



Traditional Barter System Of The Monpa Community: A Case Study Of Zemithang Circle In Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract: This study explores the traditional barter system practiced by the Monpa community in Zemithang Circle, Tawang district, Arunachal Pradesh – a border region historically linked to Tibet and Bhutan. Drawing on oral histories from elders and field interviews, it traces the evolution, items exchanged such as mar (butter) and churpi(cheese) for grains and salt, trade routes via Kenzamane to Tsona, and service exchanges like labour during harvests(Blanpa/Lakpar) and ritual payments. The system fostered social cohesion amid geographical challenges but faced limitations including double coincidence of wants, unequal bargaining, and exploitation by officials. Despite transitioning to a monetary economy, barter’s cultural echoes persist in community rituals, highlighting its role in economic survival and reciprocity.

Keywords: Barter System, Monpa community, Zemithang Circle, Indo-Tibet trade, Oral histories.

I.INTRODUCTION

The word Zemithang combines two terms: Zemi(sand) and thang(place), meaning “land of sand”. Its natives, known as Pangchenpa “people free from all sins”,reside in Pangchen “land of no sins”. The area washed by the turbulent Nyamjang-Chu river which flows from Tibet and merges with Tawang Chu. Located near the indo-Tibet border,Zemithang holds historical importance as a route to Tibet through Kenzamane. This geographical connection enabled cross-border trade, where people from Zemithang exchanged grains for mar (local butter) and churpiz(local cheese) with Tibetan traders, then traded those grains for scarce salt. Salt was very rear in Zemithang at the time. This barter system operated on mutual understanding and trust rather than money, relying on the value of goods and community relationships. Even today, a part of Zemithang Circle maintains this practice during community rituals and gathering as a symbol of cultural identity and cooperation. This traditional barter reflects not only economic activity but also ties to geography, history and the collective spirit of the Monpa Community.

2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

P. Thankappan Nair’s book, Tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, 1985, offers a broad ethnographic account of Monpa people in Tawang and West Kameng districts. It provides insights into their migration history, physical and cultural characteristics, livelihoods, and practices, including agriculture and animal traction as subsistence economy foundations- key to understanding barter goods. This establishes the economic base supporting traditional exchanges within and beyond Monpa communities

M. L. Bose’s History of Arunachal Pradesh (1997), examines tribal economic life, including Monpa, Aka, and Sherdukpen barter with Tibet and Bhutan. Goods like salt, wool, and agricultural produce were

exchanged at seasonal fairs via mountain routes. However, it lacks specifics on Zemithang's trade routes and practices, creating a gap for community-level research.

The article, Socio economic and cultural life of the Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh, 2013, by Chhomu details Monpa trade routes, barter as integral to their economy, exchanged commodities, and international/inter- regional ties shaping livelihoods. It captures cultural contexts but omits Zemithang-specific variations.

2.1 Objective of the Study

- (i) To trace the historical prevalence and evolution of barter system among the Monpa community of Zemithang Administrative Circle.
- (ii) To evaluate the economic efficiency and limitations of the barter system.
- (iii) To study the social and cultural aspects of the barter system.

2.2 Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative case study design to document the Monpa community's barter practices in Zemithang Circle, Tawang District. This method suits culturally embedded practices in natural settings, enabling in-depth understanding of traditional knowledge systems passed orally across generations.

Primary data was collected through questionnaires, scheduled and unscheduled interviews with 15-20 Zemithang locals, participant observation, and respondent experiences. Secondary sources include books, articles, research papers, notes and journal.

DISCUSSION

3.1 Items Exchange and Value in the Barter System

Details derive from oral histories and interviews Zemithang elders, sharing personal experiences and generational stories. With no written records, these accounts reveal how the traditional barter system functioned. This section documents typical items exchanged, their values, and local measurement of units used in negotiations. Barter transactions relied well-understood local measures. Elders recalled stable, customary exchange rates guiding most trade. Dairy products, particularly mar (butter) and churpi (fermented cheese), were highly valued, produced in Zemithang's high-altitude pastures.. These were essential to the traditional exchange economy. Items were measured in gyama(approximately 800 grams). Grains used brey(bowl-shaped container). For grains Thik sheng (stick-like tool) leveled heaped brey by swiping excess, preventing overflow. Hrang (traditional balance scale) maintained agreed quantities in transactions.

Table No.1: The Table shows The Traditional Exchange value of items:

Sl.No	Bartered Item	Exchanged Rate
1	1 gyama (800 g) mar	6 brey millet, or 3 brey rice, or 4 brey corn (if available)
2	1 gyama (800g) chur	2 brey millet or 1 brey rice

Source: Field Study

These values were consistent across accounts, reflecting long-standing norms. Rates were negotiated seasonally with slight variations for availability and quality, providing predictable trade basis.

3.2 Exchange with Neighboring Villages

People traveled to nearby villages (now Dudunghar and Lumla Circles) to barter dairy products. They traded mar and churpi for staples not widely grown locally- rice, millet, corn, and soyabeans. Rice was a luxury, consumed during festivals once a month or yearly by the wealthy. Trips occurred seasonally or as needed, using yaks or mules. Obtained grains were often taken further to Tibet. People acquired forest dye for traditional clothing colouring. Though without fixed value, this dye went to Tibet for salt, showing barter diversity beyond food.

3.3 Flexible and Relationship-Based Exchange

Unlike grains, chillies lacked fixed rates. Cultivated in lower-altitude villages, their exchange depended on relationships, goodwill, and demand. They also bartered sheep wool(bai), sometimes from Bhutanese traders, for local or cross-border use.

3.4 Trade with Tibet

Monpa traders organized journeys across traditional trade routes to Tibet, seeking scarce salt. Rice and millet from lower villages, plus surplus dairy, were carried north. Salt was bartered weight-for-weight or volume-for-volume with rice-one bowl salt for one bowl rice, fluctuating with availability and relationships. High demand existed for Tsonpa(dye); Tibetans valued it highly as it was not easily accessible. In return, people exchanged salt for it, plus phi(clay pots) of fine Tibetan quality (versus local Kangteng pottery). With extra commodities, they exchanged clay pots, meat, and wool. Beyond salt's fixed value, other commodities' values were set by necessity, demand, and availability.

Table 2: Barter System

Sl. no	Local term	English term
1.	Solu	chillies
2.	Gorgemu	Wood ear mushroom
3.	kyungru	Fern
4.	Damberhu	Kind of edible wild leaves
5.	Tsotpa	Dye (use to dye dress)
6.	Mar	Local butter
7.	Churpi/Chur	Local cheese
8.	Khrai	Millet
10.	Mon Deb	Red rice
11.	Tsa	Salt
12.	Bai	Fleece (for Kong zam hats)
13.	Ngama	Yak wool
14.	Phi	Clay pot
15.	Phindang	Corn
16.	Grep	Soyabean

Source: field study

3.5 Exchange of Services

Beyond goods, services were exchanged traditionally. During harvest season, labour was shared communally without money changing. Families helped each other reciprocally (Blanpa or Lakpar), maintaining social bonds for labour-intensive agriculture

3.6 Wage Labour and Payment in kind

Wealthier households hired labourers, paying in millet or butter

- (a) 2 Brey of khray(millet) per day if breakfast and lunch were provided
- (b) 2.5 Brey of khray(millet) if lunch was provided.
- (c) 3 Brey of khray(millet) if no meals were provided.

When payments were made in butter (Mar):

- (a) 1 Gyama of Mar (butter)(approximately 800 grams) for two days of work along with one meal daily.

3.7 Ritual Payments

Payment for religious services also followed barter system. Community rituals, namely(Gisuma, Mangtor, Chotpa) used fixed millet payments to Lama(Buddhist monks), recorded in lists. Household rituals were negotiated case-by-case in rice, mar, churpi, soyabeans, or wool. Lama roles were hereditary, prominent in Lumpo village, with Lamakhrai lands reserved for them

3.8 Grazing Tax (Ba Khrai)

Pastoralist households in Zemithang Circle paid Tawang Monastery also grazing tax(Ba Khrai) twice yearly during rainy and winter season. Originally it was voluntary, but became compulsory over a period of time. Approximately 300 grams of mar(butter) is paid as a grazing tax.

3.9 Weaving Exchanges

Barter was also prevalent in weaving. Weavers traded labour reciprocally (days worked in return) or for goods like butter, rice, corn based on agreement made in advance.

3.10 Taxation under Tibetan Administration (Wula)

Under Tibetan rule, Monpas were compelled to pay taxes through Wula(porter services). Villagers' transported goods on their mules along defined routes:

- (a) Dakpaneng(Lumla Circle) Wula transported commodities from Bhutan to Khoblaiteng.
- (b) Khoblaiteng Wula transported to Pangchen.

Then, Pangchenpa would transport to Tibet. These services fulfilled their tax obligation to the Tibet. In case goods were lost en-route, they were either fined or given severe punishments.

3.11 Trade Routes

The barter system in the Zemithang Administrative Circle relied on extensive trade routes connecting to neighbouring Monpa villages, Bhutan, and Tibet. Oral histories reveal their complexity, seasonality, social dynamics, and goods exchanged.

(i) Trade Route within the Society

From Zemithang, people travelled to neighbouring villages like Dhakpaneng (present-day Dudunghar and Lumla Circles). Without motorable roads, journeys took 2-3 days on foot in small family group of 3-4. They carried mar (butter), churpi(cheese), and animal products to trade for rice, millet, corn, soyabean, and dried chillies- which is less abundant locally. Natural caves along routes provided shelter with water and firewood access, showing repeated historical use. Trips occurred once or twice yearly to stock supplies

(ii) Routes to Bhutan

The monpas of Tawang maintained strong trade ties with Bhutan's Drukpas. Bhutanese

traders entered via Dongshengmang to exchange goods, continuing even after the

money economy was introduced, especially during Tawang festivals. Another route led to Khinge in Bhutan, a three day journey on foot. Traders stayed for several days, exchanging dairy products and crafts for rice, millet, and other staples. Wealthier families sent larger caravans with pack animals, while poorer ones carried loads themselves.

3.12 Routes to Tibet

The longest and most important trade route was northward into Tibet for salt, unavailable locally. Journeys were timed with the lunar calendar—Dawa Dunpa (7th month), Dawa Ngapa (5th), and Dawa Chuchik (11th). A major fair at Tsona drew Monpas from Zemithang and Tawang, who carried rice, herbs, chillies, handmade papers, bamboo pens, animal skins, vegetables, dyes, mushrooms, cheese, butter, jewelry, and wooden utensils to exchange for red rock salt (Boi tsa) and clay pots. Traders from Tawang and Zemithang also exchanged goods among themselves.

The journey was arduous, taking one to two days from Lumpo to the border, with heavier loads requiring extra nights. Stops included Taktsang, caves, or Natsang homes. Food carried included pangsi, thukpa, and grey phe flour, supplemented by wild greens and fruits. Wealthier traders used sheep as pack animals, while poorer families carried loads themselves. Travel was communal but sometimes tense, with disputes resolved before returning.

Trade continued until the Sino-India conflict of 1962. The main crossing was Kenzamani, 13 km from Zemithang, leading through Lhan-Marmang-Rhem-Douzar-Pola-Dengdengla, where traders met before continuing to Tsona. There they stayed five to seven days, exchanging goods, with salt as the most vital commodity. Salt stockpiles in riverbeds were vulnerable to floods, sometimes leaving traders empty-handed.

4. Limitation of Barter system

The barter system in Zemithang Circle, though adaptive, had several limitations. A major issue was the double coincidence of wants—both parties had to need each other's goods at the same time, often causing delays or failed exchanges. Wealthier households, with more livestock and pack animals, held greater bargaining power, while poorer families carried limited goods on their backs. Lack of standard measures led to disputes, especially over items like chili or millet. Seasonal and physical challenges restricted trade to once or twice a year, with journeys through snow, rain, and caves often ending empty-handed if salt supplies were lost. Exploitation was common: officials demanded excessive taxes, and merchants sometimes cheated by giving less than promised. Barter also lacked value storage, as goods like butter and churpi spoiled quickly, forcing rapid exchanges. Labor exchanges, though cooperative, often favored wealthier households.

Despite enabling survival in an isolated region and fostering community ties, barter was slow, uncertain, and unequal. Informants expressed preference for the monetary system, noting its fairness, fixed prices, and reduced disputes. Thus, barter was both a vital strategy and a source of hardship, reflecting resilience but also vulnerability in the absence of standardized currency.

5. Conclusion

The barter system in Zemithang region was not merely an economic arrangement but a way of life shaped by geography, mobility, and community values. In the presence of roads and modern transport people travelled on foot through mountain passes, and came often in small family groups, carrying goods such as butter(mar) and churpi(cheese) to exchange mainly for millet, rice, corn, and essential salt.

Barter in Zemithang was deeply socially embedded, extending beyond goods to include labour, religion, and taxation. Systems such as Blanpa and Lakpar ensured collective labour sharing, while hired work was paid in millet or butter based on meals provided. Buddhist monks (Lamas) were compensated in kind for rituals, and hereditary Lama households held Lamakhrai lands for subsistence. Taxes like Ba Khrai were paid in millet to Tawang Monastery, while the Wula system required villagers to serve as porters for Tibetan officials, often under harsh and exploitative conditions.

Despite its limitations, the barter system sustained Zemithang for generations by reinforcing trust, shared responsibility, and adaptation to natural cycles. Oral histories reveal that barter was less about commodities and more about survival, obligation, and social bonds. While cash economies now dominate, elements of this barter culture—reciprocity, hospitality, and payments in kind continue to shape community life, underscoring barter's lasting cultural significance.

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