

Religion and Communication: An overview of Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act, 1978 (APFRA) Amidst Awakening Movement

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Abstract

The discourse on religion has always persisted among the Tani ethnic group of Arunachal Pradesh; however, recently it resurfaced when there was a demand for the implementation of the Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act, 1978 (APFRA). This paper traces the emergence of the Religious Movement with special reference to Donyi Poloism among the Tani ethnic group in Arunachal Pradesh. Home to 26 major tribes and over 100 sub-tribes, Arunachal represents one of the most ethnically diverse regions and this diversity exposes it to the influence of acculturation and acculturative processes. Therefore, amid ongoing efforts to preserve indigenous cultures and assert a distinct collective identity, communities often experience a persistent sense of cultural ambiguity. The paper examines the contribution of the State Government in its attempt to introduce the population to the significance of preserving cultural and religious identity through communication strategies that involve verbal, non-verbal, and visual communication, etc. With reference to Arunachal Pradesh, one of the communication strategies used was a feature film called *Mera Dharm, Meri Maa*. This effort ultimately aided the inception of the Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act (APFRA, 1978).

Keywords: Religious Communication, Religious Conversion, Anti-Conversion Act, Communication Strategies, Arunachal Pradesh, Donyi Poloism

Introduction

The Tani community of Arunachal Pradesh is a group of 6 indigenous tribes, namely *Adi*, *Apatani*, *Galo*, *Nyishi*, *Tagin* and *Mising*, which form the largest ethnic groups in Arunachal Pradesh. Religious communication plays an important role among the followers of the indigenous religion—*Donyi Poloism (Sun-Moon)* of the *Tani* ethnic community in reviving the ancient animist spirituality through ritual communications. The idea of a cultural and religious identity among the Tani group of people had been simmering since the Christian missionaries entered the North-Eastern Frontier Region. Proselytization and mass conversion among the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh to Christianity were seen as a concerning issue. Hence, (Dawar, 2008) observes that the need for an organized religious identity gave birth to the idea of a common central God among the Tani tribes. Consequently, Donyi Poloism was born out of the tribes' resistance to Christianity's proselytization and mass conversion (p.63). However, there are

scholars like Dangmei (2012) who opine that there could be an influence of Hinduism among the Tani group as their religious practices present some similarities and Dawar (2008) observes that the institutionalization of Donyi Poloism could be an attempt at bringing the tribes into a greater Hindutva fold. The politics around religion peaked during the 1960s–70s as the discussion revolving around safeguarding and protection of culture gained momentum. Among the Tani tribes, there are sections of the populace who follow the traditional indigenous faith and identify themselves as nature worshippers. And the other section consists of slightly Hinduised indigenous faith believers who, as scholars like Dawar (2008) observe, are influenced by the Indian State's integrationist approach. However, the common entity among all the sections of the Tani ethnic group remains the same, that is, Donyi Polo (sun-moon). After coming in contact with the Assamese communities, the *Misings* underwent stages of religious changes within their community, from "adoption of Hinduism to the emergence of *Bhaktiya cult*, which is a mixture of both the *Misings* and the new *Vaishnavism-cum-Tantricism*" (Pegu, 2008, p.113). Akin to the change and continuity among the religious beliefs of the *Misings*, the *Tani* ethnic group in Arunachal Pradesh also exhibits a similar syncretic religious tradition. It is a religion in its transitioning phase among the Tani ethnic groups in Arunachal Pradesh where the guidelines of ethics are newly evolving and many of them align with Hinduism.

Therefore, the primary objectives of this paper are:

- (i) To trace the historical evolution of the religious movement in Arunachal Pradesh and
- (ii) To examine one of the religious communication strategies for proliferating Donyi-Poloism among the Tani ethnic group of Arunachal Pradesh.

Review of Literature and Methodology

Santra (2004), in his study, identifies five major modes of communication while studying the conversion and communication among the *Kui* people of Orissa, among which mission education's role in Christian communication is a significant one (p.21). Christian missionaries brought along with them educational and health missions from which the tribes benefitted. In view of the religious affinities of the neighboring states like Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya, the administration of Arunachal Pradesh state, erstwhile NEFA, made sure to remind the political officers that the administration remains neutral when it comes to religion. Due to these developments, administrators as well as the local leaders were uncomfortable and concerned about religious conversions. Hence, the discourse on religion and religious conversion has always been a part of the dialogue among the Arunachalese; this makes more sense when we actually consider the fact that the religious activities by Christian missionaries in Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Mizoram had been rapid and quite successful. There were instances spanning from the late 1960s to the 1970s, in which as many as 47 churches were razed down in the Subansiri division, 40 churches were burnt down in Sagalee division and a few more were burnt down sporadically in the smaller villages of Deed, Dem and Neelam. Converts were not spared either and were "severely persecuted" (Hilaly, 2024, p.565). In addition to the issues of conversion,

Arunachal Pradesh, the easternmost part of North East India, which shares 1680 kilometers of international borders with Bhutan, China, and Myanmar, had a seemingly weak relationship with the central government. This statement is backed by the observation of Regunathan: “a strong identity and self-image, they felt, would give them a more commanding and powerful stance in their relation with the central government as well as of the state to its constituent communities... Donyi Poloism, they hoped would provide a direction to this search for an identity” (Regunathan, 2000, p. 49). Therefore, one may assume that, among other factors, political ambitions may also have been the predominant reason for the religious awakening or revival movement. This is where the debate on the Hinduisation of Arunachalese tribes comes into discussion. Elwin, in his study on the Baigas in 1939, observed that the best approach towards the *Hinduised Adivasis* would be an isolationist approach, as their culture was being undermined and they were made corrupt. However, when he studied the North East Frontier Area (NEFA), his isolationist approach fell short, and he had to modify his stand. This modification was necessary for him as he studied the Nagas of Nagaland and realized that they “inculcated values like land, territoriality, cultural autonomy and political freedom. Such values were perceived as a threat to the national unity by the Indian State.”¹³ Giving in to the geo-political issues, the Indian State pushed for an integrationist approach. Indeed, Dawar observed that the “most effective method of integration was by means of cultural hegemony by appropriating tribal cultural practices.”¹⁴ These political developments amidst social unfurling brought the intellectuals and local leaders of the Tani society together to push for cultural and religious identity movements.

In this paper, for the first objective, secondary data and government documents were analyzed, and for the second objective, Harold D. Lasswell’s model of communication: Who? Says What? In Which Channel? To Whom? With What Effect? will be employed in order to analyze the mass communication medium.

Religious Communication and its Sociocultural Implications

Religious communication can be defined as the act of conveying religious beliefs, ideas or messages between individuals or groups, often transmitted through various forms of performative rituals. Thereby, religious conversion becomes an integral part of the study as it is the object of persuasive communication, which is one of the very elements used by religious communicators to proliferate their religion. In order to understand the Tani group’s apprehensions about religious conversions, among many other reasons, one of the significant reasons stems directly from their genesis and migration stories. Regunathan’s (2000) study suggests that the migration took place over a long period owing to two primary reasons: one was the uprisings in Mongolia during the 1st century, and the second was during the Yarlung Dynasty in the 7th century in Tibet. The King Shrong-Tsan Gampo was the ruler, and with the consolidated power over Myang Territory, Buddhism was accepted as the state religion. Therefore, he opines that it is possible that the Adis rebelled against both the imposition of the religion and the ruler and left the area and finally reached present-day Arunachal Pradesh (p.29-30). The tribes during their stay in these regions came into close interaction with the people of these tracts; however, religious conversion was still a far-fetched idea; the fact that the adoption of the religion followed by the people of these

tracts did not influence the tribes seems to be due to their disinterest in a new religion as the Tani ethnic group had fled Tibet rejecting Buddhism as well. By 1934, the Christian missionaries had penetrated the inaccessible regions, and hence the mission gained momentum with the opening of John Firth Catholic Mission School at Sadiya, where the tribals from the state were enrolled and given education. This school was a significant establishment, as many of the poor tribal children from Arunachal Pradesh were sent there to study. Evangelizing the Arunachalese commenced with their enrolment in these Christian Missions primarily situated in Upper Assam, specifically Tezpur and North Lakhimpur districts bordering Arunachal Pradesh. Subsequently, Mission-raised individuals returned to Arunachal, disseminating their newfound faith and teachings (Dangmei, 2012, p. 147).

This particular occurrence can be regarded as the nascent stage of religious communication among the Arunachalese. Up until this time, the tribes of Arunachal had not been exposed to Christianity, but when the proselytization began, in 40 years it jumped from 0.79% in 1971 to 30.26% in 2011 according to the Census records. The proselytization activities by the Christian missionaries in this region caused much discomfort to the educated sections of Tani society, and the fear of acculturation heightened due to the mass conversion to Christianity. Hence, the first to bear the brunt were also Christian groups. A Hindu organization like the Vivekananda Kendra Arunachal Pradesh Trust (VKAPT) was always present in the backdrop, working for the betterment of society through educational missions, just as the Christian missionaries did; however, they were never directly targeted for reasons such as conversion and proselytization.

Transition from Animism to an Organized Religion

On 28th August 1968, a meeting was held where it was decided that *Donyi Polo Mopin Solung Dere* (community hall) would be constructed, and this event marked the initiation of the awakening of the cultural and religious identity movement. Following this, in the winter of 1971, the Adi cultural and literary society was formally inaugurated. The Tani community had garnered enough support from the public against conversion to Christianity, and efforts were made to develop their tribal faith and religion (Dawar, p.59-60).

One of the most revered figures in the cultural and religious identity movements was Golgi Bote Talom Rukbo. He is considered a revivalist and a founding father of the religion Donyi Poloism. Being a literary figure, he worked extensively for the upliftment of the Adi society and preservation of its culture. However, during this period, the Hindutva lobby was also operating through different organizations like Kalyan Ashram. Dawar's study reveals that the Hindutva forces, in an attempt to appropriate tribal religion, were in the process of Hinduising their "Gods and incorporate them into the Hindu pantheon" (p.62). It is also debatable if the tribal populace of Arunachal Pradesh, who were resisting Christianity out of fear of acculturation, may have given in to a more confused state of identity because of the pull they experienced from both the Christian and Hindu groups. With as many as 26 major tribes and over 100 sub-tribes, the societies in Arunachal are vastly dynamic, which makes them susceptible to cultural fusion and acculturation (Nayak, p.264). Therefore, Arunachalese have always been vulnerable to both the

bigger, organized religions. Therefore, amidst political and cultural changes, the Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act, 1978, was introduced. Undoubtedly, the issue of conversion among the tribes played a major part in this movement for religious identity. Bath (2006) traces the history of religious policies in NEFA Administration back to 1963, where the administrators made it clear that there must not be any imposition of religious ideals or propaganda on the indigenous tribes in the area. In the year 1976, the Government of Arunachal Pradesh produced the film *Mera Dharm, Meri Maa* which was supported by various other legislators like Prem Khandu Tungon.

Locating the First feature film of Arunachal Pradesh *Mera Dharm, Meri Maa*, 1976 amidst Awakening Movement

A widespread wave of patriotism and consciousness about one's religion and culture came over the population with the release of the film *Mera Dharm, Meri Maa* directed by Bharat Ratna awardee Bhupen Hazarika. This feature film was made in the Hindi language with the majority of the cast belonging to tribes of the Tani group during the time when the cultural and religious movement in Arunachal was at its peak. Bath (2008) observes that the film was made keeping in mind the dilemma that the people of Arunachal Pradesh at the time were facing. This film can easily be considered a powerful mass communication medium as it remains one of the most popular films among the Arunachalese. He observes that the film was far-sighted and Hazarika aptly captured the essence of the problem. As we look closely, the film had various elements that suggested that Christianity was an "alien" religion and Hinduism was "our own". Therefore, it is evident that the emphasis on religious neutrality loses its essence. An analysis of the film suggests that it may have been used as a communication medium for what the Christian community may consider a biased message, which goes against what the government at the time (1963) was suggesting to its political officers.

The film revolves around two brothers, Takar and Talo, set during the NEFA period, and conveys the importance of education among the tribes. The villagers' ignorance, coupled with fear and skepticism about receiving an education from the teacher, Ramesh, someone whom they considered an "outsider," made it an arduous task for the teacher. However, the teacher reckoned that education was the only way the village could prosper. Hence, with the help of a local errand boy, Charini, he managed to bring Takar and Talo to the school in hopes that he would be able to educate them, and in turn they would educate the others in the village. The two brothers under the supervision of the teacher Ramesh grow up into two different characters—while Takar has a grounded, social character and aspires to become a teacher himself and return to his village to give back to the children; Talo, on the other hand, develops a taste for "Western" materialistic greed. He renounces his indigenous faith, Donyi Polo, and converts to an "alien religion" and becomes individualistic. The characters of these two brothers symbolize the perspectives of the East vs. the West, the latter signifying the Western religion and worldview.

Miyazi and Sonam (2021) analyze the film in terms of change—modernity vs. tradition. They thematically analyze the film and observe that "one of the reasons why the filmmakers put the

focus on conversion and its opposition to traditional religion is probably to highlight the fact how many people who have converted are too quick in denouncing their old way of life without having properly understood the essence of both religions” (p. 131). The teacher symbolizes secularism and equality of this country’s Constitution, while the brothers are connotative of the two great religions. This film, which was made in the Hindi language for the tribal audience, can be considered monumental in evoking patriotism among the Arunachalese masses as it is one of the most revered films of all time.

Takar and Talo’s “Mother” falls to her death as the two brothers Takar and Talo fight. Here, the mother figure can also be considered symbolic of the country, India. Takar and Talo, the two polar opposite brothers, can be considered the religions, and in the fight between the two great religions, the country suffers or falls. It is also important to remember that the administrators and the leaders who helped make this movie at the time were pro-Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act, 1978. This film came out at a time when there was widespread fear of mass conversion to Christianity in the region.

Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act (APFRA, 1978)

Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act, 1978 (APFRA, 1978) is an anti-conversion Act which emerged from several resolutions passed by the then Pradesh Council. The first was the resolution of 1969, wherein the Agency Council “urged the Government of India to take suitable steps to protect and promote the indigenous faith and various tribes of the areas”, followed by the resolution of 1972 and finally the resolution of 1976 during the Arunachal Pradesh Development-cum-Cultural Convention held at Pasighat which also urged the Government of Arunachal Pradesh to safeguard the indigenous faith and culture of various tribes. Therefore, on 19th May 1978, the assembly passed the Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Bill; it invited huge criticism and resentment from the Christian communities across the North East Region. The states of Meghalaya and Nagaland openly showed their dismay. However, after minor modifications to the Bill, as suggested by the Government of India, on 25th October 1978, the Bill finally received the Presidential assent; two years after the release of the feature film *Mera Dharm, Meri Maa*, the Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act, 1978 (APFRA, 1978) came into being (Bath, 2008).

At present, the Act has invited a division among the populace of Arunachal Pradesh; the division is between the indigenous faith believers, Donyi Polo and the Christian community. Arunachal Christian Forum (ACF), which was formed chiefly to resist this act, was formed 2 years after the Bill was presented to the Assembly; they argue that this anti-conversion law is directly targeted at them. There are many loopholes to consider in this Act, chiefly because it raises concerns about whether it aligns with Article 25 of the Indian Constitution, which guarantees the right to freely practice and propagate religion. The Act presents a legal barrier for anyone who would want to voluntarily convert, as stated in sections 5 (1) and (2). It states that if a conversion has been performed, it is to be reported to the Deputy Commissioner of the district to which the convert belongs within a prescribed period; failure to do so may result in imprisonment up to a year or a

fine up to Rs. 1000 or both. Another issue with the Act is that it opens up a wide scope for misuse, as the District Magistrate is endowed with the task of inquiring and verifying if there is any coercion or fraudulent means involved in the conversion. Furthermore, the Act prohibits “conversion from one religious faith to any other religious faith by use of force or inducement or by fraudulent means and for matters connected therewith.” However, there are still loopholes relating to the Act because, like any other religious bills, it does not specify what constitutes “force”, “inducement” or “fraud” in a conversion. Roberts, in his study on The Tamil Nadu anti-conversion law, observes that the “laws ban only conversions based on “force”, “fraud” and “allurement,” but these terms are defined so broadly as to render virtually any conversion to Christianity and Islam illegal.” The same may be the case concerning APFRA 1978.

Discussion and Conclusion

The state of Arunachal Pradesh, in its socio-religious pursuit of Tani Identity, kick-started the religious and cultural movement. Considering Rupke’s “approach to replace self-identity with a kind of *religious identity*, which is understood as a collective identity”, by extension, this reasoning suggests that the idea of Tani Identity could, in all probability, well have stemmed from the need for a collective identity and to achieve that, religious identity is emphasized. However, the movement is in a constant state of agitation as the religion itself is in a transitioning phase and the pressure to preserve culture and institutionalization of Donyi Poloism have forced the stakeholders to borrow or create new traditions and practices in terms of ritualistic performances.

Moreover, regarding the rules pertaining to the Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act 1978, they need to be precise and framed with much clarity, with all the stakeholders involved, to maintain the status quo and uphold secularism. There have been cases where the church authorities and pastors were accused of forceful conversions in the town of Tezu in Arunachal Pradesh, which later turned out to be false accusations. The risk of being a true democratic and secular state also invites unwarranted and false accusations which at this point seem to be targeted at Christian groups. The use of popular culture like the feature film *Mera Dharm, Meri Maa* was one of the many attempts by the State Government of Arunachal Pradesh to educate the tribes about the importance of preserving one’s culture and identity and also to sensitize the tribes about the ill effects of falling prey to proselytization, lest the social disharmony and disunity among the tribes born out of this Act should cause a negative impact in the form of social unrest and communal uprisings.

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