's solve within the family whatsoever". In primitive tribal society there is complete absence of tax system. The nonexistence of appointment of any Administrative Officers is also one of the features of the tribal politics. The members of the indigenous tribal administration are chosen on the basis of their knowledge on the customs and traditions of the tribe with oratory skill and person of good genre. However, the Memba tribe of Menchuka had well organized

political setup controlled by the Tibetan Authority before they were brought under Indian government in 15 August 1947.

The Memba along with Tagin and Ramo tribe inhabits the Menchuka Circle of Menchuka Sub-division of West Siang District of Arunachal Pradesh. As per 2011 census, the population of the Memba was 4,395. The Menchuka Circle consists of 34 numbers of villages. Out of which the Memba live in twenty-two villages. The Memba villages are Monigong, Thargelling, Lhalung, Segong, Dehengtang East, Dehengtang West, Singbir, Galling, Gauche, Menchuka village, Chorling, Yorni, Pharge, Bomjipang, Sarangang, Kadasila, Lingdungloti, Dorjeeling, Sekar, Sorangdem, Chengrong and Menchuka HQ [3]. Mc-Mohan Line bound the land of the Memba on the north, the Boker, a sub-tribe of the Adi on the east, the Tagin tribe on the west and the Ramo and Pailibo, another sub-tribe of the Adi on the south. Prior to India Independence in 1947 the mainland Indian people and world knew nothing about socio-cultural aspect of Memba ethnic group. The Memba before 1947 A.D had well organised political set up that continued until the end 1952 A.D.

The origin of the Memba nomenclature is unknown to the Memba people themselves and even to their neighboring tribal people. Historically, Menchuka was known by the name *Pachakshiri (Baechakshiri)* by the Tibetans and the western people. In 1878-1879 A.D, *Nem Singh*, a spy disguised as a *Lama* employee by British colonial government of India [4]. He was given a task to explore-spy in Tibet. While on his exploration in Tibet area of Orong and Gacha (Gaza) he reports of his encounter with people who call themselves *Pachakshiriba* from *Pachakshiri* [5]. A British Botanist *Captain F. Kingdon Ward* and his companion *Lord Cawdor* in 1924 A.D, while on their expedition in Southeast corner of Tibet also mention the existence of a place called *Pachakshiri* and *Tsari* at the sources of the Subansiri [6], he describes that:

*To the south of us now lay the passed into Tsari and Pachakshiri, as the country at the sources of the Subansiri is called; but they were all blocked by snow, and would not be given for another two month [7].*

The early Memba during those days also identified them as *Pachakshrisba (Bachakshrisba)* and called Menchuka as *Pachakshri (Bachakshri)*. Memba was also known by the Tibetan as *Neh-nang* (people living in holy place) and till now many of the old folk of the community also identify themselves by the same denomination. This may be because of the geographical location of the place, which was known to the Tibetan by the name of *Cheri-Neh-Nang (Tsari-Neh-Nang)*, which means new pilgrimage place located adjacent to *Cheri-Neh (Tsari-Chu)*. Among the neighbouring tribes

this place is known as *Nyem Nyoku* (The place of women), which was a common term used by the Tani ethnic group of tribal people in order to recognize the Tibetan Place and people by *Nyem Nyoku* and *Nyem*. The term Memba for the people of Menchuka most probably came into general use only after the independence of India. The term Memba had been first used for the Buddhist people inhabiting in the Tuting circle of upper Siang district, Arunachal Pradesh. The early colonial British government records also maintain the same to recognize this group in Tuting circle known as Pemako by Tibteans.

Geographically Menchuka was under Tibetan authority until 1914 Shimla Conference. The period 1908-1910 A.D., witnessed extensive Chinese forward policy in Tibet and was posing a real threat to British interest in the Himalaya. However, the British government under Lord Minto and Lord Morley decided to continue the British non-involvement policy in Tibet. In November 1910 A.D., Lord Hasting and Lord Crewe became the new Viceroy and Secretary of state for India. Within a month of their holding the office, they began to reassess the non-involvement policy followed by their precedent [8]. In March 1911 A.D., the Chinese began to move their troops forward into tribal area in Assam under informal British control and by August 1911 A.D., they had established a Chinese garrison at Chikang near Rima [9]. In the same year Noel Williamson, the British Political officer at Sadiya was murdered by Adi tribe during an expedition. The Chinese forward policy and murder of Political Officer ignited the fuelling public speculation among the British about the Chinese involvement in the incident. This new development of Chinese interference in the frontier area soon began to convince Lord Harding to worry.

Further, in December 1911 A.D., the British came to know about the Dalai Lama's devotion towards Russia, the suspicion intensified by the intelligence report of the meeting between the Dalai Lama and Aghvam Dorjiev in June 1912 A.D [10]. The report further deteriorated Anglo-Russia relation in connection with Afghanistan and the Tibetan interest. In order to solve the problem permanently the British came to a decision of concluding a treaty, which would settle the status of Tibet under international law and lead to the development of idea for the Shimla Accord.

In 1913, British sent a message convening representative from Tibet and China to participate in a conference at Shimla (India) to discuss the issue of Tibet. The Tibetan authority readily accepted the proposal. The Chinese on the other hand disinclined to accept the proposal on an equal footing with the Tibetans. However, the changing political situation in China and Tibet forced the Chinese official to accept the proposal [11]. In this conference, British India was represented by Sir Henry Mc Mahon and assisted by

Charles Bell, the Dalai Lama, Prime Minister Lonchen Shatra Paljor Dorje, represented the Tibet and Ivan Chen represented the Chinese government. In this conference, Henry Mc Mahon introduced the plan of dividing Tibetan inhabited areas into “inner Tibet” and “outer Tibet” where the former one would enjoy autonomy and later would be under the Chinese government jurisdiction. In February 1914, Tibetan representative accepted the proposal but the Chinese representative was against it and started procrastination of the proposal. Meantime, the proposed boundary line between India-Tibet was secretly in negotiation between the representative of the British and Tibet privately in the absence of the Chinese representative. The main object of this negotiation was India’s North-Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA) and Tibet. The proposed demarcated boundary between Indo-Tibet Frontier was fixed on March 1914. During the finalization of the boundary, the British Plenipotentiary assured the Tibetan Prime minister that the Tibetan ownership in private estates on the British side of the frontier will not be disturbed. The sacred places of Tso Karpo and the Tsari Sarpa will be included in the Tibetan territory. Thus, from here the McMahon Line became visible on a map dividing the boundary of North-East India with Tibet.

The McMahon Line comprises a distance of 820 miles of which 640 miles is between India and Tibet. It begins from the tri-junction of Bhutan, Tibet and Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh and ends at the tri-junction of India, Burma (Myanmar) and Tibet boundaries near the Diphuk or Talik pass [12]. The conference met for six sessions over the next six month, by April 1914, Henry Mc Mahon was forced to capitulate failure to reach any agreement. As a result, negotiation failed due to clash of interest between China and Tibet. Gradually the Chinese official withdrew from the convention on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1914 and proceeded to Calcutta en route to China. In the absence of Chinese representative, the British and Tibetan representative signed the agreement.

British almost forgot the McMahon Line until 1935, when various British explorers visited the area bordering McMahon Line. The McMahon line alignment from the west of Siyom basin to the Bhutanese border, the British by 1914 had no detailed geographical information and run through the information provided by Bailey and Morshead on their return to India in late 1913. The information was prepared entirely from the Tibetan side, and there were section of the McMahon alignment, which these two travelers did not see. The region where the Subansiri approached the McMahon alignment was virtually a blank on the map, and up to the end of Second World War no British officer has made his way up the Subansiri-Tsari region. The reports of the exploring team troubled the Indian Government about the actual frontier boundary between the Tibet and North Eastern

Frontier Agency of India [13]. Under the Government of India Act of 1935, a special provision for the administration of North Eastern Frontier Agency upto international boundary was classified as excluded area and brought it under the charge of the Governor of Assam. However, due to high terrain and heavy mountain it was impossible for the administrative machinery to reach the far-flung border areas. Due to which most of the area of NEFA were unaware of the Indian government.

Based on the demarcation agreed on Shimla Convention in 1914, a small British troops led by Captain G. Lightfoot was sent to Tawang in 1938. The Captain was given the task of informing the monastery that Tawang was now an Indian territory. The message was sent to Tibet about the British activity in Tawang. The Tibet government protested and its authority was restored. The opposition of Tibet in Tawang further stopped the British policy of final demarcation of McMahon Line in Northeastern Frontier Agency. Thus, even after the 1914 Shimla Accord agreement, most of the area, which was under Tibet’s control of McMahon Line, remained under the Tibetan authority. Pachakshiri (Menchuka) was a private Tibetan State whose residents paid revenue through Gaza Deb continued as private estate of *Lhalu* family of Tibet. It was only in 1951-1952 when extensive tour was undertaken by the Indian government to reconnaissance the northwestern part of the West Siang and Upper Siang districts of Arunachal Pradesh and to establish administrative centers. The Menchuka administrative center was set up in 1951 and U. Hiphson Roy became first Assistant Political Officer of the centre [14].

Politically before 1947 A.D, Menchuka (Baechakshiri) was a private estate of Tibetan aristocratic family called *Lhalu* [15]. This family was considered to be one of the most powerful, respected and come under *Yabshi* group in Tibet [16]. This family was regarded as the one who had credit for producing two reincarnations of the Dalai Lama and numerous reincarnated soul boys for Tibet. Their history begins with the reigning of eight Dalai Lama in Tibet (1762 A.D-1804 A.D) [17]. Sonam Dargye, father of the eight Dalai Lama was conferred Dukedom and provided with estate by Central Government of Tibet. Their residence lies about one Kilometer North of Potala palace in Lasha (Tibet). This family continued their activities until 1832 A.D., and discontinued for failing to produce male heirs [18].

Trinley Gyatso became the reincarnation of the late eleven Dalai Lama in 1857 A.D. The Tibetan central government was exhausted by allotting estates to the families of frequently changing the Dalai Lamas as they did not have sufficient financial resources left to subsidize a new *Yabshi* family. As a result, the family of 12<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama was moved into remnants of the *Lhalu* family [19]. Thus in a broader sense we can

presume that the Menchuka (Baechakshiri) was a private estate of the twelve Dalai Lama family in the 19<sup>th</sup> century A.D. There was a tradition of giving estate to a rich and powerful family and the Lamas in Tibet.

### **The Administration**

The *Lhalu* Family in Lasha controlled the administration of Menchuka through the Official called *Deb* (*Kongik*) from Gaza province in Tibet. The *Gaza Deb* further appointed *Deb* from Menchuka as his representative to look after the administration of Menchuka. The *Chim* (village head) further assisted the Menchuka *Deb*.

### **Deb System**

The Menchuka *Deb*, appointed by a higher authority from Tibet was responsible for overall administrative function from maintaining law and order, as the chief judge and as revenue officer on behalf of the *Gaza Deb* and *Lhalu* family. Before the appointment of Menchuka *Deb*, *Gaza Deb* would conduct thorough investigation of all the qualities of any one whom he considered deem fit for the post. A *Deb* was appointed from the person who has knowledge of all conventions, be quick in composition and have good handwriting. He should be able to read document and order. He should not corrupt the uncorrupted people of Menchuka. The required age qualification for the post was sixteen years. The qualified person was asked to attain the court of *Gaza Deb*, where he was given an official appointment letter for the post of Menchuka *Deb*. During his visit, the person also carries various items such as butter, animal fur and other edible item as a present for the *Gaza Deb*. Some of the Memba people said to have taken the post of Menchuka *Deb* by bribing the *Gaza Deb*. When new *Deb* arrives in Menchuka, a grand official ceremony of oath taking was organized in an open field called *Deching-Pang* located in Deching-Tang village. During ceremony, the official appointment letter was readout to the public as the new *Deb* took oath and flag hoisting followed by an anthem. During the celebration, various games were organized, where people from all walks participated. During this ceremony the handing and taking process was followed between the outgoing *Deb* and the newly appointed *Deb*.

Literally, the post of Menchuka *Deb* was appointed for a period of three years. However, there was a case, where the person holding the said post continued to hold the position for more than three years. Until 1952 A.D. Menchuka had been administrated by twenty-three numbers of *Deb* (see table no. 1). From among them, four of the *Debs* were Tibetans and nineteen were from Memba. As per information available, the system of *Deb* was introduced in Menchuka in the year 1866 A.D., it is believed that the area was temporarily under the administrative control of *Lamas* of Menchuka. The first *Deb* of Menchuka was *Deb Balu* (1866-1868 A.D), a Tibetan. The Memba

were appointed to the post of *Deb* began in the year 1872, when Kunsang Philley (1872-1874 A.D) was appointed as Third *Deb* of Menchuka. Later the six generations of Kunsang Philley had served as Menchuka *Deb*. The longest serving *Deb* among Tibetan in Menchuka was Soka *Deb* Tomden, who held the post for seven years (1887-1893 A.D.) and among the Memba was Choising Philley, who held the post for eighteen years (1925-1945 A.D.). This is reflected in an official letter sent from *Gaza Deb* for the people of Menchuka for the appointment of Choising Philley. The English equivalent of plate reveals that:

*The People of Baechakshiri should hear that Choising family from many generations had rendered their services with dedication for Lasha authority. He is given further appointment as Menchuka Deb to look towards the administrative of Baechakshiri for the welfare of the people. The authority had conducted a meeting at Gaza, where various past activity of Baechakahiri has been scrutinised and discussed. Based on discussion some new law has been formulated and people of Baechakshiri are ordered to follow the rule.*

October month of Earth-Dragon year (1928), Seal of *Gaza Deb*.

The role of *Deb* was to maintain law and order in Menchuka. He had to protect the Memba from the neighboring invasion if required. All the Memba people of Menchuka were bound to aid *Deb*, when required for safeguarding the peace and order and apprehending offenders. If any members of the community fail to do so then *Deb* was empowered to impose fine in the form of cash or kind. He was empowered to try any case involving any offenders as per the customary law and law provided by Tibetan authority in which the person accused was a resident of Menchuka. Any cases which could not be settled under him was referred to *Gaza Deb* and then to the Lasha authority. But the most important role of Menchuka *Deb* was to collect revenue from Memba on behalf of the *Gaza Deb*. Once in every year Menchuka *Deb* along with the potters visit Gaza to deposit the collected revenue. *Gaza Deb* receives it on behalf of *Lhalu* aristocratic family of Lasha. In lieu of his service, Menchuka *Deb* was provided with salary in form of kind or cash. Certain amount of material and money collected during the revenue collections were used for salary by Menchuka *Deb* to pay himself and his subordinate staff. The higher authority also knows everything about Menchuka indirectly through regular report made to them by Menchuka *Deb*.

The Menchuka *Deb* was also provided with one personal Secretary called *Dung-yek* and one personal bodyguard called *Gozo-Karma*. The appointed *Dung-yek* must be a learned one who could read and write. His duty was as a record keeper. He shall be knowledgeable about the qualities of all the items,

differences in each of the products and from where it came while receiving revenue from the people. He shall know how to store each item, any losses that may occur during storage and the means of preventing deterioration during storage. The main role of *Dung-yek* was to maintain proper record of the day today activities of the *Menchuka Deb*. On the other hand to be a *Gozo-Karma* the criteria of being educated was not required. He wears the Tibetan soldier dress and carries a sword and a Tibetan gun. The role of *Gozo-Karma*

was to protect the *Menchuka Deb*. Both *Dung-yek* and *Gozo-Karma* escort *Menchuka Deb* in his tour. The *Menchuka Deb* had to give detail information of the happenings of *Menchuka* to *Gaza Deb*.

Besides appointing *Dung-yek* and *Gozo-karma*, he also appointed one representative from each village under his administrative control called *Chim*, to assist him in proper administration of the area.

**Table-1: Succession Chart of Menchuka Deb**

SL. NO	Menchuka Deb
1	Deb Balu (1866-1868)
2	Deb Onju (1869-1871)
3	Deb Kunsang Philley (1872-1874)
4	Deb Oju Philley (1875-1877)
5	Deb Resang Philley (1878-1880)
6	Deb Thinley Philley (1884-1886)
7	Soka Deb Tomden (1887-1893)
8	Deb Pedor Philley (1894-1896)
9	Deb Jola (1897)
10	Deb Dorjee Mane (1898-1900)
11	Deb Pedor Naksang (1901-1903)
12	Deb Pema Philley (1904-1906)
13	Deb Tashi Onju Sona (1907-1909)
14	Deb Tacha Naksang (1910-1912)
15	Deb Lajung Sona (1913-1915)
16	Deb Lam Chukla (1916-1918)
17	Deb Tashi Phinjo Naksang (1919-1921)
18	Deb Dorjee Phinjo Sarjo (1922-1924)
19	Deb Ada Goiba (1925-1927)
20	Deb Choisang Philley (1928-1945)
21	Deb Pemba Naksang (1949-1951)
22	Deb Tashi Philley (1946-1948)

Sources: Field study

**Chim System**

*Menchuka Deb* directly elected the *Chim* from every village. The *Chim* literally means a village head, who under the power conferred upon him by the *Menchuka Deb*, an influential person in the community. Before the appointment of a particular person in the post of *Chim*, a proper investigation was carried out to find the qualified person. In most cases, *Menchuka Deb* selected the elderly person who was well respected by their concerned village people.

*Menchuka* had four numbers of *Chims* representing the four villages, of Lha-Lung, Dezing-tang, *Menchuka* and Galling. The last known *Chim* of these four villages were Khandu Dorsom, Pema Ganjen Naksang, Peje Sarjo and Dawa Tsering Sona respectively. The period for holding the post of *Chim* was not determined and once who held the post continued till he was physically active. The appointed

*Chim* in any case was not allowed to disobey the command of the *Deb* and should not indulge in any unwanted activities in the village.

The role of *Chim* was somewhat similar to today's *Gaon Burrah* (G.B) system of Arunachal Pradesh [20]. The *Chim* played the most important role in village level functionary. They were responsible for maintaining the law and order related duties in the village. *Chims* were the representative of the *Deb* in the village and were bounded by the *Deb* instruction issued from time to time.

The *Chims* were expected to maintain peace and order within their jurisdiction and discharge the duty of police in the village. The *Chim* were expected to watch and report any bad or suspicious character within his jurisdiction and apprehend any such person and deliver the offenders before *Menchuka Deb*. The *Chim*

also played the most important role of revenue collection in their respective jurisdiction on behalf of *Menchuka Deb*. Until 1952 A.D., the Memba people had to pay revenue to the aristocratic *Lhalu* family of Lhasa in Tibet. The revenue was deposited to *Chim* of respective village. The revenue collected by the *Chim* was further deposited to the *Menchuka Deb*. The later calculated the revenue that had been collected and deposited it to *Gaza Deb*, who later deposited the collected revenue to the *Lhalu* family in Lasha [21].

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