Chapter Four

DONYI-POLO MOVEMENT

The phenomenon rise and growth of various identities in North East India presents a picture of the possibilities of multiple emergences of identities with many distinct claims. In the recent years, indigenous beliefs and practices became a recurring theme among the Tani group\(^1\) of Arunachal Pradesh. Forging of religious and cultural identity based on indigenous tradition forms an important aspect of the Donyi-Polo movement. Talom Rukbo\(^2\) was considered as the father of the Donyi-Polo movement. This movement came in the wake of the perceived threat felt from the other dominant religious forces, especially Christianity and Hinduism, with the coming of the colonial British and the subsequent nation-state formation of India. Apart from the threat perceived, the introduction of education, contact with other societies have inculcated the people of Arunachal Pradesh, especially the Tani group who believe in Donyi-Polo to inquire and scrutinize their indigenous faith and practices, which was shrouded with mystery.

This inquiry began in the seventies, in search of the Supreme God on the basis of their mythology, faith and practices. The formation of Donyi-Polo Mission, with its

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\(^1\) Abotani or ‘Abo’ or 'Abu' means father,’ tani’ means man is considered as the primal ancestor of the Tani group of people which includes the Apatani, Nyishi, Adi, Galo, Mishing, Hill Miri, and Tagin. Abotani, the mythical folk hero occupied enduring aspects in the socio-cultural life of the Tani people. As a whole, Abotani can be dubbed as the first Adam for the Tani group of people. They followed the Donyi-Polo belief and considered Abotani as one who introduced the technique of rice cultivation. Abotani is also a symbol of struggle of human kind for food and prosperity through difficult situations and of the need for harmony between man and wealth to bring wealth to the family. The tales of Abotani and belief in Donyi-Polo binds together the Tani groups of people today in various walks of their life since the ancient past.

\(^2\) Talom Rukbo (1938-2001) was the father figure, leader and philosopher of the Donyi-Polo movement. Born on 1\(^{\text{st}}\) December 1938, Rukbo was educated at Pashighat and later entered the NEFA administration in 1960. As a language officer in the administration, he took up the initiative to study language, literature, folklore and religion of the Adis, and later became the Secretary of the Adi Cultural and Literary Society at Pashighat. During his capacity, he published several tracts on Adi folklore, religion and culture. He also visited many villages with a group of performing artists, explaining the masses about the threat faced by the Adi culture and religion from the alien religions, and exhorted them to preserve their traditional religion and culture.
headquarter in Itanagar and the Adi Cultural & Literary Society in Pasighat, have been playing a significant role in this regard. Basically a service oriented organization with education and public health programmes, Donyi-Polo Mission has taken a leading role in giving concrete shape to the faith by collecting various myths of Donyi-Polo faith and by publishing them in the book form. This is a significant endeavour and a great leap for the Donyi-Polo faith, since there was no written records, whatever myths and stories about Donyi-Polo was passed down from generation to generation through oral tradition. Similarly, the Adi Cultural & Literary Society has been doing great service in bringing out pamphlets and books. In reminiscent to this, few learned individuals have also contributed their efforts by writing articles on magazines and newspapers.

Among the Nyishis of Arunachal Pradesh, the revival of faith in Donyi-Polo, an indigenous religion practically began from the early part of 1990’s. The increasing trend of Christian converts among the people and the subsequent erosion of the indigenous customs and practices have created concern for the people who practiced indigenous religion. Indifferent attitude on the part of the people towards their aged-old culture and tradition thereby imminent possibility of losing it has also necessitated the urgency of reviving and promoting the indigenous system. Organizations such as *Tani Jagriti, Arunachal Pradesh Priests Association* which was renamed as *Arunachal Pradesh Nyobu Welfare Association* and *Nyishi Culture Society* sprang up in these years whose main motive was to preserve and promote the indigenous customs and traditions of the community.

However, the formation of ‘Nyshi Indigenous Faith and Culture Society’ was a landmark, as this society became a formal forum for discussion of the indigenous religion in a broader perspective. Mention must be made that the Adis were the first to formalize
the Donyi-Polo faith and propagated it through ‘Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang’. Many of these organizations organize regular prayer meeting in fixed places like those of church and temple. Branches are established in many places, even in remote areas. This has brought a massive enthusiasm and response from across the sections of the society. In order to channelize the movement for preservation, promotion and propagation of indigenous belief system and culture throughout the state of Arunachal Pradesh, ‘Indigenous Faith and Culture Society of Arunachal Pradesh’ was formed in December 1999. This society is a conglomeration of all faiths and cultures, which are indigenous in nature. The basic aim of this society is to forge a united movement for cultural and religious revival among the people. For this purpose, this society organizes seminars, symposia, debates, public meetings, and mass gathering.

**The Donyi-Polo Nomenclature**

There is controversy in relation to the title of Donyi-Polo faith. In fact the controversy is not the doctrine, but the title of the doctrine emanating from antithetical interpretation of the mythology, the basis of the doctrine. There are chiefly two schools of thought in this regard: (a) The School of Donyipoloism, (b) The School of Sedism.

The first school is advocated by Oshong Ering, which is considered to be based on popular belief. The argument of this school is that the Tani group of Arunachal Pradesh turned to Donyi-Polo whenever they are to seek truth, justice, love and light.\(^3\) The second

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\(^3\) Interview with Oshong Ering (IAS Retired) in April, 2009 in Pasighat, East Siang District, Arunachal Pradesh. For Ering, enlightenment is an essential component of Donyi-Polo rather than primarily being a religion. In his words, ‘people with knowledge and wisdom can become conscious of any issue affecting individual and society and thereby offer enlightened views on things in right perspective. Such enlightened persons are called *Donyi-Polo Ome-O*, meaning children of truthfulness. Elders who are consistent in truthful delivery and thereby convince people in the Kebang or village council are revered as *Donyi-Polo Abu* or
school is initiated by Pajing Pertin and N.N. Osik, based on the interpretation of mythology. The argument is that Sedi is the supreme creator of all including Donyi-Polo.\(^4\) The controversy to the title, apart from the two contestations, lies in that this faith has no prophet, no messiah in the form of an incarnation. This led to the establishment of the Donyi-Polo faith into an organized religion. Thus, a new movement, Donyi-Polo began to emerge, Talom Rukbo as its founder. With this new movement, the follower of Donyi-Polo started constructing Donyi-Polo church (gangging), setting up the date of New Year, and setting up a calendar with systematically arranging the names of the months and weeks.

The Adis have already formalized the Donyi-Polo faith as an indigenous religious faith and propagated it through Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang. The Nyishis too believe in Donyi-Polo faith but were not so sure over the nomenclature of this indigenous religion. However, there arise a need for formal teaching and preaching among the Nyishis. Therefore, Nyedar Namlo (spiritual house), a purely religious body was established on 27 January 2001 at Doimukh under the aegis of Nyishi Indigenous Faith and Culture Society. The person behind the movement is Nabam Tata, a known figure in the field of socio-cultural aspect of the Nyishis. He initiated the move and conducts the proceedings of the Nyedar Namlo. Like the Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang, the Nyedar Namlo organizes regular prayer meeting in a fixed place like those of church and temple. The branches are now established at many places like Yazalee, Palin, Kimin, Balijan, Itanagar, and Naharlagun, which are centrally placed under the guidance of Doimukh Nyedar Namlo.

As the Nyishis emphasize more on Donyi (the sun), the painted image is generally displaced inside the Nyedar Namlo. In their prayer also unlike the Adis, they hardly use the word Polo (moon). They call to the Donyi often whenever they are in need or trouble. In this way, two sects are emerging out of the broader form of Donyi-Polo faith. Nevertheless, philosophically there is hardly any difference as the two groups basically accepted Donyi-Polo as the Almighty power of the universe. The mythological background relating to origin, evolution and role of Donyi-Polo is also more or less same.

The people of Arunachal Pradesh cling to the divine universal symbol of the Sun and Moon, which helps to maintain their original identity of the natural religion. As such, a new social order is opening up based on the hierarchy of values of which they apparently had comprehension before. The strategies adopted for organization of the tribal oral religion has been to give a call to eliminate all alien beliefs and practices, especially Christianity; to revitalize the traditional ritual practices and to produce a new theology. In the European reformation, most of the debates on religious discrepancies arose from within the congregation. However, in the Donyi-Polo religion, the need for reform rather is challenged by the alien forces especially Christianity and Hinduism. The ‘other’ became the defining parameter of the reform.

The call to eliminate the alien beliefs and practices has no doubt a populist dimension. It is aimed to gather support from within and as well as across groups. The call readily appeals to the emotions of the people and help in mobilization. In practical terms the call is a kind of reaction to what has been going on in the region. Attempts of Christian proselytization at one time may have brought a glorified status for the indigenous groups, but that does not work anymore in the present circumstances. Proselytization can be
shunned but modernization which is creeping in the society pervades in every aspects of the indigenous groups. Therefore, Christian proselytization is not the only sole reason for the deterioration of tribal religion and culture. This resulted in their search for a coherent order of values which would be capable of conferring meaning and unity in the society. This they found in Donyi-Poloism. Donyi_Poloism therefore became a symbol of their religion and cultural identity. Not that they have been able to resolve all the problems and oppositions, they confront them and as a result of which Donyi-Poloism is continuously evolving itself.

The Donyi-Polo movement is mostly confined to the Tani groups of the state. Nevertheless, the elites of the Donyi-Polo faith represent only a small section of the ethnic groups of the state, namely, the Adis. The Adi theologians always deny their tie with any other religions like Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism but they remain grounded in these religious thoughts. Besides, there are religious and cultural affinities between Donyi-Polo religion and Bon religion of Tibet. Prior to the coming of Buddhism in Arunachal Pradesh, Donyi-Polo religion represents the crude form of Bon religion of Tibet. With the spread of Buddhism and the adoption of written scripts Bon religion seems to improve in the light of Buddhist ideas. After the adoption of written scripts, the Bon also wrote their scriptures, improved and institutionalized their religion. Besides, the Bon began building their monastery, and improved their doctrines in the light of Buddhist ideas and principles. But, the Donyi-Polo faith remained as original and un-institutionalized.

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5 Interview with Bani Danggen (IAS, State Information Commissioner, Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh) in April, 2009 in Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh. Also see Danggen, Bani, A Comparative Study of Bon Religion of Ancient Tibet with Donyi-Polo Faith of the Adis of Arunachal Pradesh (Itanagar: Preety Publishers & Distributors, 2007).
Nevertheless, in interpreting the indigenous belief of the Adis, they are looking for the similarities with Semitic religion. This is seemingly true the Donyi-Polo religion has been endowed with such attributes as ‘creator’, ‘almighty’, ‘omnipresent’, and ‘omniscient’. Despite the accusation of Christian proselytization, the Donyi-Polo religion is not free from the influence of Christianity. Besides, the intrusions of Hinduism, prior to the coming of Christianity in Arunachal Pradesh have also influenced the people by the Hindu way of life, and this again is reflected in their religious outlook. The minority but dominant group even succeeded in getting a bill enacted in the year 1978, providing legal protection to the indigenous faith.

**The Gangging Movement**

For a long time tribals have no system nor particular time and place for regular worship. They have no congregational service and no recitation of any kind since they don’t have religious literature. There is no confession, and they worship the Supreme Being only in times of distress and sickness. Certain places, however, are given due reverence. Sometimes the tribals pay reverence to certain trees which are believed to be the abode of a supernatural power. Nevertheless, in the recent years, tribals in Arunachal Pradesh have begun the practice of constructing a house of worship called the gangging.

The Donyi-Polo movement can be also called as the ‘gangging movement’. The Adis, though believe in Donyi-Polo since time immemorial, did not have a place or house of worship for long time. It was only in 1986 that the Donyi-Polo movement began where

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6 The term ‘gangging movement’ is used here to elucidate the importance of gangging in Donyi-Polo movement. The researcher attended the main gangging in Pasighat, East Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh. There are still many villages which have no gangging. Therefore, the main gangging is chosen for a study. The priests and the some congregation are interacted and then observation is made by participating in their service. Since there is no written document, observation is made by participating in their house of prayer.
construction of ganging or place of worship started. The Donyi-Polo faith under the Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang developed into a proper and systematic belief system, having a place of worship called the ganging. Since its inception, the Yelam Kebang has constructed over 600 ganggings, where about 300 ganggings are based in Adi areas of Arunachal Pradesh. The remaining ganggings are based in Assam, where the Donyi-Polo believers are settled.

Before the ganging movement, the people of Arunachal Pradesh (Adis) used to gather in a place called musup (gathering hall) for prayer. Every village has a musup. However, there was no particular priest who sits in the musup. It was rather an informal gathering of people for prayer and also other matters pertaining to the Adi society or village. In most cases, the people used to go to the house of miris (priests) for prayer and healing whenever they are sick or ill. Only in few cases, the miris go to the house of the sick and perform rituals, and massages, healing the sick.

The ganging movement however, brought certain changes and reforms. The musup is replaced by ganging in most of the Adi villages. The people gather in ganging every Saturday, where the miris come and perform prayers and rituals. Moreover, some priests visit various places, in different ganggings preaching the Donyi-Polo faith and practices, distributing booklets, pamphlets and cassettes. Through the ganging and preachers, many follower of Donyi-Polo faith became aware of the importance of their indigenous religion, and also the importance of preserving their culture and identity. In most of the Adi areas, about 40% among the follower of Donyi-Polo attend the ganging. The rest do not attend the ganging; however believe in Donyi-Polo. Government employees, doctors, engineers, and mostly in urban areas, their attendance in ganging is low compared to the unemployed in
the villages. Nevertheless, these employed individuals donate sums of money to the ganging whenever necessary.

Before entering the ganging, shoes must be removed. Inside there are two sections, the left side for the male and the right side for the female. At the front of the ganging is the altar, centrally placed and elevated, reserved for two priests and a conductor. However, the conductor is changed every Saturday. The children sit with their parents according to their gender. The priests perform rituals and chantings, and then prayers are performed with the congregation. Sometimes, female priests also perform rituals and prayers whenever necessary. For an instance, while tying the ridin (thread) in hand, a female priest has to tie the ridin to female members, and the male priest to the male members. A ridin is tied to protect a person from fear or evil spirit. If a person is sick or ill, an elder member of the family can tie the ridin. A ridin is tied on the left hand for unmarried person and on the right hand for the married person. Ridin is also tied whenever a hand is cut or where there are bruises in the wound to stop blood. The priest sprinkles the holy water which is called bogum or engo karsing asi or guminsigo for purification. There is no blood sacrifice or rituals, but if a person commits sin, he or she comes to the ganging for purification through the holy water. It is a simplified form of worship and rituals.

The mode of worship is similar in all the ganggings, but the central ganging in Pasighat controls all the ganggings. Every ganging follows the guidelines of the central gangging. Important matters have to be brought to the central gangging for deliberation; decisions are made through the General Body Meeting (GBM). However, in normal times, each gangging functions independently. For an instance, when an evil spirit enters a person, a priest or villagers performs rituals independently without consulting the central gangging,
or in healing the sick. In other words, in day to day activities, each particular gangging functions independently. But important matters like in construction of ganggings, decision has to be passed by the central gangging.

Recently, the Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang of Ngopok village has made the following appeal and submitted to the central gangging since it has to be deliberated and passed by the central gangging.

(1) Due to the lack of religious texts except the ‘Angun Bedang’, some of the ganggings in the villages are on the verge of extinction. The central gangging should look into the matter to make prayer book easy to understand and made available for purchase.

(2) There should be a programme of the elders from the central gangging visiting various ganggings to preach about Donyi-Polo.

(3) Leaders of the Donyi-Polo should have a uniform dress code.

(4) Early publication of the Yelam book is needed. The ‘Angun Bedang’ which exists today is only a prayer book. To protect from the ill activities being done and which are ought to be done, and to control a book should be published. The only prayer book cannot lead us to withstand our Kelam (dharma).

(5) Arunachal Vikas Parishad (AVP) should look into the construction of ganggging as there are some villages where ganggings are not constructed.

(6) A sum of rupees twenty should be collected from the Donyi-Polo believer to be submitted to their respective local ganggings.7

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7 Interview with the President of Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang of Ngopok village in East Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh on 16 March, 2011. The appeal letter was translated into English language from the Adi dialect through an interpreter, Olik Megu from Pasighat.
Though it is a reform religion, Donyi-Polo does not have a religious text like the Bible, Gita or Koran. Whatever exists today is only a prayer book called the ‘Angun Bedang’. The need to have a proper religious text began with the gangging movement. As Talom Rukbo envisaged that unorganized society would cease to exist, the gangging movement began with a view to establish an organized society and materialize a complete way of life. The societal network is established with the gangging movement, as it has its connectivity and network in every village, block and district. Since the beginning of the establishment of gangging, about 20-25% of the people are converted to Donyi-Polo who regularly attended the gangging. The gangging movement apart from the religious and liturgical work also tries to adjust with modern society. For an instance, in matters pertaining to crime and punishment, it appeals to reduce the degree of punishment. It also abolishes many taboos and prohibitions and made the mode of worship simple.

The gangging movement provided the follower of Donyi-Polo, a socio-religious network that cut across villages, enabling to form more organized religion. Despite the construction of ganggings in most of the towns and villages, the number of people attending the gangging is relatively low. In Ngopok village of East Siang district, there are about 260 households, of which 40 households are Christians, 7 households are Hindus, and the rest of the households are the followers of the Donyi-Polo faith. Though majority of the households belong to the Donyi-Polo faith, only about 80 households attended the gangging. The majority do not attend the gangging though they believe in Donyi-Polo. Government officers, like engineers and doctors do not attend the gangging. But they tie the ridin in their hands and also donate large amount of money to the gangging whenever necessary.
In Kiyit village, there are 240-250 households, of which 30 households are Christians, and the rest of the majority follows the Donyi-Polo faith. According to the head of the Donyi-Polo faith of the village, only 28 households attend the gangging, and the rest do not even actively participate in Donyi-Polo movement.\(^8\) In Pasighat town areas, there are five ganggings, and 80% of the population follows Donyi-Polo. However, only 40% of the followers attend the gangging. According to the head of the central gangging, about 60% of the Donyi-Polo believers in the state do not attend the gangging.\(^9\)

**The Donyi-Polo Priest (Miri)**

The Donyi-Polo religion does not have written creeds to be recited, but rather creeds are contained in the hearts and minds of the people. Therefore, each one, family clan and village is a living creed. The religion does not have founder nor centered in a great historical person, but rather it is centered in creation. The priests or miris\(^10\) learnt the accounts of creation through the narration of Abangs. Therefore, the priests play a very important role in the religious life.

The gangging movement helps the priests find its proper place and role in the religious life. Every Saturday the priests come to the gangging and perform rituals and other liturgical services. The priests chant prayers, and also sprinkle the holy water in the gangging. Besides, some priests are assigned the task of preachers, and go place to place

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\(^8\) Interview with the head of Donyi-Polo in Kiyit village of East Siang district on 16 March, 2011. Since most of the villagers are not educated nor active in the Donyi-Polo movement, their understanding is local, and are not much aware of the elites role in their religious reformation.

\(^9\) Interview with the head of Central Gangging in Pasighat on 19 March, 2011. It must be mentioned here that the central gangging in Pasighat controls and regulate all other gangging in Donyi-Polo movement.

\(^10\) *Miri* is the Adi word for a priest.
propagating the Donyi-Polo religion. Thus, priesthood becomes more organized with the establishment of the gangging.

Priesthood in Donyi-Polo is not hereditary, but depends on the quality of a person. Those individuals who can recite the rituals and prayers can become a priest. Priesthood is also considered as divine providence. There are those who have healing power. It is a divine power a priest gets from his dream. In most cases, through massage the sick people are healed. Healing is one way of bringing the people back to the Donyi-Polo faith. Different religious groups including Christians visit the priest for healing in time of sickness. Most people after their sickness is healed accepted the Donyi-Polo religion. There are also cases where Donyi-Polo believer converting to Christianity if they receive healing from Christian missionaries, and if the Donyi-Polo priests could not heal their sickness.

There are broadly four types of priests. (1) Ukki miri-this is a priest who does the healing services especially in their homes. Sick people usually go to the house of the priest, and the priest performs the rituals and prayer of healing. (2) Aayit miri-this is a priest who chants and performs rituals to bring the soul whenever a soul of a person wanders from place to place when led by the evil spirit. (3) Delong miri-this is a priest who performs rituals during festivals, especially with dao. (4) Ponung miri-the role of ponung miri is similar with that of Delong miri, but better and well versed in prayers and rituals. Generally the ponung miri performs the prayers during solung festivals, which is difficult and usually performs the prayer from night till morning.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{11} Interview with the priest of Ngopok village of East Siang ditrict on17 March, 2011.
The Nyishis called the priest as Nyob. A Nyob is neither inherited or appointed nor imparted any formal training. He is rather inborn and has imbibed himself a divine vision to become a priest. The priest carried out his services through various modes and methods of divination. The Nyishi priests are generally grouped into three categories. The first is Bunyio Nyob, who deals ordinary ailments; the second is Bute Nyob, that deals the highest order of rituals or sacrifices including Yellow ceremonies and the third is Nyoki or Jeri Nyob, gifted with extraordinary spiritual power, who could predict impending danger, cures epidemic, detects theft, heals fractured bone, cures dog and snake bite.\textsuperscript{12} But, the Nyishi priest does not occupy deserved and distinguished position in the society, as there is no separate class or status for them. Nevertheless, by virtue of their indispensable and humanitarian services, they are always honored, respected and acknowledged in the society.

There is no hierarchy in Donyi-Polo priesthood as such, but people usually certify the ranking by observing their songs and chanting of creation. Generally priests in villages and remote areas are well versed in reciting and chanting prayers, performing rituals and ceremonies. Besides, they are more close to their culture, more authentic, and still consider the Abangs as the original source of interpretation while priests in towns and urban areas are closely associated with the Hindus.

**Donyi-Polo Conception of Spirit/Life after Death**

The tribal people believe in the existence of the spirit or spirits in nature. The spirit inhabits all of creation. There is nothing on the earth that has not been touched by them. It

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is through the work of the spirit that plants are made to germinate, grown and bear fruit. The presence of the spirit in stones and trees is real to tribals. Humans and animals become alive and active through the power of the spirit. Benevolent spirits are thought to be responsible for the welfare and prosperity of humans. They guard and protect the village from disease, pestilence, outside enemy attacks, and natural devastations such as crop failure, storms and flooding. In the past, animal sacrifices were made to them in times of cultivation or seed sowing and harvest. People worship them and offer proper sacrifices to gain favor. However, if the right offerings are not given at the proper time, the spirit might not guard the people.

Malevolent spirits are considered dangerous and destructive and cause all kinds of human suffering such as damage to property, disease, sickness, accidents, madness and even sudden death. Because such things are associated with these spirits, people offer sacrifices of domestic animals, food and the libation of rice-beer. Tribal people believe that the spirits would harm them if such sacrifices were not given and thus fear of evil spirits guide the people’s lives.

According to a priest in Pasighat, there are four types of deaths. Firstly, in normal in death, while dying if the person calls the name of the father or mother and if tears fall, then the dying person goes to Donvie Yaromibang, which is the beautiful land. Secondly, in the unusual death like the accidental death, the dead goes to Dorum Lisam, that is a place between heaven and earth, and the dead person becomes an evil spirit. Thirdly, in a pregnancy death or when a person possessed with evil spirit died, the dead goes to Nygi Sikit Kitbung, which is a dark place near the river bank where there is no sunlight.
Fourthly, when a child died during birth, the spirit of the dead child does not go anywhere, but in a place called *Yinkong*, which is a small playground.\(^{13}\)

However, according to a follower of Donyi-Polo of Ngopok village, if a good person dies he/she goes to the land of Donyi-Polo, which is the heaven. But unusual death like accident and suicide go nowhere but their spirits roam around, and then return as a bad spirit.\(^{14}\) According to the head of Kiyit village, the dead goes to the land of Donyi-Polo, whether a person is good or bad, as the people are created by Donyi-Polo, they must go back to Donyi-Polo.\(^{15}\) But for a priest of Ngopok village, the dead goes anywhere they wish to go and there is no particular place for the dead.\(^{16}\) According to the secretary of Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang of Pasighat, the deaths have their own place, but suicidal and accidental deaths do not have any place. Their spirit roams around in the village. Their spirits enter the living to make the people know why they died, and after asking something from the living person, they disappear, and finally find their place.\(^{17}\) Donyi-Polo does not believe in the recycle of birth, but believes its existence.

Different views, opinions and interpretations exist regarding life after death among the follower of Donyi-Polo religion. There is no clear concept of life after death as there are no written texts. Most of the followers of Donyi-Polo in villages and remote areas still believe in their own way of understanding, lacking a systematic interpretation. But the educated elites are still in the process of reforming the Donyi-Polo religion.

\(^{13}\) Interview with Gao, a priest in Pasighat on 14 March, 2011.
\(^{14}\) Interview with a retired school teacher, follower of Donyi-Polo religion in Ngopok village of East Siang district on 16 March, 2011.
\(^{15}\) Interview with the village head of Kiyit, East Siang district on 16 March, 2011.
\(^{16}\) Interview with a priest of Ngopok village of East Siang district on 16 March, 2011.
\(^{17}\) Interview with the Secretary, Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang, Pasighat on 19 March, 2011.
**Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang**

The philosophy and religious beliefs of the Adis exist since time immemorial. The belief in Donyi-Polo, the unseen Sun and Moon, which is known as Donyi-Polo religion is practiced by the miris (priests). The common people through the Abangs learnt the principle and philosophy of Donyi-Polo faith. However, to practice the Donyi-Polo faith becomes a difficult task for the people as there were no proper place of worship, religious books or trained preachers to deliver the teachings and practices. Thus, in order to enlighten the people about Donyi-Polo, and to bring awareness about the importance of indigenous faiths, the Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang was formed on 31 December, 1986 under the guidance of Talom Rukbo, Secretary of Adi Cultural & Literary Society. During his capacity, Talom Rukbo published several tracts on Adi folklore, religion and culture. He also visited many villages with a group of performing artists, explaining the masses about the threat faced by the Adi culture and religion from the alien religions, and exhorted them to preserve their traditional religion and culture. Under the Kebang, Donyi-Polo had emerged as a well formulated and well organized religion. Following are the objectives of the Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang:

1) To organize Donyi-Polo as a functional religion under the authority of the Kebang.

   The Yelam Kebang is the authority of the Donyi-Polo faith.

2) To make the idols of Donyi-Polo and other benevolent gods and to construct temples.

3) To publish books of hymns and prayer, traditional teachings and injunctions of the Donyi-Polo known as Abang.
4) To establish prayer centres known as Gangging which are constructed to accommodate people for prayer and worship.

5) To celebrate the festivals which are the ingredients of the faith.

6) To preserve and follow the age-old traditions as the basis of any innovation, modification and reform in the religious practice.\(^{18}\)

The Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang also gives strong emphasis on meditation and prayers for which the hymns were composed and circulated. The kebang conducted the sermon on the teachings of Donyi-Polo on every Saturday, and organized orientation courses twice a year on the Donyi-Polo philosophy. Since its formation, the Kebang has tried to expand the canvass of the Donyi-Polo over the kindred tribes of neighbouring area. In order to cover the Tani groups (Mishing, Nyishi, Apa Tani, Galo and Adi), the Donyi-Polo Spiritual Society of Arunachal Pradesh was constituted. The Donyi-Polo was recognized as a distinct religion by the International Association for Religious freedom, Oxford (IARF). Talom Rukbo, the founder of Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang attended the conferences organized by the IARF in Europe and Asia. It was mostly due to his efforts with a strong backing from educated people that Donyi-Polo had arrived at its present glorious position.

Besides, the Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang constructs ganggings (house of worship) in many villages. At present, there are about 300 ganggings in Arunachal Pradesh. Most of the Adi areas have ganggings, where preachers are sent to village ganggings, distributing pamphlets and cassettes under the Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang. It deals with Adi literature,

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culture and other socio-religious activities. It organizes literary events, cultural events, marriages, train young people, imparting the importance of their religion and culture. It also creates a space for bringing awareness of the importance of preserving the indigenous identity.

The Yelam Kebang also interferes in promoting what is good for the society. For an instance, the Yelam Kebang dissuades people from cultivating opium, and encourages cultivating rice or other items. The Yelam Kebang helps the people in the initial stages of cultivation; and later some amount of the produce is given back to the Yelam Kebang for its service. Also in occurrence of dead, if the deceased family is poor, the Yelam Kebang helps the deceased family.

The Dony-Polo Yelam Kebang, apart from the great services done for the preservation of their religion, it also tries to promote their traditional faith through new discovery. Following are the objectives of the new discovery for promotion of the traditional faith:

1) To strengthen the faith on Donyi-Polo, pieces of meditation and prayers are composed in order to create a means for direct communication with Donyi-Polo.

2) In order to practice spiritual aspiration for self satisfaction and self confidence towards achievement of salvation, regular prayer and sermons on every Saturday are conducted at Donyi-Polo Dere by Yelam Kebang, where codes of moral conducts and disciplines are taught in the mass prayer.

3) Orientation course for further enlightenment for self realization are conducted twice in a regular manner.
4) To remove the suspicious and superstitious outlook which cause moral weakness, blessing of Donyi-Polo are sought through prayer to regain strength of mind.

5) Through prayers, worship is performed for the good health, good mind, peace and happy life.

6) Through prayers evil spirits which attack and assault innocent persons are driven out and taboos which are chronic disease of the society are totally stopped for the affected family. Through these ways all worries and melancholies of mind are removed and relieved.19

The Central Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang is based in Pasighat, and it is the highest body that governs the Adi society pertaining to Donyi-Polo faith. Every important matter is to be discussed and deliberated, and passed by the Central Yelam Kebang. The Yelam Kebang also functions at the district level, block level and village level. The mode of selection for the appointment of persons in the Yelam Kebang is simple. The people democratically select experts to lead the Yelam Kebang in their own respective areas.

Apart from the Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang, there is also Nyedar Namlo which is established for the preservation and promotion of the indigenous religion. With the formation of Nyedar Naamlo, a formal preaching on Donyi-Polo faith is being ushered among the Nyishis. Workshops and specific trainings are imparted on methods and tenets of the indigenous religion which are being conducted periodically under the aegis of central Nyedar Namlo committee. It has tried to usher certain process of selection and

accommodation of the traditional belief systems without undermining the basic aspect of spirituality thereby filling the gap between the old tradition method of worship and the new modern and alien form of religions. Many people began to show interest in the Nyedar Namlo. Even some Christian converts have returned to the Donyi-Polo religion.

**Indigenous Faith and Cultural Society of Arunachal Pradesh (IFCSAP)**

The Indigenous Faith and Cultural Society of Arunachal Pradesh (IFCSAP) came into existence on 28th December 1999 with the sole motive to establish unity among the small and big janjati communities and to give momentum to their ongoing efforts for protection and promotion of their respective faith and culture. It provides a common platform for all the janjatis of Arunachal Pradesh. The IFCSAP appeals the various janjatis to attend the weekly prayer centres such as the Nyedar Namlos, Medar Nellos, Ganggings, Rangfraa Mandirs, Kargu Gangi, and Donyi-Polo Dere to strengthen the indigenous society.

The IFCSAP has also decided to celebrate a month long house to house contact programme starting from 1st December to 31st December. The IFCSAP requests the various janjati communities to observe the birth anniversary of Talom Rukbo on December 1st at every prayer halls and observe month long awareness campaign to enlighten the indigenous faith followers. It further appeals the followers to decorate the prayer halls in a grand manner and hoist Donyi-Polo and Rangfraa flags on all the prayer halls and house tops. Further, it appeals the like-minded indigenous people to work united and establish a weekly prayer centres in all villages to protect their faith and culture.
The IFCSAP organizes youth awareness camps in every district from time to time to create awareness about the importance of their tradition and preserving their identity. Indigenous language is one of the vehicles to preserve the cultural heritage and the indigenous faith of any community. The IFCSAP therefore envisions in preserving, protecting and promoting the indigenous languages. They are of the view that great civilizations of German, Roman and Greek are now dead due to mass conversion to Christianity and Islam.

The Indigenous Faith & Cultural Society of Arunachal Pradesh (IFCSAP) urged the people to conduct inter-tribe tours and meetings to know and understand the indigenous ethnic cultures existing in various parts of the State. It also suggested formation of block/district units of the society to preserve and protect indigenous faiths and cultures. Further, it stressed on preserving local dialects of the various tribes and appealed to the people, especially parents to encourage their children to speak in local dialects. The IFCSAP also reiterated that belief on respective faith and culture is the right approach to preserve indigenous faith and traditional cultures from external forces.

Besides, the IFCSAP is engaged in the work of defending the reform movement. There are some traditionalists who believe that Donyi-Polo movement is destroying the essence of tribal animism. However, the reformists reiterated that there is no choice if the culture is to survive, and people have to recognize that the old ways of worship did not connect modern people with their gods. ‘Our religion demanded too many animal sacrifices, which were too expensive, people always needed a priest to connect with spirits,
and our women were not given due respect,” reiterated Tony Koyu, one of the founders and former president of the Indigenous Faith and Cultural Society of Arunachal Pradesh (IFCSAP). Though the IFCSAP do not have organized public relations, they make audio CDs, composed songs, mantras and sent them to the villages. The IFCSAP also tell the people that a person who deserts his religion is like a rootless tree that has no identity and is bound to perish. The IFCSAP further claim that the organization has not only reduced conversions but also brought converts back into the Donyi-Polo fold.

**Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religious Act 1978**

The legislative history relating to the issue of conversion in India underscores the point that the authorities concerned were never favorably disposed towards conversion. While British India had no anti-conversion laws, many Princely States enacted anti-conversion legislation: the Raigarh State Conversion Act 1936, the Patna Freedom of Religion Act of 1942, the Sarguja State Apostasy Act 1945 and the Udaipur State Anti-Conversion Act 1946. Similar laws were enacted in Bikaner, Jodhpur, Kalahandi and Kota and many more were specifically against conversion to Christianity. In the post-independence era, Parliament took up for consideration in 1954 the Indian Conversion (Regulation and Registration) Bill and later in 1960 the Backward Communities (Religious Protection) Bill, both of which had to be dropped for lack of support.

The proposed Freedom of Religion Bill of 1979 was opposed by the Minorities Commission due to the Bill's evident bias. However, in 1967-68, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh enacted local laws called the Orissa Freedom of Religion Act 1967 and the

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Madhya Pradesh Dharma Swatantraya Adhiniyam 1968. Along similar lines, the Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act, 1978 was enacted to provide for prohibition of conversion from one religious faith to any other by use of force or inducement or by fraudulent means and for matters connected therewith.

There has been a persistent demand from the people of Arunachal Pradesh to take some concrete and positive measures for preservation and promotion of their traditional culture particularly their indigenous faith. The anxiety of the people regarding their traditional culture and faith is that if no timely effective measure is taken, their age-old culture and faith might be overwhelmed by different culture and faith which are alien to the society. The people of Arunachal Pradesh also argued that some forces are operating in their territory whose intension is to subvert their traditional culture and faith. With these contentions, the Freedom of religion Act of 1978 was hurriedly introduced and passed without much debate.

The bill received the assent of the President of India on 25th October 1978 and became operational Act in Arunachal Pradesh as law of the land. An important is mentioned in Chapter Three which reads, ‘no person shall convert or attempt to convert, either directly or otherwise, any person from one religious faith to any other religious faith by the use of force or by inducement or by any fraudulent means nor shall any person abet any such conversion’. Chapter Four reads, ‘any person contravening the provisions contained in Chapter Three shall without prejudice to any civil liability, be punishable with imprisonment to the extent of two years and fine up to ten thousand rupees’. However, this Act was criticized as it violates the fundamental rights and the spirit of secularism. Intellectuals, academicians, politicians and even judiciary have not wholeheartedly
accepted the Act. There were protest and condemnation from Christian community. Memorandums were repeatedly submitted to the concerned authorities including the President and Prime Minister of India.

Supporter of the Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religious Act, 1978 argued that there was an alarming growth of Christian converts as churches increased significantly. Christian missionaries are also accused of being detribalizing the tribal people. The protagonist’s chief complaint against Christianity is that it has destroyed their culture, tradition, custom and practices. The Christian converts countered the charges that it was not the church which entered the tribal land or abode. The first people to enter the difficult and rugged terrain were the administration followed by the modernization process. Then came the merchants, shopkeepers, petty traders, contractors and laborers, they argued, when Christianity first entered, the detribalization process had long been ruining the tribal society.

In fact there is no single agency which is responsible for detribalizing the tribal society. Detribalization also took place through government machinery and other modes of cultural domination. This process of cultural domination results in detribalization. It is manifested in the inferiority complex of the tribals, presenting a scenario of reversal to the goal of developing tribal people along the lines of their tradition and genius. Nationalism offers a cultural resistance to the West, while tribal development in India faces the discourse of nationalism that tries to appropriate them within the nation-state.

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While these anti-conversion laws, on their face, appear to protect religious adherents only from attempts to induce conversion by improper means, the failure to clearly define what makes a conversion improper bestows governments with unfettered discretion to accept or reject the legitimacy of religious conversions. For instance, there are several cases where the courts sentenced priests for converting people even after the converts provided statements that they voluntarily converted. Another contributing factor to the enactment of anti-conversion laws involves the history of Christianity in India. Christianity came to India during British colonialism almost 200 years ago. The British-led churches in India received funding from the West; after 200 years under British rule, the modern-day Hindu government fears that Christians in India would have ulterior motives in converting mass numbers of the population.

Another factor is electoral strategy, that is, to get votes from the upper caste Hindu majority by appeasing them with a law that keeps the socially entrenched caste system in place. However, the underlying factor is still the struggle for power—to keep the lower caste Hindus (untouchables and Scheduled Tribes) from competing with the higher and privileged castes. The anti-conversion laws, both by their design and implementation, favor Hinduism over minority religions. Therefore, it represents a significant challenge to Indian secularism which is enshrined in the Constitution.

25 Ibid.
Converts & non-Converts: Liberals & Conservatives

There are tensions between Christians and non-Christians in Arunachal Pradesh. The non-Christians allege that the Christians are eroding the cultural and religious fabric of the society. The Christian converts desist themselves from associating or joining social functions including the festivals. The practices which are contrary to their religion are termed as satanic and sinful, and therefore, they openly denounce and dissociate themselves from such practices. Another charge being leveled against Christianity is that the converts tend to lose the basic morality. It is also alleged that Christians are abandoning popular folk songs and dances merely on the ground that these are superstitious in nature. The non-converts argue that the conversion is causing tension within family, villagers and the community. Christian converts on the other hand argue that the religious elements in the old life did not in any way alienate or result in the loss of people’s identity because the traditional religious element had not contributed to that in the first place. In fact, it is in the new forms of religious life that the tribal identity is strengthened.

There are two groups within the Christian converts: the liberal and the conservative. The proponents of the liberal view favor the integration of many of the traditional socio-cultural practices with Christianity. This group tends to be inclusive in dealing with other religious communities including the indigenous religion. The Catholic Christians are liberal and accommodative in nature as far as their dealing with the socio-religious aspect of the tribal is concerned. The conservative group insists strict adherence to the religious ideology and to some extent they believe in the notion of superiority of their religion.

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26 Catholics are somehow more liberal towards the use of traditional rice beer, and often consumption is not restricted. But other denominations like Baptist, brewing or consumption of rice beer is strictly prohibited.
Generally, educated Christians subscribe to the liberal view while the less educated and illiterate are more inclined to the conservative group. Therefore, it is the educated or elite group who plays the role of bridging the gap between the Christians and the non-Christians. They actively participate in the community festivals and even some of them offer leadership in the celebration committee.

Similarly, there are two groups within the non-converts; the liberal and the conservative. The conservative group is staunchly against the Christian religion while the liberal believes in the inclusive religious ideology. The conservative seeks complete disassociation or even prohibition of the Christians from attending socio-religious functions including the festivals on the ground that their presence vitiated the very purpose of the ritual. The liberal argue that one’s religion should not disqualify him/her from freely joining or participating in the festivals as it represents the broader aspect of indigenous culture.

It is therefore, the inherent ideological divisions within the Christian converts as well as within the indigenous religious believers that sustain a kind of restraining force from friction or conflict between the two religious ideologies. The liberal views evolved within the two religious communities have been putting the respective opposite views in a balance. Despite the virtual polarization of people into two religious groups, it has not yet reflected in the electoral politics. In other words, religion has never been an issue during the elections as these are being contested on the line of party politics and the individual capabilities in terms of merit or ability matters a lot.
The Hindutva Campaign against Conversion

Hindu nationalism and the conversion issue are intimately related. This ideology crystallized largely in reaction to the proselytizing activities of Christian missionaries.27 Socio-religious reform movements such as the Brahma Samaj and revivalist neo-Hindu movements like the Arya Samaj were partly formed to cope with often aggressive religious propaganda.

The advent of the British rule led to a time of religious, philosophical, and social ferment as the traditions of India encountered modernity and Hindu leaders responded to the activities of missionaries and the influx of Western civilization. Indian reformers, along with the work of Protestant missionaries were instrumental in causing a revolution in nineteenth century Bengal, which eventually led to an Indian renaissance. However, as the issue of religious conversion arose, the relationship between the Hindu leaders and the missionaries soured, and this was expressed through intense public debates on conversion in Bengal, which continued throughout the period.

For Ram Mohan Roy, ‘the majority of Christian converts in India were converted by other attractions rather than by a conviction of the truth and reasonableness of those dogmas’28. In the late 1820s and in the beginning of the 1830s, a number of young higher caste Hindus in Bengal were converted to Christian faith. Concerned by this development and provoked by a pamphlet written in Sanskrit in 1839 by John Muir, a Scottish civil servant and Orientalist, Hindu pundits started to respond publicly to Christianity. While

Muir claimed that Christian faith has universal implications for all, regardless of their race and caste, the pundits argued for the particularity of all religions, including Hinduism. The debates in Bengal focused initially on the doctrinal differences between Christianity and Hinduism, but conversion had become a central issue since the Ram Mohan Roy-debate on Christianity. During the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, a number of young high caste Hindus converted to Christianity. Because of their higher caste background and their profile in their society, their decisions brought controversy and criticism from their respective Hindu communities.

The conversion from the depressed classes in the late nineteenth century gave rise to various problems. It determined Hindu claims to religious supremacy, and therefore it was a challenge to the basis of the political framework with which they were opposing British rule. Gandhi was also aware of the need for a unified national identity that could bring political momentum to the fight against the British rule. He knew that such a national identity was not possible unless there was peaceful co-existence of the different religious communities in India29. He saw conversions of the depressed classes as a threat not only to communal harmony but also to the very concept of the India nation. Therefore, Gandhi openly expressed his disapproval of conversion. He further complained that missionary activity took place under the shadow or protection of the British rule.

In post-independence India, the ideal of secular was widely shared by the political leaders and was embodied in the constitution. However, its actual implementation has not always been without tension and struggle, particularly where the relationship between the state and religious minority communities is concerned. This struggle has been exacerbated

by the rapid growth of various Hindu nationalist movements, their campaign to uphold Hindutva, and their rejection of anything foreign on Indian soil. Hindu nationalists demanded a series of radical discontinuities between those who were loyal to Indian tradition and culture and those who do not. Conversion was regarded not only as a religious intrusion undermining confidence in Hindu religious ideology but also as a political scandal because it allowed the continuation of foreign influence and dominance even after independence.

In the mid-1980s the Hindu attitude towards minority communities, especially Muslim and Christian communities became increasingly hostile and aggressive as India witnessed a resurgence of Hindu nationalism, involving the promotion of Hindutva. The increasing religious tension of the 1980s and 1990s involved violence by the Hindus towards Muslims and Christians. This tension was largely due to the increasing political influence of the RSS and its associate organizations, the BJP, VHP and Bajrang Dal, which were determined to achieve their ideal of Hindutva at the expense of the security and welfare that Indian secularism had promised to provide to other religious communities. The success of the BJP in the election of 1989 gave Hindu nationalist leaders a confidence to assert the failure of secular India to respond to Muslim separatism and to promote the ideology of Hindutva. Paul Brass describes this period as ‘an ideology of state exaltation, which the BJP wishes to infuse with Hindu symbols in order that a united India may come to occupy a respected place among the great states in the modern world. Its ultimate goals
were to consolidate Hindus and to bring the backward and Scheduled Castes and Tribes as well into the political Hindu fold.\(^{30}\)

The VHP and Bajrang Dal asserted that any ideology or religion other than their version of Hindutva should be excluded for the sake of a united Hindu national identity. The moderate sections of the Hindu nationalist movement who were eager to maintain their political power by projecting an acceptance image of the party (BJP), were not able to keep control of the militant groups. The strength of fundamentalist Hindu ideology was highlighted with the demolition of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya on 6 December 1992. As the BJP became the major political opposition in the early 1990s, the secular ideology that had hitherto dominated Indian politics was increasingly threatened by communal tensions caused by religious issues and fomented for political purposes. In the 1990s, the VHP, RSS and Bajrang Dal actively applied *Shuddhi*\(^{31}\) to reconvert dalits, adivasis and other backward classes as a part of their pursuit of Hindutva.

**Christians & Hindus: Cross vs. Saffron**

Religious distinctiveness when coterminous with ethnicity exacerbated the sense of otherness. For an instance, Christianity reinforced and complemented rather than supplanted the sense of distinct ethnicity and otherness amongst the Nagas and Mizos. The overt Christian religiosities of some separatist groups have led Hindu nationalist groups like the RSS to suspect a foreign hand behind the ethnic rebellions of North East India. The

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\(^{31}\) *Shuddhi* was a ceremony used to demonstrate the return to the Hindu fold of those whom they regarded as Hindus but who had been converted to another faith. It had been practiced by the Arya Samaj mainly in response to Christian and Muslim conversion movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and it was accepted by mainstream Hindus only with reluctance.
RSS leaders thwarted by the spread of Christianity in ever new areas of the North East and by rebel attacks on their leaders and institutions points to the Church’s use of liberation theology slogans like ‘Nagaland for Christ’ or ‘Operation Jericho’\(^{32}\) as evidence of its connivance with ethnic separatism. To counter this alleged nexus, the RSS tries to infiltrate a number of ethnic movements mostly spearheaded by smaller groups who oppose the imposition of Christianity by the bigger ethnic groups.

For an instance, in the Tripura-Mizoram border, the RSS has strong presence in camps where Brus Reangs displaced by violent evangelical Mizo groups have taken shelter. There have been reports that the Bru National Liberation Front (BNLF) received support from the RSS. The RSS and VHP have also strongly supported the Donyi-Polo faith in Arunachal Pradesh. Similarly, the RSS and VHP supported the Heraka group of the Zeliangrong. Both the Donyi-Polo and Heraka groups oppose the Christian Proselytization. Therefore, the Hindu nationalists extend their support to these indigenous religious groups.

Although the RSS and VHP have been stridently vocal about the church-separatist nexus, its preoccupation with the emerging threat of Islamic radicalism in the North East have occasionally prompted its leaders to try and promote Hindu-Christian understanding in the region. However, efforts to bridge the Hindu-Christian divide in the North East by playing up the issue of illegal infiltration from Bangladesh have not been very successful because Hindu radicals elsewhere in India attacked Christian preachers.

\(^{32}\) The Mizo National Front (MNF) used the biblical event ‘Operation Jericho’ in their first uprising on 28\(^{\text{th}}\) February, 1966.
Hindu Organizations (RSS) in Arunachal Pradesh

During the early years of India’s independence, restriction on all kinds of religious activities other than the practice of tribal religion was imposed. Verrier Elwin strongly advocated the continuance, preservation and promotion of tribal religion and opposed the undue entry of other form of religions in NEFA. The NEFA administration observed a policy of strict religious neutrality and advised not to impose even tribal religion on those who do not want it. For an instance, the administration insisted that songs and hymns sung in schools should be of neutral character. Inspite of the medical and educational work rendered to the tribal populations by various missionaries, the administration in NEFA felt that tribal religion and culture should not be disturbed. However, after the Indian debacle in the Sino-Indian war in 1962, the government of India affected changes in its religious policy where for the first time the Ramakrishna Mission was invited to work among the tribals of NEFA. The mission school was opened at Along in 1966 and extended its network in other parts of NEFA as well.

The Hindu organizations as compared to other North Eastern states in India, find an easy entry in Arunachal Pradesh. During the initial years after independence, the government of India provided favorable conditions and encouraged Hinduism by permitting its missionaries to carry out their activities in the state. This is responsible for the strong presence and influence of Hindu religion and culture among the tribal population of Arunachal Pradesh. Another factor is that the Hindu adherents were the first among the outsiders to come to the state which includes government employees, business people and teachers both in private and government schools. Teachers are to some extent, responsible for influencing their faith towards their students. For an instance, primary school teachers
while enrolling students on the school register would tend to change either fully or partially the names of the students.

Hinduism being a dominant religious community in India undoubtedly influenced almost every minority religious communities directly or indirectly. Various Hindu organizations such as Ramakrishna Mission, Vivekananda Missions, Sharda Missions and Vivekananda Kendra Vidyalayas are operating in Arunachal Pradesh. They also extended their valuable services in the field of education and health care. There are organizations with committed agents and workers whose task is to impose or assimilate Hindu elements into the indigenous faith and belief system of the people in the state. Some of these organizations include Rastrya Syamsevak Sangh, Vishva Hindu Parishad, Bajrang Dal, Arunachal Vikas Parishad, Banwasi Kalyan Ashram, Nari Kalyan Kendra, Durga Vahini, Mahesh Jogi Ashram, Brahma Kumari Vishwavidhyalay, and Shanti Kunj Ashram.33

At present, there are three centres of Ramakrishna Mission situated in Along, Itanagar and Narottam Nagar (Tirap District) in Arunachal Pradesh. The mission rendered humanitarian services like hospitals and education. It also aims at spreading religion and culture which is accomplished through a large number of libraries, lectures, and journals. Besides, the recent presence of ISKCON is also another development in the Hindu proselytization process in Arunachal Pradesh. The contribution of Vivekananda Kendra Vidhyalaya mission in the field of education is of great significance in the growth and development of education in the state. It has greatly contributed in the development of human resources. The Akhil Vikas Parishad under the disguised nomenclature of

Arunachal Vikas Parishad too greatly contributed in the services of the needy in the form of relief and rehabilitation. The Vivekananda Kendra Arunjyoti is actively involved in creating awareness among the rural folk, opposing and campaigning against Christian activities and proselytization.

Subsequently, with the rapid growth of activities of the Hindu missions, many Hindu gods and goddesses are being adopted by the tribal population. For an instance, pupils who are in Hindu missionaries’ school as well as in other government and private schools take active part in the worship of goddess Saraswati, the Hindu goddess symbolizing learning and knowledge. Though, the Hindu missions do not formally convert the tribal population into Hinduism, but their loosely organized religious practices are viewed as one of the various shades of Hinduism. This is because Hinduism does not go for direct conversion but tacitly influences them so as to assimilate their religious belief to the Hindu fold. Their dominant discourse is that Christianity is an alien or foreign religion where as Hinduism is an indigenous religion.

There are also various indigenous organizations in the state whose objectives are to protect, preserve and promote indigenous religion and culture. These include Donyi-Polo Mission, Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang, Arunachal Pradesh Nyobu Welfare Association, Indigenous faith and Culture Society of Arunachal Pradesh, and Nyishi Indigenous Faith and Culture Society. However, these indigenous organizations are being closely knitted with various Hindu organizations. Most of the indigenous organizations receive financial help from the Hindu organizations which indeed embedded the vested interest of the Hindu organizations. In many instances, in the name of indigenous religion and organizations,
pamphlets, posters, cards, photos, and calendars are clandestinely published by Hindu based organizations for their sheer vested interest.

The Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS)\textsuperscript{34} has woven an intricate network through its numerous affiliates to reach out to the tribal areas across the country to promote ‘Hindutva.’ Operating as social workers under different names, the members of these organizations work towards inculcating a feeling of self-respect and confidence among the tribal people and bringing them back into the Hindu mainstream. These groups have been persuading the people to go back to their roots in Hindu culture, and this translated into votes for the Bharatiya Janata Party in the last few elections. The shift in loyalty by the tribals, who have traditionally voted for the Congress since Independence, catapulted the BJP to power in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh.

The RSS came in Arunachal Pradesh in 1992 in Papampare district. From Papampare district, it has successfully expanded its branches in the state in ten different places. The working system of the RSS is unique and simple. The RSS has a system of gathering of daily get together which is called ‘shakha’. The members are expected to spare at least one hour daily for attending a shakha of the Sangh. The shakha is held daily, at a fixed time and at a fixed place, which is called ‘sanghsthan’.\textsuperscript{35} The members of the RSS assemble in the morning or evening according to their convenience and circumstances.

\textsuperscript{34} The RSS today is a nationalist organization whose contribution to character-building of millions and towards inculcating in them the spirit of patriotism, idealism and selfless service of the motherland has been incomparable. It is this organization that has inspired tens of thousands of public-spirited persons to serve the nation through the medium of politics. Those in the political field and those who are serving the society in other fields have to function with unity and trust like a family to ensure that the country secures its rightful place in the country of nations. Christophe Jaffrelot, ed., \textit{Hindu Nationalism: A Reader}, op.cit, pp. 191-92.

Bhagwa Dhwaj (Saffron Flag) is hoisted and after saluting it, there is a programme of some exercises or physical training, sports, discussions about nation or society, question-answer session or collective singing of tuneful patriotic songs. Then, the shakha is dispersed after a prayer and reiterating of a solemn resolve to serve the motherland.

In the shakha, tribals of Arunachal Pradesh are imparted with the idea of serving the motherland, respecting India’s culture, traditions, the glorious past histories and preserve the tribal religion, culture, tradition and identity. Apart from the shakha the RSS also organizes camps to impart the ideology of RSS to the students. During the camp, students are taught about the organizational structures and principles of the RSS. Singing patriotic songs, playing kabadi game and yoga are also imparted to the students. Through such activities, love for the motherland and a feeling of brotherhood for fellow citizens are developed among the Arunachalese tribals. To inculcate the virtue of self-reliance and the spirit of equality, students are encouraged to work on their own. In training and educational camps, students take part in cooking and serving of food and clean their utensils themselves.

There are also other Hindu organizations operating in Arunachal Pradesh working in the similar pattern of the RSS. The VHP for an instance, works for the development of Hinduism, Vidhya Bharti works in educational sector, Seva Bharti works in health sector, and Sanskar Bharti works in cultural field. These Hindu organizations work differently, but they took inspiration from the RSS. Their motto is the same with the RSS that is to create a sense of cultural nationalism.
Besides, there is another wing called Arunachal Vikas Parishad (AVP) which comes under the RSS, working with the similar ideologies of the RSS. The AVK in their effort to safeguard the indigenous religion, culture and traditions of tribals provides basic information about the importance of preserving the tribal identity. Circulating of postures and pamphlets like ‘save your culture’, ‘loss of culture is loss of identity’ and lockets are some of the activities of the AVP. There are about fifty members of AVK, mostly tribals, with some full time workers in the entire state of Arunachal Pradesh. In Pasighat, there are two full time workers of the AVP. Besides, there are many others who work and contribute towards the RSS nation building project. The AVP helps in the construction of the Donyi-Polo Gannging in the state. Under the AVP, the tribal people learn Hindu prayers, and are influenced by the Hindu religion.

The commonality between Hindu religion and the tribal religion is that both their religion are indigenous, in the sense that it is not foreign. While other religions, especially Christianity is a foreign religion, and that accepting or converting would amount to loss of culture and identity. However, the influence of Hinduism on tribals through Hindu organizations such as the RSS instead of helping the tribals to protect and preserve their indigenous religion, in the long run may come under Hinduism. One of the leaders, president of Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang of Ngopok village asserted that ‘one day the followers of Donyi-Polo may become Hindu because of the AVP’.

The important sign of Hindu influence is evident among the followers of Donyi-Polo. That there are postures and calendar with the Hindu gods and goddesses, and symbol

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36 Interview with the President of Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang in Ngopok village of East Siang district on 16 March, 2011.
of om in Donyi-Polo homes. In the words of Nabam, ‘some people have pointed out that the using of Dup Duna and utterances of om sound in the proceedings of Nyedar Namlo is purely a Hindu influence. In this way the inner value of the term indigenous or originality is being defeated even in the eye of a layman who does not embrace other religion but wish to retain his own religion’. However, their assertion is that anybody who goes to ganging (house of worship) is a follower of Donyi-Polo, and it has nothing to do with postures and symbols of Hindus gods and goddesses; while the Christians consider Donyi-Polo as Hindus. A Donyi-Polo priest asserted that ‘Hindus are helping the tribals to protect and preserve their indigenous faith, culture and identity, so keeping postures of Hindu gods and goddesses is just another kind of respect in return for what they have done’. He further asserted that ‘people do not mind doing good deeds in return’. According to one of the leaders of Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang, ‘Donyi-Polo does not believe in Hinduism per se, but the religious activities are same. Like Hinduism, Donyi-Polo also believes in the nature worship like mountain, stream, and mother earth.’ He further reiterated that in the Solung festival, which is the biggest festival of the Adis, womenfolk often go to the paddy field to make offering to the goddess Lakshmi (goddess of wealth), invoking wealth and prosperity for the family and village.

Hindus generally do not convert the tribals. When the RSS began their activities in Arunachal Pradesh during the initial years, the tribal population suspected that the RSS had come to convert them into Hinduism. However, the motive and agenda of the RSS is not necessarily to convert the tribals into Hinduism, but rather helping them to protect from

38 Interview with a priest in Pasighat on 14 March, 2011.
39 Interview with the Secretary of Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang in Pasighat on 19 March, 2011.
alien proselytization, and especially from Christian conversion. What it means to be a Hindu for the RSS is a larger question that is associated with cultural nationalism. According to an RSS activist in Pasighat, ‘a person who had taken birth in India, who may follow any religion, caste, or creed, any form of worship but who thinks that India is his motherland and holy land is a Hindu’. He further reiterated that the RSS only tries to cultivate and impart the sense of nationalism to everyone and do not force anybody to be a Hindu, and that the similar pattern of worship and activities of some tribals with Hinduism is not necessarily the influence and proselytization work of the RSS. But rather, this has been the influence of Hinduism before the advent of the RSS. The RSS activist again argued that some tribals practices Hinduism, and even worship Hindu gods like Shiva. For an instance, the Noctes are already Vaishnavite Hindus long before the coming of the RSS in Arunachal Pradesh.

Most of the activities of Hindus organizations including the RSS are confined in towns and cities. Their association with the tribals is also with those educated elite, and leaders of the Donyi-Polo movement. In towns and cities, in some Donyi-Polo homes, there are postures, signs and symbols of om, Hindus gods and goddesses, or calendar circulated by various Hindu organizations. This depicts the close association of the Donyi-Polo followers in towns and cities with Hinduism. While in villages or remote areas, the followers of Donyi-Polo tries to keep aloof themselves from Hinduism, and maintain its distinct identity. Since there are no Hindu activists in villages, the follower of Donyi-Polo somehow remain intact with their past tradition and culture. For an instance, in towns and cities, tribals participate in Hindu festivals like Holi, Durga Puja and others. In the villages

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40 Interview with RSS activist in Pasighat on 13 March, 2011.
there is no such participation in Hindu festivals among the tribals. The reason could be, perhaps there are no Hindus, or even if there are tribal Hindus, they are negligible. Some Christians are of the view that only the few elite and leaders of the Donyi-Polo Kebang received benefits, grants and donations from Hindu organizations.

In villages, most of the miris (priests) are well versed in reciting prayers, rituals and ceremonies. The recitation that was passed down from the Abangs is recited during prayers, rituals and ceremonies. A miri from a village claimed that ‘majority of the miris from towns and cities do not know the proper recitation and chanting of the Abangs since they came to know the Donyi-Polo religion through books and other secondary sources’. As such, though it is a reform religious movement, most of the miris in villages refer to the Abangs for interpreting their faith and practices. While in towns and cities, many miris tries to cite some instances from Hinduism to justify their movement. In villages, there are hardly any postures, images of Hindu gods or symbols. The head of Donyi-Polo movement in Kiyit village asserted that ‘religion, culture and tradition are the same, even in celebration religious rituals are performed and loss of religion is loss of culture, and loss of culture is loss of identity’. He further argued that, though Hinduism steps into the Donyi-Polo religion, they cannot remove or uproot the culture of Donyi-Polo. In villages, miris and leaders do not want close association or link with Hindu organizations. The commoners hardly even know that Donyi-Polo Kebang has close link with various Hindu organizations.

The close link and association of Donyi-Polo or other indigenous faiths in North East India with Hinduism is also made possible through organizations such as the Kalyan

41 Interview with the head of Donyi-Polo movement in Kiyit village of East Siang district on 16 March, 2011.
Ashram, Janajati Faith and Culture Forum and Janajati Dharma Sanskriti Manch. These organizations organize seminars, and culture awareness programmes where various indigenous religious groups participate and showcase their culture through dances and songs. The Janajati Dharma Sanskriti Manch, for an instance is a socio-cultural organization of Janajati communities of North East region and Sikkim. Its aim is to organize and encourage the Janajati brothers irrespective of caste, creed and colour for the preservation, protection and promotion of Sanatan Dharma, Sanatan Sanskriti; customary laws and traditional village institutions. It also aims to enlighten the Janajati communities about the dangers posed to them by the alien forces, especially Christian proselytization and Islamic fundamentalist in the region.

Therefore, the Janajati Yuva Sammelan 2006 was organized on 24-28 December 2006 at Guwahati wherein 4469 delegates from 108 Janajatis from the seven states of North East participated. In the event, there were exhibitions displayed the way of worship, lifestyle of various Janajatis and glorious past and tradition of the North East India. A grand Shobha Yatra was also arranged where various Janajatis marched in the street and market of Guwahati, dancing and singing in their traditional dresses. For the Hindu right-wing nationalists, this symbolizes oneness and national integration. There was a declaration from the delegates in an open session on the concluding day of the convention, which read, “We swear in the name of God that we shall preserve, protect and promote our Sanatan Dharma, Sanatan Sanskriti and the sovereignty of the country”. Thus, national integration through culture is the agenda of the right-wing Hindus nation building project.

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42 Pamphlets of Janajati Yuva Sammelan 2006.
43 Ibid.
Some Hindus consider the indigenous faiths of Arunachal Pradesh as Hindus. Besides, many Hindus consider themselves as follower of indigenous religion since Hinduism is not a foreign religion. Yoga guru and spiritual leader Swami Ramdev while laying the foundation stone of the Hindu Seva Ashram at Lingalaya Seva Ashram along NH 52A in between Naharlagun and Itanagar in Arunachal Pradesh 16th February, 2011 advocated that all religions are equal, adding that in the context of indigenous religion, Donyi-Polo, it is also worshipped directly or indirectly by the Hindus, irrespective of difference in nomenclatures. Lauding the indigenous faiths of the Arunachal Pradesh, Ram Dev said, “I am a true Nyishi as I worship Sun and the Moon. Likewise every follower of indigenous faith is a Hindu.” In this way the Hindu functionaries are openly campaigning that Donyi-Polo is a part of their religion and on that line they try to assimilate or accommodate some of the Hindu elements into the tribal religion.

**Critical Analysis of Hindutva**

The ideology of Hindutva has been criticized not only by religious minorities but also by moderate Hindus for several reasons. That Hindutva ideology is a majoritarianism of power-driven minority high-caste Hindus over the other sections of society. It is also untrue both to Hinduism and to Indian nationalism and in defining Indianess along religious lines, it is fundamentalistic. To the secularist, Indians should be defined on the basis of common participation in the body politic known as India, regardless of their caste and religion. Hindutva thinking legitimizes social hierarchies that guard the privileges of the powerful.

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45 Ibid.
The Sangh Parivar’s pursuit of Hindutva is a majoritarian idea that does not espouse communal conflict in principle but sees communal conflict as a by-product of reactions from minority communities and secular forces in the course of their cultural and ideological search for Hindu national self-identity. The combination of this majoritarian idea with the politics of numbers in a modern democratic electoral system became so dominant that the religious minorities had limited space to locate their own self-identity. Conversion in this context was understood as a way for dalits and adivasis/tribals to protect against what was perceived to be overwhelming ideological aggression. The Parivar’s assertion that the self-identity of Indians must be founded on Hindutva rather than any ideology not only failed to appreciate the struggle of other religious groups to define their own identities but imposed their ideology on them as the only means of being part of the Hindu nation.

The coming of RSS in the North East to promote the Hindutva ideology or Hindu nationalism finds its place within the indigenous religions of the tribals. The assertion that tribals are the backward Hindus and that they belong to the same religion is one such religious propaganda propagated by the RSS in the North East among the indigenous religious groups. Therefore, both for the RSS and the tribals, Christianity is a foreign religion and that Christians are responsible for the importing of Western cultures and practices which undermines the indigenous culture. This is because in general, the tribal way of life is holistic in nature; there is integration of social, economic and religious institutions. In other words, the secular and sacred aspects are indistinguishable in the tribal world.
Mode of Re-vitalizing the Reform

Westernization in the name of modernization have brought about a great change in the social set-ups of the people of Arunachal Pradesh that contributed to a lot to the erosion of their traditional religion and culture. Therefore, there arise for the need of remedial measures in order to preserve, protect and promote the indigenous religion and culture. The re-vitalization of the Donyi-Polo movement is accomplished through the introduction of weekly prayers system. It is the demand of time that weekly prayer centres are established among the supporters of the Donyi-Polo movement. It is through such weekly prayer meeting that young people are made aware of their ancient traditional wisdom and knowledge. The new system of worship and prayers in the reformed religion are strictly based on the eternal religious philosophies. In order to attract the younger generation, the way of worship and prayer are made simple, meaningful, and attractive. The content or meaning of the prayer songs composed are in tune with philosophy, and music of the devotional songs are traditional and melodious.

There are also frequent preaching tour programs in order to strengthen the movement and to recharge the people spiritually. Besides, workshops and seminars are held frequently to share the success as well as to discuss the problems, and to find solutions. There are also training programme for youth so that spiritual knowledge are imparted, and making them aware of the ill-effects of religious conversion, and day to day practical problems of life. The young generations generally tend to confuse the social evil practices of their own culture, and feel a sense of inferiority complex. For an instance, people kill *mithun* or buffalo for appeasing the evil spirits when people become sick. Due to this reason, they easily leave the indigenous religion and embrace alien religion. Therefore,
some educated elite envisage the eradication of social evil practices or reformation on the
different social practices has become an important matter.