

**CHANGING PROFILE OF RELIGIOUS CULTURE IN
ARUNACHAL PRADESH**

*Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University
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MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled "*CHANGING PROFILE OF RELIGIOUS CULTURE IN ARUNACHAL PRADESH*", submitted by **Margam Bagra**, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy** is her original work and has not been previously submitted for the award of any degree to this or any other University.

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Glossary of the terms used.

'Donyi-Polo'- literal meaning, '*Donyi*'- Sun and '*Polo*'- moon.

Tani group - refer to all those tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh who trace their descent to one common ancestor '*Abotani*'. It comprise the tribes of the 'Nyishi', 'Galo', 'Adi', 'Tagin', and 'Apatani'.

Abotani- he is believed to be the ancestor of the '*Tani*' group, and features in all the myths of origin of these group.

Mithun- Buffalo like animal, scientific name '*Bos frontalis*', is a semi-domesticated animal, highly valued among the Arunachalee's, infact ones social honour and prestige depends on the number of the Mithun one owns. It is feasted upon in all the community festival.

Abo - means 'Father' in the local dialect of the "*Tani*'s".

Ane- means 'Mother'.

Nyishi- a tribal community of Arunachal Pradesh.

Galo- a tribal community of Arunachal Pradesh.

Tagin- a tribal community of Arunachal Pradesh.

Apatani- a tribal community of Arunachal Pradesh.

Sedi- The Adi tribe believe '*Sedi*' to be the creator of Universe, features in their myths.

Jimi- The 'Galo' tribe believe '*Jimi*' to be the creator of the Universe, features in their myths.

Nyokum- the community festival of the 'Nyishi' tribe.

Nyedar-Namlo- newly created places of worship of '*Donyi-Polo*' of the 'Nyishi' tribe.

Dere- Gathering places of the village.

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Introduction on the Topic

Modernization and modern values have had tremendous impact on the tribal life of Arunachalee society. This isolated and autonomous land, with the mainstream policy of Jawaharlal Nehru and Verrier Elwin began to see more of the outside world, although contact with Assam had actually preceded it. This time, post- independence, the people saw more inflow of non-tribals in the form of administrators and economic professionals. With the administrators, traders and professionals came their cultures and religions, which would change the nature of the native tribals. These new comers significantly brought about changes in their social, cultural, political and economic life. The important domains of their life continue to undergo rapid process of transformation. Significant changes have also been noticed in the realm of religion in the state, which has impinged on the tribal way of life, through these accompanying forces. With the advent of Christianity and Hinduism, more changes could be seen in the socio-cultural aspects of the natives. More conversions were echoed in the tribal land through the evangelists especially from the Christian side and more people came under its fold. Against this background, a faith that was indigenous to the natives began to surface as a religion to challenge the outside religions and to declare the indigenous faith as the original religion of the natives, and in its endeavor to be designated as one, began to evolve new practices to legitimize it. This is the '*Donyi Poloism*' or the religion based on the cult of Sun and Moon God that has in the recent time gained prominence in challenging Christianity and evangelical works and prevent further conversions, and to protect the indigenous traditions and cultures which have been attacked by such conversions.

My thesis is centered around the indigenous archaic faith '*Donyi--Poloism*' and the recent entry of other religions like Christianity and the way these new religions has changed the way of life of the adherents and how it has shaped the relations between the converts and the non converts.

The aim of my research work is twofold. On the one hand I examine the process of religious transformation in the state, and on the other hand, I try to assess, what aspects of tribal culture and life have been altered and shaped by the changes in the religious sphere.

1.2 Tensions and Contradictions in using the term “Tribe”.

The term ‘tribe’ is fraught with tensions and contradictions, so much so that the Indian constitution has left the term undefined. The term ‘tribe’ has been defined by various writers in their own specific views. G. S. Ghurye is of the opinion that the terms like ‘Aborigines’ or ‘Adivas’ as used by many people to refer to “tribes” are “question begging and pregnant with mischief”.

A tribe, for D.N. Majumdar is “ a collection of families or common groups bearing a common name, the members of which occupy the same territory, speak the same language and observe certain taboos, regarding marriage, profession, or occupation and have developed a well assured system and a mutuality of obligations”(Majumdar 1961:367).

The term ‘tribe’ has been explained as “Ordinarily has an ancestor or a patron deity” (Chatopadyaya 1978:1).

Verrier Elwin further explained this term, by looking at the history of the term and concept. Elwin explicates that it is “ derived from a Latin root, the middle English term “tribuz” meaning the three divisions into which early Romans were grouped, came to develop into the modern English ‘tribe’. With the Romans, the ‘Tribe’ was a political division which Greeks seem to have equated it somewhat with their ‘fraternities’ at times, with the geographical divisions at others. In Irish history, however, the term meant families or communities of persons having the same surname. In certain other areas of western world and certain period of history, it stood for a division of territory allotted to a family or community” (Elwin 1963:17).

A “tribe” is “a social group usually with a definite area, dialect, cultural homogeneity and unifying social organization having several subgroups, such as clans or sibs” (Mehta 1996:10).

Tribes have also been defined as a “course of socio-cultural entity at a definite historical stage of development acknowledging the authority of a chief and usually regarding themselves as having a common ancestor” (Bardhan 1997:16).

A Tribe is also a “nation’ since it is “a collectivity which has a moral claim over the territory it inhabits; a fusion of territory and culture gives birth to nationhood” (Oommen 1995: 226,234).

Similarly various authors have described the tribes by different nomenclature, Dr. Ghurye named them ‘Backward Hindus’, Dr. Das and Das rename them as ‘Submerged Humanity’, few named them ‘Aboriginals’, ‘Primitive tribe’, ‘Adivasi’, ‘Vanyajati’, ‘Vanbasi’, ‘Adimjati’, Pahari etc. In the ancient literature of India- the Vedas, the Puranas, the Ramayana, the Mahabhaarta the tribals appeared as ‘Nishad’, ‘Sabarars’, ‘Kirates’ and ‘Dasyns’.

In the Indian constitution, the term “Tribe” has not been defined clearly anywhere. Only the term ‘scheduled tribe’ is explained as “the tribe or the tribal communities or parts of or groups within tribes or tribal communities” which the president may specify by public notification (article, 342).

The difficulty in setting out formal criteria for defining the tribe arises from the fact that tribes in India are and have been for some decades in transition. All of them live in various stages of cultural and economic conditions. Hence, any standard definition of the “Tribes” is difficult to encompass the transitory process of evolution.

However, in my dissertation I have used the term “tribe” for the various communities of Arunachal Pradesh in the sense that the constitution has conferred ‘scheduled tribe’ status to the native population of the state. Further most of the anthropological and sociological studies done on these people have also been done in the light of them as a ‘tribal’ population. Besides almost all the tribes that I have mentioned in the dissertation exhibit the typical characteristics that have been outlined above by various writers such as, the member have a common name, occupy the same territory, speak the same language, tribal endogamy, common ancestor, cultural homogeneity, social organization having various sub groups based on clan, etc.

1.3 Review of Literature

Religion is the central focus of study, so we will focus light on work of some of the sociological thinkers on it. There has hardly been any society, which does not have some form of religious belief system. Although its role and significance varies from one society to another, religion has been an integral part of all the societies; past and present. Religion and culture has been one of the most widely studied subjects of inquiry. Sociologists, Anthropologist and scholars from various disciplines have viewed religion from various perspectives and approaches in analyzing it as part of cultural system of man.

Religion, viewed sociologically is a part of human culture and is frequently referred to as one of the major social institutions, along with the marriage, government, education, etc. The phenomena of religion is so complex and yet so intriguing that, it had been studied by scholars from various disciplines.

Religion is a subject of great concern even in an advanced society of today where futility of science has often compelled man to search for God, or a supernatural power. Specific religions have come and gone, have changed very slowly or very rapidly, but so far as we know, religion has always been present in human society. This fact led Durkheim to conclude that 'there is something eternal in religion which is destined to survive all the particular symbols in which religious thought has successively enveloped itself'(Durkheim 1915:427). Thus, religion becomes all the more important to the 'tribal' people who live nearer to nature, and whose life is largely influenced by its overwhelming forces. Religion than becomes a part of their life and is interwoven in their socio-religious beliefs and rituals.

Sociologists, Anthropologists and scholars from varied disciplines have been concerned with the origin of religion and have tried to establish several theories on it. Animism, animatisms, naturism, naturalism, manaim, totemism, all try to understand religion in its most primordial form. These references has been necessary as the religion that I would be discussing in the context of Arunachal Pradesh belongs to a class which many anthropologist have often classified under these categories.

Many Sociologists and Social anthropologists of nineteenth and early twentieth century made the study of religion the central focus of interest in their more general

conceptions of social and cultural life. There are diverse and inexhaustible directions and approaches from which religion has been studied.

The sociologists and anthropologists who have adopted evolutionist's perspective tried to account for religious phenomena primarily in terms of religious beliefs. Scholars like Spencer and Tylor explained religious beliefs in primitive societies as an intellectual attempt on the part of primitive man to understand natural phenomena and biological events. Religion consist essentially in "the belief in the omnipresence of something which is inscrutable" (Spencer 1937:37). Likewise, Max Muller sees in religion, "a struggle to conceive the inconceivable, to utter the unutterable, a longing after the Infinite" (Muller 1882:23).

In explaining the functional nature of religion for society, scholars like Durkheim suggested that primitive man too has a philosophy through which he tries to understand the supernatural. Durkheim in opening his discussion suggest that religion cannot be defined by any definitions, but it can only be understood through its subject matter. It was his treatise on religion, '*The Elementary Forms of Religious life, 1915*' which for the first time shifted the emphasis in the study of primitive religion from the past to the present. The main point of argument put forth by Durkheim is that all the writers on religion seem to regard it as a survival of some elementary blunders in the intellectual thinking of some primordial process of muddled thinking. Any such theory in Durkheim's view, miserably fails to explain why religion founded upon great illusion should have survived so long and should play the part which it does in human communities even now. On the other hand, for Durkheim, the reality upon which religion is founded is essentially social and is based upon the solidarity and spiritual communion, which the individual feels with the fellow members of his social group. This, Durkheim proceeds to elaborate in relation to the 'Australian Totemism'. Religion consists of two basic things, 'beliefs and rituals' (Durkheim 1915:36). Beliefs are static while rituals are dynamic. And it is because of their dynamic nature that rituals becomes more important in the pragmatic worlds. Mere beliefs cannot constitute religion. They basically depend upon rites which bring conformity with nature. For Durkheim, religion is more important than magic as mistakes of magic are set right by religion.

We find that the basic form of religion in Arunachal Pradesh, i.e, '*Donyi-Poloism*' consists of beliefs in supernatural beings with a co-related body of rituals, performed towards fulfillment of some communal or personal motive. Durkheim's basic formulations on religion are found broadly applicable in this region, as they provide an insight into a proper understanding of the Indigenous religious system in the zone. But it cannot be understood adequately without a reference to Tylor's theory, because if we take a closer look at the religion in Arunachal Pradesh, we would find that it suggests an element of '*animism*'- a concept originally by Tylor, and which formed the core thought in 'primitive religion' for a number of years in the anthropological world. This interpretation of religion tries to see religion as "a belief in spiritual beings" (Tylor 1903:424). This, Tylor calls a minimum definition of religion and correlates it with *Animism*, his theory of religion which seems to provide an altogether new explanation of tribal religion. The very idea of 'possession' and 'ancestor worship' by the tribals of Arunachal implies the idea of spirit, a feature essentially found in '*Donyi-Poloism*'.

James George Frazer, a British anthropologist and the celebrated author of the *Golden Bough* (1933) has tried to explain religion in relation to magic. Religion in his view is 'a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man'¹, which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and of human life. In so far as religion assumes the world to be directed by conscious agents who may be turned from their purpose by persuasion, it stands in fundamental antagonism to magic as well as science, both of which take for granted that the course of nature is determined, not by passions or caprice of personal beings, but by operation of "immutable laws" acting mechanically.

Max Weber has given a more systematic explanation of religion. Weber inaugurated a new phase in the understanding of the relations between religious aspects and the other aspects of human behavior, especially the relations between religious ideas and commitments and other aspects of human conduct within a society. The essence of religion can hardly be determined by providing definitions. Weber laid emphasis on the understanding of a social system, social behavior and phenomena happening around it. The most elementary forms of behavior motivated by religions or magic are

¹ Frazer, G.J., 1933. *Golden Bough*. New York, McMillan Company.

oriented to this word. A crucial point in Weber's theory is that there is no known human society without something which modern social scientist would classify as religion. "Every society possess some conceptions of a supernatural order, of spirits, gods or impersonal forces which are different from and in some sense superior to those forces conceived as governing ordinary "natural" events, and whose nature and activities somehow give meaning to the unusual, the frustrating and the rationally impenetrable aspects of experience. The existence of supernatural order is taken seriously, in that many concrete events of experience are attributed, in part at-least, to its agency, and men devote an important part of their time and resources to regulating their relations with this order as they conceive it"². This observation by Weber, is more or less true of all religions, all the more in context of the people of Arunachal Pradesh, who live in the very difficult terrain in the sub-Himalayan ranges, behind their ordinary though hard life, and behind this they feel the interplay of natural forces playing their different and distinctive roles, devastations caused in no time, all unaccountable -by rivers, rocks which ruins the whole village in a spate. They strain their mind to understand it and perhaps miserably fail; in despair they fall back upon discovering a supernatural explanation for their destiny.

Radcliffe Brown, has emphasized the functional role of religion, "how does religion contribute to the existence of society as an ordered and continuing system of relationship amongst human beings" (Radcliffe Brown 1952:54). For Radcliffe Brown the religion plays the most important part in maintaining the social cohesion and equilibrium. Through the study of *ancestor worship* and the *Australian Totemism* as types of religion, Radcliffe Brown tried to demonstrate the close correspondence of the form of religion and the form of the social structure. In both "it is possible to see how the religious rites reaffirm and strengthen the sentiments on which the social order depends" (Radcliffe Brown 1952:169). Thus, Radcliffe Brown focused on the needs of the society. In his structural functionalist view, religion was seen as the cement of society. It was analyzed so as to show how it contributed to maintaining the social structure of the groups. Among the adherents of 'Donyi-Polo' religion in Arunachal Pradesh as like elsewhere, sense of solidarity and collective sentiment is very strong which greatly regulated the social order before the advent of the modern

² Parsons in Introduction to Weber's 'Sociology of Religion', 1922. London, Methuen and Co. Ltd, Pp xxviii.

forces. Also in the Study of Andaman Islanders³, Radcliffe Brown has expounded how the natives believe in the existence of a class of supernatural beings which he denotes by the term 'spirits'. The Andaman Islanders believe in special classes of spirits- spirits that haunt the Jungle, the spirits that live in the sky etc. The spirits are believed to be the cause of all sickness and of all resultant deaths. Thus, the spirits are propitiated here. Similarly, in Arunachal Pradesh, the belief in existence of various classes of spirits who control the world is central to the adherents of *Donyi-Polo* religion.

Malinowski explained religion and science in terms of his functionalist theory of human needs. On the basis of his in-depth study of the Trobriand Islanders, Malinowski argued that both magic and religion arose from emotional stress and anxiety in the face of difficulties and uncertainties. 'Primitive Religion' had a survival value, helping individuals and groups to meet their biological and psychological needs, the demands of existence so as to emerge victorious in their struggles on earth and to face the future after death with confidence. In other words religion sacralises and guides human beings through earthly crisis. Furthermore, for Malinowski religious ritual is also a public statement of religious dogma, which in turn reinforces social values, social rights and obligations, upon which the proper functioning of society depends. Like Durkheim, Malinowski admitted that religion also often served to bind a community together. All his life Malinowski wrote against the western stereotype of the 'irrational-savage'. He knew from his experiences that Trobrianders were uncanny, calculating and reasonable, as any European.

Another important scholar in the analysis of primitive religion is Evans Pritchard, who tried to show the reasonableness of a primitive system of thought by analyzing religion among the Nuer⁴, and magic and witchcraft among the Azande⁵. The two societies differed in their social structure, economy and religion. Basic to Nuer religious thinking was the concept of supreme God, as creator, unseen, disembodied and universal and also a vast range of spirits inhabiting the world. Among the Nuer there was no magic mode of thought operating together with the spirit mode. The

³ Radcliffe Brown. 1922. The Andaman Islanders. New York, Free Press.

⁴ Evans Pritchard. 1956. Nuer Religion. New York, Oxford University Press.

⁵ Evans Pritchard. 1937. Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande. Clarendon Press, Oxford.

systematizing of all experiences in terms of spirit seems to have made magical thinking unnecessary. In comparison among the Azande, there was a vague belief in a 'supreme being', which was never expressed in ritual. But magic as revealed in witchcraft, sorcery or oracular divination, occupied a very important place.

In his essay, "*Religion as a cultural system*" (1966), Clifford Geertz approaches the subject from what he calls the 'cultural dimension of analysis', this means looking at religion as a part of a cultural system. As a part of culture, religion deals in sacred symbols; and what sacred symbols do, is "to synthesize a people's ethos-the tone, character and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood- and their world view- the picture they have of the way things in sheer reality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order" (Geertz 1966:3). Thereby, both religion and culture have a moral code which tries to regulate the behavior patterns of the people in almost all the societies.

In my dissertation, impact of Christianity on the tribal people, on their religion and culture, is another major area of concern. The phenomena of religious conversion is complex and varied. Due to ongoing mass-conversions, there has been an increasing scholarly recognition of the importance of religious conversion. The study of religious conversion has been approached from various perspectives: historical, sociological, anthropological, psychological and phenomenological. Factors preceding conversion, as identified by these approaches include socio-political upheavals, psychic factors of anguish, turmoil, despair, conflict and guilt and self-realization. Lewis Coser⁶(1987), observes that if certain groups within a social system feel deprived in power, wealth and status, and if there exists no institutionalized provisions for expression of such discontents, than the expression of their frustration may be limited to innovations or they may take the form of complete revolution.

Other, than exploring the modes, motivations and rationality of conversion, another important area in the study of religious conversion, has been to understand the attitude of the convert to his/her former faith.

Commenting on the impact of the European culture and the teachings of Christian missionaries, Radcliffe Brown observes that it weakens in some individuals the

⁶ Lewis, Coser A., 1987. 'Continuities in the study of Social conflict'. New York, The Free Press.

sentiments that attach them to their lineage. “The disintegration of the social structure and the decay of the ancestral cult proceed together” (Radcliffe Brown 1952:164).

“Proselytisation” and “conversion” are the two terms commonly used in India for the processes whereby people change their religious faith. Infact there is a difference between these two terms. E. Stanley Jones(1960)⁷ makes the following distinction, “proselytisation” is generally understood as persuading the people of one religion to change their religious affiliation to another, by economic, social or political inducements and not because of spiritual illumination. For, Proselytism is a change from one group to another without any necessary change in character and life. “Conversion” on the other hand, is a change in character and life followed by outer change of allegiance corresponding to inner change.

Conversion, notes W.H. Clark, ‘is that type of spiritual growth or development which involves an appreciable change of direction concerning religious ideas and behaviors. Most clearly and typically, it denotes an emotional episode of illuminating saddeness, which may be deep or superficial, though it may also come about by the more gradual process’ (Clark 1958:191).

A very comprehensive definition of conversion is provided by, Andrew Wingate as “conversion is a process including a personal decision, taken alone or as a part of a group, to enter one’s religious life on a new focus, which one believes is more liberating in every aspect of that word, and closer to truth. This involves a change of identification within oneself and normally to a change of outward affiliation to a new community, which will affect one’s life at various levels, ‘body, heart, mind and soul’, and to tangible changes of behavior and religious practice (Wingate 1999:270).

Mahatma Gandhi was greatly opposed to religious conversions, in this context he wrote, ‘I have heard of a well-known Hindu been converted to Christianity. It was the talk of the town that, when he was baptized, he had to eat beef, and to drink liquor, that he had to change his clothes, and that henceforth he began to go about in European costume, including a hat. These things got on my nerves. Surely, thought I, a religion that compelled one to eat beef, drink liquor and change one’s clothes did

⁷ Jones, E. Stanley. 1960. Conversion. Great Britain, Hodden Se Stoughton Ltd.

not deserve the name. I have also heard that the new convert had already begun abusing the religion of his ancestors, their customs and their country”⁸.

Leonardo Boff writes of this being a general world wide experience; ‘For the people of the third world who really had no choice in receiving and accepting the missionaries from the colonial powers, becoming Christians often meant the fatal end of their customs, traditions, values and religious expressions’⁹.

In studying conversion, Lewis Rambo¹⁰ emphasizes on motivations, experiences and aspirations. Conversion for him is usually accompanied by crisis, he lists some catalysts, such as mystical experiences, including those near death, emphasis is on the practice of healing.

However, many scholars who have worked on religious conversion are of the opinion that conversion does not lead to a drastic change of one’s previous ways of life, beliefs and cultural system, infact these scholars have laid emphasis on continuity and change and the process of assimilation and accommodation.

C.J. Godwin, in his book ‘Change and continuity: a study of two Christian village communities in suburban Bombay’¹¹ shows that conversion to Christianity and contact with Portuguese have not greatly changed the socio-economic institutions of the communities except in the sphere of religion. The changes visible today in the life style of East Indian Christians have taken place of its coming into contact with the British and are the results of the process of modernization and westernization which the British initiated.

One should not assume that all the missionaries are homogenous in their attitudes towards local cultures and traditions. In some cases they may be tolerant of them and in others they make every effort to eradicate them (Hefner 1993:3-44). Even in the former case, it could vary, as every aspect of the existing culture is not tolerated. It is

⁸ Quoted by Banerjee, B.N in an article ‘A Hindu attitude to conversion,’ in IRM, Vol. LXX11, no. 287, July 1983, pp.387.

⁹ In Concilium, 1988, quoted in E.R, Vol. 44.oct. 1992,p.387.

¹⁰ ‘The implication of cognitive-experiential self-theory for research in social psychology and personality’, in Journal for the theory of Social behaviour15, Oct,1985,pp.64.

¹¹ Godwin, C.J. 1972. ‘Change and Continuity: a study of two Christian village communities in Suburban Bombay’, Bombay, Tata Mcgraw-Hill.

also rare that missionaries seek conversion only in terms of change in religious beliefs or dogmas; often they also demand from the converts outward manifestations of this change in terms of a transformation in cultural practices.

In his book *'The Muslims of British India'*, Peter Hardy endorses the view that in Indian life 'conversion' means "more a change of fellowship than of conduct or inner life", but he then adds a significant rider, that 'the latter (the change in conduct or inner life) may in time occur'(Hardy 1972:8).

N.K. Bose (1971) points out that Christianity has undoubtedly brought the message of a richer life, wider companionship and a new sense of dignity to the converts. But, at the same time Christian religion has always been associated with the modern western civilization. It is only after independence that allegiance to one's native culture is being encouraged. "It is now giving acceptance that there can be a Christian religion which does not necessarily draw men and women away from their culture and civilization"(Bose 1971:68). However, on a closer look, we find that, unlike the Hindu Missions which did not lead to any vast departure from the tradition and culture, the impact of Christians missions, on the converts and their relation to their tradition and culture, was different. Bose observes that now a new trend has begun among the tribals, of a unification between Christians and non-Christians or 'animists', so that their 'tribal identity may be reaffirmed. And in the process a salvage takes place of much of their tribal culture and religious faith as is consistent with the demands of modern life.

K.S. Singh observes that Christianity has been an important factor of cultural change in tribal religions. In the context of Christianity in the North East, Singh is of the view that, proselytization has not been a unilinear process. There is oscillation between traditional religion and Christianity, a measure of compromise with the first while getting absorbed in the second. Further, in recent years there has been an endeavor to Indianize, even indigenize Christianity. Elements of tribal life which harmonize with Christianity have been accepted. Singh maintains that, Christianity in the first place sought to Christianize paganism; now it is other way round. "There is the Indianization of the church and its personnel, of prayers and liturgy. The Second step has been 'Indigenization' .i.e, the acceptance of tribal religion and festivals, dance and

music as do not come into conflict with the tenets of Christian faith” (Singh 1985:288).

Scholars have also in their studies shown adequately the ways in which in the process of conversion missionaries in many parts of the country have demanded from the converts various outward signs of religious change.

In South India, Visvanathan (1993) ¹²notes how the protestant missionaries wanted the converts to shave the *kudumi*, the tuft of their hair which signified high status, to refrain from chewing betel nut, having oil baths, expressing relationships of honour through use of Sandalwood and flowers or maintaining puberty rites.

Hudson, also describes how missionaries in the late 19th century in Tamil Nadu opposed expressions of Hindu identity among the Christians. Some of the expression cited included the public announcement of puberty for girls, the smearing of cow-dung in houses, of bathing in river, of chewing of betel, etc.

Similarly, Christian missionaries working among the tribal group objected to their participation in New Year or harvest celebrations, drinking of rice beer or dancing and attending indigenous dramatic performances (Nongbri 1989:113,244; Troisi 1979:126, 267).

Conversion, argues Robinson, is not merely a transformation in the belief system, it also involves changes in social and cultural realm for the converts. However, it does not lead to elimination of the indigenous ways of life rather there is accommodation and negotiation (Robinson 2003:67).

G.A. Oddie, makes a similar observation that the adoption of a new identity did not necessarily mean a complete rejection of the old. “Most Hindus who joined a new community (whether Christian, or Muslim fellowship) continued to relate in some way to their community of origin. For many of them it was not a case of either/or but of striking the right balance between the old and new, or perhaps of adopting an additional identity. “Some Christians for example were quite adamant in describing themselves as ‘Indian’ or ‘Hindu Christians’ (Oddie 1997:6). For the converts the

¹² Visvanathan, (1993). Missionary styles and the problem of Dialogue. Simla: Occasional paper 6. Indian Institute of Advanced study.

experience, memories and culture of the old world continue to permeate and flavor the new and the old concerns and values are not always left behind.

What Susan Bayly has argued in her recent book is that in the examples she had studied Muslims and Christians continued to share in what she described as the 'indigenous moral order' (Bayly 1989:8). The most obvious examples of this continuity were Nadar converts who remained within the caste system and who continued to compete with 'Hindus' in their attempt to improve their status within the caste hierarchy.

F.S. Downs¹³ has explored a combination of crisis in the north-eastern hills where the pressure of colonial rule and of the outside worlds threatened traditional cultures and way of life and led to the rapid spread of Christianity among the various tribes in some parts of the region.

In the views of Verrier Elwin, all over the world, the conversion of tribals by missionaries had undermined traditional political institutions, intensified personal rivalries, and implanted a false sense of prudery and sin. The change of religion, in India as in Africa or Melanesia, 'destroys tribal unity, strips the people of age-old moral sanctions, separates them from the mass of their fellow-countrymen and in many cases leads to a decadence that is as pathetic as it is deplorable'¹⁴.

A Naga historian writing in 1974 gently criticized Elwin for his criticism of missionaries, arguing that it was Christianity that pushed the Nagas 'out of the seclusion and isolation from which they were suffering for centuries into (contact with the) open ideas, ideals and civilizations of the people of the world.'¹⁵

Thus, the studies centering on conversion, have mainly tried to understand, the motivations and rationality of conversion and how the conversion, leads to changes in the belief, socio-cultural life of the converts, and their previous religious community. These themes will be furthered explored in the context of the Arunachalee society in

¹³ Downs, F.S. 'Christian Conversion Movements among the Hill Tribes of North-East India in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries', in G.A. Oddie(ed.), 1997, Religion in South Asia, pp.155,174.

¹⁴ Elwin, Verrier, 'Missionaries and Aborigines', undated typescript(probably written in 1944), in Bhulabhai Desai Papers,NMML.

¹⁵ Cited in Ramachandra Guha,(1999), 'Savaging the civilized, Verrier Elwin, his tribals, and India'. Oxford University Press.

understanding the conversion of the tribals to Christianity from the indigenous system of faith and the resultant changes thereof.

1.4 Objectives of Study

- My attempt in the thesis is to examine the process of religious transformation among the people of Arunachal Pradesh.
- I would also present functions of religion in the Arunachalee society, and also explore the tenets of the *Donyi-Polo* Religion and view it in its totality, i.e. the way it is related to other aspects of society.
- Further, my study would also try to understand, if the new religion, i.e. Christianity, through its organized churches have impinged on local tribal life over the past few decades, despite the fairly strong resistance on the part of the administration as well as sections of local communities.
- In the dissertation I would also provide an overview of the forms and practices of the different religious groups in Arunachal Pradesh i.e. *Donyi-Polonians*, Christians, Buddhists and Hindus.
- My study also makes an analysis of what aspects of tribal culture and religion have been modified, assimilated from the practices of other religious groups in the state.
- I have also, tried to understand the modes, motivations and meanings of conversions in the tribal state of Arunachal Pradesh.
- My study would also try to analyze the Indigenous faith movement in the state. Is it really an assertion of Indigenous faith, or an reaction to counter the on-going conversions in the state?
- I have also tried look at the forces of Hinduism that are at work in the state.
- I have also, attempted understand the relations between the converts and the non-converts in the state.

- Furthermore, in the study I have also tried to explore the intricate relation between religion and culture in the state and to explore, if the changes in one realm leads to changes in another?

Sources of Data

The present study is based on drawing secondary information and report from various sociological and anthropological works, books, journals, published articles, and census reports.

1.5 Organization of Study

The dissertation is organized into four chapters including an introduction and a conclusion.

The second chapter provides an overview of the social and cultural organization of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. It also deals with the various religions practiced in the state along with the relation between religion and culture.

In the third chapter, my aim would be to study the tribal faith of Arunachalee tribes '*Donyi-Poloism*' in detail; to explain its basic tenets and to view it in its totality, the way it is related to other aspects of the society.

The fourth chapter, of my dissertation would deal with the ongoing religious conversions in the state. Unlike the other northeastern states where most of the tribals are Christian converts, in Arunachal Pradesh, Christianity made very late inroads. Also in these chapters, I would try to understand the ways in which the religious conversions to other religions has impinged on the tribal social and cultural life.

Finally, in the conclusion, my aim would be to make an analysis of the social processes that are at work, in relation to the various religions in the state. In this, I would attempt to explore the intricate relation between religion and culture in the state i.e., to try to understand if the changes in one realm leads to changes in another.

Chapter 2

Profile of the Traditional Arunachalee Society

2.1 Arunachal Pradesh: Land and People

North-Eastern India is inhabited by numerous different racial and ethnic groups. These communities are very heterogeneous in terms of racial, linguistic and religious patterns. The state of Arunachal Pradesh is situated in the extreme North-Eastern corner of the Indian Union. The first ray of the sun peeps at this land, this is the reason that Arunachal Pradesh is popularly, known as the '*land of rising sun*'. It is located at the latitude of 26°28' N and 29°30'N and longitude of 91°30' E and 97°30'E.¹⁶It is a sentinel of the country bordering as many as three neighboring countries viz. China, Myanmar and Bhutan besides China (Tibet, now a Chinese territory). Arunachal Pradesh has a total of 83,743-sq.km² landmass; while it borders the states of Nagaland and Assam in the south-east and south. The state has 2.37% and 0.10% of the country's area and population respectively. More than 80% are hilly regions that sustain the forest resources and more than 62% of the state's area is under various forms of forest cover. As per the 2001 census, the population of Arunachal Pradesh is 109117. The density is 13 person per square Km.

Tribes of Arunachal Pradesh

Arunachal Pradesh is a tribal dominated state; Some 10,97,968 odd persons live in this land, of these, 64.2 per cent are tribals and are scattered in some 2,500 villages (2001 census). Racially, the ethnic groups of Arunachal Pradesh belong to the Tibeto-mongoloid stock. The tribes of Arunachal Pradesh have a rich and varied cultural heritage. As many as 110 major and minor tribes inhabit the state. There are some 22 major tribes in Arunachal Pradesh, each of these tribes have a distinct territorial base (districts of the present day). An attempt has been made below to list the major tribes and their territory/districts in which they are concentrated in the state¹⁷:-

¹⁶ Census of India 2001: Arunachal Pradesh: Series-13.

¹⁷ Gopalakrishanan, R., 1994. *Arunachal Pradesh*. New Delhi, Omsons Publications, pp. xiv.

- i) Bangni, Monpa, Miji, Sulung, Aka, Sherdukpens, Khowas and Bangro of the composite **Kameng district**.
- ii) Nyishi, Tagin, Apatani, Hills-Miri, Sulung in the **Subansiri district**.
- iii) Adi, Gallong, Tagin, Membas, Miri, Khamba in the **Siang District**.
- iv) Mishmi-their cognate groups and the Khampati in **Lohit district**.

Heterogeneity - The tribal population of Arunachal is not a homogeneous entity though they ethnically belong to the Tibeto- Mongoloid group. Each tribe and sub-tribe has its own language, dress, custom, norms and social institutions. However, similarities among them are within the framework of this bewildering diversity.

2.2 From NEFA to Arunachal Pradesh

The administrative growth of Arunachal Pradesh had been precisely started after the British occupation of Assam in 1826 A.D. Initially the British continued the policy of appeasement policy of *Ahoms*¹⁸ towards the frontier tribes. However, by the end of 1850, British modified their policies, which are essentially called 'non-interference'. With the appointment of captain F.Needham as Assistant Political Officer at Sadiya in 1882, the fragile type of frontier administration was given a virtual shape. As a result, of development in Lhasa, in August 1910, Chinese activities on the frontier and murder of Noel Williamson, Assistant Political officer in March 1911, at the hands of *Abors*¹⁹ (now *Adis*), British policy of 'non-interference' was replaced by a policy of 'loose political control'.

The definition of Indo-Tibetan boundary in 1914, popularly known as 'Mac Mohan Line' was the most important step initiated by the British. The 'Government of India Act, of 1919' designated all the tribal areas of Assam as 'Backward tracts', which was rechristened to 'Excluded Areas' and 'Partially Excluded Areas' in 1935. Consequently, the Balipara, Sadiya and Lakhimpur Frontiers of NEFA were designated as 'Excluded Area'. In 1942, the Tirap Frontier tract was carved out of Sadiya Frontier Tract, while in 1946 the Balipara Frontier Tract was divided into two

¹⁸ '*Ahoms*' were the rulers of Assam in Pre-independent India.

¹⁹ Tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, who are concentrated in West Siang district of the state.

divisions- the Abor Hills and the Mishmi Hills. At the dawn of independence, there were five administrative frontiers but they had undergone a series of territorial and jurisdictional readjustment. In 1954, the Frontier Divisions were given the names i.e. Kameng, Subansiri, Siang, Lohit, Tirap and Tuensang, but at the end of 1957, Tuensang was re-united with the Naga Hill District as the New Naga Hills.

However, the promulgation of the 'North-East Frontier (Administration) Regulation 1954', paved the way for full scale administration for the entire areas under the collective designation of ' North-East Frontier Agency'- NEFA²⁰. A 'single line Administration' system was introduced which greatly increased the efficiency of work and the spirit of cooperation among the officers. The Ministry of Home Affairs took over the administrative responsibility of NEFA from the 'Ministry of External Affairs' in 1965. Consequent upon the passage of 'North Eastern Area (Reorganization) Act 1971', NEFA was converted into a Union Territory status. In the next year, the name was rechristened to Arunachal Pradesh and the administrative divisions were renamed from Divisions to Districts. A four tier Panchayati Raj (as recommended by Daying Ering Committee, 1964) was introduced in 1969, again, it was replaced by Pradesh Council in 1972. In 1975, the Pradesh Council under the administrative head of Chief Commissioner was upgraded to Provincial Assembly with the Council of Ministers headed by Chief Minister and the status of Chief Commissioner was promoted to Lt. Governor. The first General election to elect thirty Members Legislative Assembly (MLA) was held in 1978. Within a decade, Arunachal Pradesh obtained her statehood on 20 February 1987.

2.3 Cultural Life and Social Organization of the People of Arunachal Pradesh

Culture

In the state of Arunachal Pradesh, we shall see that the interdependence on one another was felt much more than in most parts of the country. These can be attributed to the extremely difficult living conditions here, due to factors like geographical isolation.

²⁰ Nabam, T.R., 2005. Emerging Religious Identities of Arunachal Pradesh. New Delhi, Mittal Publications, Pp. 2,3,4.

Culture being a complex phenomenon, any one single definition would not be all encompassing. Emphasis of various scholars, when attempting to define culture vary, - some have placed emphasis on behavior patterns, others on outward manifestations of belief, art, knowledge etc, and still others on values, meanings etc.

Nonetheless, the definition provided by E.B Tylor is one of the most commonly accepted. Culture is defined as "...that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor 1871:1).

A contemporary American anthropologist, Clifford Geertz observes, "Culture... denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embedded in symbols, a system of inherited conception expressed in symbolic forms by means of which human beings communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about attitudes towards life".²¹

If we go back to the analysis of culture by various scholars, we would find that, the convenience for methodology has led to classification of culture as primitive, medieval or modern culture and the tribal culture of Arunachal has often been termed as 'primitive culture'. The society has been called as a 'backward society'. However, this type of labeling or assumption is absolutely incorrect. In this light, Verrier Elwin, in 'A Philosophy for NEFA' rightly point out that often the people in their sub-conscious feel that whatever is tribal is somehow inferior. But "a careful study of tribal religion, both in NEFA, and elsewhere, does not suggest that it is noticeably inferior to its competitors" (Elwin 1967:215). Although the tribal religion has its drawbacks, it is not fully thought out, and there are many problems to which it has no answer, nevertheless, much like the other religions as a working way of life it brings consolation to its adherents and gives them hope and courage. Further, "tribal religion, developed and reformed from within, is thus not bound to be destroyed by science". Elwin was thus farsighted in recognizing that the tribal religion with its overt functions and its own internal logic was "thus worthy of preservation". Even Freud²² was of the view that there are hidden motives in the customs of the primitive

²¹ Geertz, Clifford. 1993. The interpretation of Cultures, London, Harper Collins Publications, Pp. 89.

²² Freud, S. 1950. Totem and Taboo. Great Britain, Cox and Wyman, pp. 77, 97.

man and so we should not dismiss it simply as “superstition”. In Freud’s words “Therefore, we begin to realize that the mental life and cultural level of savages have not hitherto had all the recognition they deserve” (Frued 1950: 77, 97).

In the Arunachalee society too, the ‘tribal’ religion and various customs and practices associated with it might look irrelevant and illogical to an outsider on the onset. However on a closer look we would find that, though not everything in it makes sense, there are useful aspects. For example it gives them hope and comfort in times of distress and uncertainties.

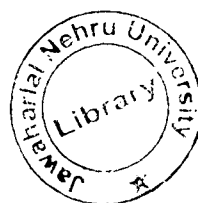
Cultural Groups of Arunachal- On the basis of cultural differences like rituals, customs, ornamentation, design, dance, music etc, Arunachal can be divided into **six cultural areas corresponding with the social groups**: 1) Bhotia culture area; 2) Nishi-Apatani cultural area; 3) Adi cultural area; 4) Mishmi cultural area; 5) Khampti-Singpho-Tangsa cultural area and 6) Naga Cultural area²³.

Much of these cultural differences can be attributed to regional locations and their relations with the nearby countries.

1. The **Bhotia cultural area** comprises of the tribes of Sherdukpens, Monpa, Membas, and Khambas. Area wise it extends in West-Kameng and Tawang Districts; Takshing, Mechuka, Tuting, Valley of Matu, Mipi, and Dibang Valley districts. The common features of cultural aspect are: There is linguistic affinity; their rituals, festivals, customs are similar and they follow Mahayana Buddhism; in ornamentation i.e. in adorning their bodies with costumes and ornaments, there is similarity. Their art and craft designs have been influenced by the Tibetans. Their dance and music have got Tibetan and Buddhist influence which is uniformly spread over the entire area.

2. The **Nyishi- Apatani cultural area** comprises ‘tribes’ like Akas, Khowas, Mijis, Bangnis, Nyishis, Sulungs, Apatanis, Hill- Miris and Tagins. The area extends between the Subansiri and the Kameng rivers. In several cultural aspects different tribes have a marked resemblance; the language of all tribes, although different individually, has a striking linguistic affinity between the dialects. Their, rituals are animistic type and Shaman is the priest who is appointed to perform it; the sacrifice of

²³ Pauchauri, C.S. 1989. Arunachal Pradesh: Religion, culture and society. New Delhi, Himalayan Publisher, pp.280-285.



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pigs, mithuns²⁴, buffalo etc, is commonly practices in all tribal groups; their costumes and ornaments are alike, the design of craft, especially bamboo and cane work is almost on the same pattern; their dance styles and music have similarities; the jhum cultivation, pig rearing and taking of rice beer is a common practice among all (Apatanis tribe however follow wet rice cultivation in terraced paddy fields).

3. The **Adi cultural area** is represented by the sub-tribes of Adis such as Ledum, passi, Padams, Pangins, Milansa, Minyong, Simongs, Bokars, Boris and Gallongs. The cultural area extends between the Siang and the Subansiri rivers into a vast region occupying the central portion of Arunachal Pradesh. This is in fact the largest cultural area of the biggest Adi tribe. The Adi culture in almost all respects has achieved a homogenous character. Each sub-tribe distinctively represents the typical form of the Adi-culture; their rituals are uniform throughout and all sub-tribals follow '*Donyi-Polo faith*'²⁵ (*an animistic faith*), sacrifice of mithun or pig is prevalent among all; all the costumes and ornaments are on the same pattern and designs are in the entire area; with slight variations Adi- dialect is spoken among all sub-tribes.

4. The **Mishmi cultural area** comprises of the sub-tribes like Idu- Mishmi, Digaru-Mishmi and Miju Mishmis. The area extends between the Dibang and Kambang rivers. There are several points of common character: their dialect is almost the same in all sub-tribal groups. They follow Shamanism, the rituals are uniform in all and the services of priest called *Igu*, are solicited for performing community or domestic rites. The ornaments adorning their bodies are of same typology throughout Mishmi area.

5. The **Khampti- Singpho culture area** can be ascribed to the tribes of Khampti, Sinpho and Tangsas. The area lies between the Kamlang and the Tirap rivers. Some scholars have grouped Tangsas under Naga group i.e., the tribes of Noctes and Wanchos, but in specific study of their culture they seem to be more close to Khamptis and Singphos than Nagas. However many traits are similar with Khampti and Sinpho tribes. Therefore, the area occupied by Tangsas is contiguous with them with basic similarities in all the three tribes; no doubt Khamptis have adopted Hinayana Bhuddism and Singphos have also adopted it due to induction but both

²⁴ 'Bos Frontalis' (scientific name of 'Mithun').

²⁵ 'Donyi' is sun and 'Polo', the moon, in tribal language of the *Adis* of Arunachal.

these tribes still follow some animistic rituals which are similarly followed by Tangsas who however have not adopted any advanced religion. The linguistic affinity in all the tribes is decisively very close; the customs and ornaments are similar in all three tribes, infact the *Lungi* culture (cloth worn by males) is prevailing only among Khamptis, Singphos and Tangsas; their ladies costumes also reveal striking similarities. Further, the art and craft is followed on the pattern of basic similarity in all the three and is based on their original design as followed in Burma, from where they are believed to have originated. Their dance and music also have some relative similarities.

6. The **Naga cultural area** is represented by the Noctes and Wanchos tribes of Tirap district. These tribes represent a typical Naga culture. The Naga culture of Arunachal Pradesh has a similarity with that of the Nagas of Nagaland and the Nagas of Man and Ukhrul areas of Manipur. Thus, the Noctes and Wanchos in Arunachal Pradesh represent the Naga culture of the South-East Naga cultural belt. We would also find that there is a marked similarity between the Nagas and these tribes in terms of dialects, rites and rituals, social customs, festivals, social stratification, crafts and art, forms of dances and music etc.

Variety of Culture - Therefore, we find that Arunachal Pradesh represent different cultural profiles. These diverse natures of cultural profiles reflect the impact of different cultures, this shows that active transmission of cultural traits of Hindu, Buddhist, Animistic and Shamanistic cultures. We thus, find that the cultural matrix of Arunachal Pradesh is a mixture of several elements contributed from various cultures. C.S Pauchuri, has provided us with an simplified understanding of the cultural influences in the state. He writes that the culture belt is a zone of influence, “The Assamese culture (Hinduite form) to its foothill belt; Tribal culture (Shamanistic form) to its central belt; Bhotia culture (Mahayana Buddhist form) to its north–west and border fringes in Subansiri, Siang and Dibang region; Burmese culture (Hinayana Buddhist form) to its south-east region in Lohit around Sadiya; Nagaite culture (Naga cultural form of south-eastern belt) in the Tirap district” (Pauchuri 1989:283). Therefore, we see that the state of Arunachal Pradesh is the meeting ground for different cultures. The different cultural profiles were assimilated to the cultural matrix and represented a unique form of culture of Arunachal. What culturally exists in Arunachal today is, therefore the treasure house of different cultural values. The

state provides us the display of traditional tribal culture, the impact of Buddhism and Hinduism on the tribal culture and also the display of the Naga culture. Thus, the cultural matrix in Arunachalee society represents a kind of homogeneous mixture derived out of many different cultures.

Commonalities in the culture of different tribes- Thus amidst such cultural differences, tribal identities, local dialects etc, Arunachal exhibits a rich cultural diversity. However, despite such cultural differences there are some commonalities which can be seen and which are very conspicuous. For instance, take the dialects; the dialects of the Adis, Gallongs, Apatanis, Nishis, or in short the 'Tani Group' exhibit commonalities in their pronunciation of words as well as meanings, although changes could be seen in their spoken manner (Style, tone, etc). For instance, Adis call water 'ishi', Apatanis call it 'yashi' and the Nishis as 'ishi' as well. Thus, this is just an example, there are many such words that are common and more importantly give the same meaning. Another commonality could be seen in the practice of drinking local beer made out of rice. Further, Bamboo culture is prevalent throughout. The dances and music have tribal elements in it and is based upon nature etc. Thus, we find certain elements of homogeneity in the cultural life of the various tribes of Arunachal Pradesh amidst a great deal of diverse culture and it exhibits an interesting synthesis of different cultures.

Dress and Ornaments

In this land of 110 tribes and sub-tribes, there are as many variations of dress and ornaments, reflecting the moods and minds of respective tribes. Regarding the costumes, each tribe has its own type of costumes. This distinguishes one tribe from the other. Almost all the tribes wear head-gear which provides the distinction to a group of tribe from the other.

However, it may be very difficult to find the tribal dressed in their traditional costumes nowadays; save the old generation, since, the present day tribal society has adopted the western dress, except for the festivals and occasions when the traditional attire and ornaments are adorned by all, young and the old. Thus, it is no longer possible to identify and distinguish the tribals from each other by looking at their dress.

Occupation

Arunachal Pradesh being predominantly rural, basically all the tribes are agriculturists, 'Jhumming' or shifting cultivation is the main method of cultivation with the exception of the Apatani, Singpho and Khamti, who practice wet rice cultivation. However, wet rice cultivation has been introduced recently among many of the Jhum cultivators. A shift from shifting cultivation to other modes of earning a livelihood, does not necessarily imply a progressive step, Savyasaachi is of the opinion that when the developmental activities fails to ensure a sustainable means of livelihood and on the other hand the "forest landscape abound there is a possibility for exclusive dependence by the tribals on shifting cultivation" (Visvanathan 2001: 75). Although the economy of the people is mainly- agro-based, in recent years some new vocations like contract work, government jobs, business, industry, etc, have been taken up further to strengthen their economy. One would also find that barter trade is continuing in spite of money economy, which entered late in Arunachal²⁶. Any large-scale industry has not yet been introduced in Arunachal.

Festivals

Festivals are a very important aspect in the collective life of the tribals in Arunachal Pradesh. All the tribes celebrate a number of festivals, most of which are connected with agriculture. Some of the important festivals are Losar and Chhos-Kor of Monpa tribe, Dree and Myokko of Apatani tribe; Nyokum of Nishing; Boori- Boot of Hills-Miri tribe; Si- Donyi of Tagins; Solung and Mopin of Adis; Dri and Tamla ladu of Mishmis; Sangken of Khamtis and singphos; Mol of Tangsos; Loku of Noctes and Ojilate of Wanchos. P.C. Dutta points out that "earlier the celebration of the festivals was confined to their respective villages but now-a-days important festivals are celebrated community wise, in a centrally located place, preferably in the district of sub-divisional headquarters where the non-tribal population also takes part" (Dutta 1991:13). Festivals connected with agriculture are performed at different stages of agricultural operation such as, selection of Jhum field, jungle cutting and burning, seed sowing, weeding, harvesting, and eating of new crop. The songs and dances that

²⁶ Dutta,,P.C., 1999. Cultural Panorama of Arunachal Pradesh and the trends of change. Anthropological survey of India, Vol.48, pp.11-16.

accompany these festivals, like the festivals are also numerous. Every occasion and festival is marked with song and dance

Festivals among the Arunachalee tribes are thus, the occasions in which the entire village participates together, it brings together the families and the clan members who are dispersed in towns for employment, education or even for those who have settled outside the village and thus is an expression of community or tribal identity.

Basic Social Organization: the Clan and the Family

Very typical of a tribal society; the tribal society of Arunachal Pradesh is mainly organized on the basis of tribe, clan or villages, and the social relations are determined on the basis of kinship or locality.

There is no doubt that the various tribes of this land lived in small villages having very little or no communication with either the outside world or other tribes until the recent past. In spite, of the many differences amongst the different tribes, there are certain common features of all the tribes. Pandey (1997, 64) has attempted to list some of the commonalities in the social organization of the tribals of Arunachal. Some of these are- every tribe is endogamous in character, this becomes clear where we find that, inter-tribe marriages are generally not encouraged, however, the violation of this rule is not viewed very seriously. Also, every tribe is divided into various clans and every clan is exogamous in character. It was and still, is considered a crime to marry within the same clan, as the clan rule is, that the males and females of the same clan are considered as brothers and sisters. Hence, in the Arunachalee tribal society the breach of the clan rule is a social calamity, which invites social ostracism.

Family

All the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh are patriarchal and the father is normally the head of the family. The tribes are also patrilineal in character, whereby descent is traced through the males. All over the state, the smallest unit of the society is the family and in some cases, we come across the joint family, more so in the villages. Normally, the right of inheritance to property devolves through the male members of the family. Primo-geniture is the rule followed in inheritance and succession. Monogamy is the general rule of marriage among the tribes, though there are no strict social restrictions

against plural marriage (in the form of polygny). Pandey holds that, “polygamy is specially, enjoyed by the chiefs among the Nocte and Wancho tribes and by other influential men of some of the other tribes”(Pandey 1999: 66,67). Further, almost all the works, requiring tough physical labour are done by the male members of the family, such as hunting, trapping and fishing, clearing jungle, construction of houses, collection of fodder for the piggery etc.

Social Division

Unlike, the mainstream Indian society, in Arunachalee society there is no “ Caste system”, rather there are social distinctions in many tribes and their society is divided into the nobles or chiefs, priests, the middle class, the slaves or the servants and normally intermarriage between them is not permitted. But this division is more horizontal than vertical. All the people in every tribe eat together on social occasions and take part in the village councils. The social division does not affect the social solidarity of the village.

However, among the tribes where some kind of social stratification does exist, one could cite the example of the Apatani tribes, where the most rigid class division of the society is to be found. The two distinct classes in the society are known as *mite* and *mura*, representing the two broad divisions of the society. The *mite* holds a higher status than the *mura* and the members of the two classes do not intermarry²⁷. A similar type of division has been mentioned by Levi-Strauss among the *Winnebago* tribe, who were divided into two moieties, *Wangeregi*, or “ those who are above”, and *Manegi*, or “ those who are below” (Levi- Strauss 1963: 133). These moieties were exogamous, and they had clear reciprocal rights and duties. The *Primitive Classification, 1969*, also explicates the division of a tribe into *moieties*, clans and sub- clans. These divisions are “based on an evolutionary social progression” in which moieties are the ‘oldest’ social groups and the clans the ‘more recent’. Moieties in the sense used by Durkhiem and Mauss means ‘one of a number, more than two, of groupings of clans’, each moiety, in turn comprises a number of clans, i.e. groups of individuals with the same totem. In addition to this division into clans, each moiety is

²⁷ Pandey,D., 1991. History of Arunachal Pradesh. Pasighat, Bani Mandir Publication, pp. 68.

divided into two classes which are 'marriage classes' (Durkheim and Mauss 1969: 10,11).

Since the Arunachalee society comprises a number of 'tribal' groups, my thesis revolves around the clan and not class or caste, because clan and locality were (and still largely are) the basic factors for the organization of the society. The social relations were and determined mostly by clan rules.

Position of Women

We have seen earlier that, in the case of Arunachal Pradesh, the entire tribal society, without any exception is predominantly patriarchal and inheritance is always on the paternal line. In addition to this polygamy is prevalent among some tribes especially among the Nishis and Hill- Miris, and in many tribes bride price is paid by the husbands. "The only exception where women were recognized as the head of the society is the Akas: in their society there are two queens, the Rani of *Jamiri* and the Rani of *Hushigaan*, who trace their descent to royal lineages" (Pandey 1997: 71). However, it is not to suggest that the position of women in Arunachal is very pitiable and one of subjugation. We need to understand the position of women in Arunachal in the light of various customs, beliefs, condition of life, etc, for a more insightful study.

The following indicators of the status of women in a society, like rights of women to property; their share in the household duties; their place in political organization; their freedom to selection of mates; etc, tell us a great deal about the position of women in Arunachalee society. Amongst the various tribe of Arunachal, women normally have little right to own property. In most of the cases a women cannot inherit immovable property like land and the only property she can inherit is the traditional ornaments, which are passed on from mother to daughter. It is, the son/sons who inherits all the immovable and movable property. The heavier work, such as felling of trees, cutting the logs, hunting and fishing etc, are done by men, other activities like seed sowing, weeding, harvesting, weaving etc, are women's job besides all other household work like cooking, fetching water, rearing pigs and poultry etc. There is no distinction of work amongst the married and unmarried women.

In so far as participation in political organization is concerned, a woman's role is much restricted and minimal. In the village councils which are the traditional political

organization among majority of the Arunachalee tribes, it is the men who participate and the participation by women in such proceedings of the village councils is very minimal. Women are very comfortably placed in Arunachal as far as the selection of their life partner is concerned. Though the general norm in most of the tribes is to settle a marriage by negotiation, the consent of the girl is often taken before marriage. Most of the tribes such as the Monpas, the Shedurkpens, the Akas, Noctes, Sinphos and so on, confer the right of choosing husbands to the girls. However, amongst the Nishi and the Miji tribes the girls do not enjoy this type of freedom. Amongst many tribes marriage by elopement is also very popular. Payment of bride-price is one notable feature of almost all the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. At the time of marriage the boys or his parents pay the bride-price to the other party, and thus according to Pandey, "theoretically women become the property of their husbands" (Pandey 1997: 73). However, a better status to women is ensured in the system of gift exchange by both the parties in marriage, for this is an outstanding feature of the Arunachalee society in general. Amongst the tribes where there is prevalence of polygamy the first wife, often has the consolation that she is the chief wife, the mistress of the household.

In the religious domain, women are not allowed to become priests, although they can freely take part in the religious ceremonies²⁸.

Political and Social Organisation since Pre-colonial Times

The institution of slavery has existed in the society of Arunachal Pradesh from times immemorial. Slavery was practiced amongst different tribes of the area. The slaves were acquired by the tribals in a number of ways. Firstly, a man or woman captured during the war automatically became a slave. Secondly, offspring of these slaves were also destined to remain slaves. Thirdly a man who committed an unpardonable offence against his own village community but could not pay fine as levied by the village council, was generally sold to some wealthy person as a slave. Fourthly, in some cases, a person who could not repay a loan might be a slave to the debtor. In addition to these, slaves could be purchased from the people trading in them.

²⁸ Pandey, D., 1997. History of Arunachal Pradesh. Pasighat, Bani Mandir Publication, pp.73.

With the declaration of India's independence in 1947, all slaves were declared to be free. However, owing to inadequate and lack of efficient administrative machinery in the state, tribals were unaware and slavery continued, which was abolished legally in 1960. Yet, though the institution of slavery has been completely abolished by law, some taboos are still observed in maintaining the social relations between the ex-slaves and free men in traditional society of Arunachal Pradesh, for example, marriage between the slaves and the others is strictly dealt with by the tribes even today.

Political Organization

Almost all the tribes in the state have various named democratic and semi-democratic types of village councils. For example, the Nocte and Wancho have chieftainship whilst the Adi tribes have very strong councils called *Kebang*. It was the British administration which imposed a sort of chieftainship in the shape of the *Gam* (village headman), but it did not work in the face of the strong democratic *Kebang* system. The chieftainship is almost non-existent now. Even amongst the tribes, which have the system, unlike the past the chieftians do not have any political power.

Tribal Identity

The much formalized celebration of festivals like Mopin, Dree, Nyokum, Solung, etc, by various tribes are examples when tribal identity is asserted through it, as the entire tribe participates in the festival and each tribe has its distinct festival. Such celebrations have helped in the community/tribe specific solidarity and also provides scope for the participation of people from scattered villages to come together. The festivals have also helped in ensuring the continuity of performing arts-dances and songs-rituals and promotion of other elements of collective tribal identity.

Another aspect of Arunachalee society, where the tribal identity is manifested is in the endogamous marriages within the tribes which is strongly stressed among each tribe.

In the recent times, at a broader level certain distinct trends are visible of some bigger tribes trying to subsume smaller tribes within their own fold (e.g, Nyishi-Sulung), whereas some others (e.g., Galo) are trying to come out of wider identity shared so long with other groups in search of their own identity. These emerging trends have often given rise to social tension. Some smaller tribes (e.g., Miji and Aka) are again

thinking about merger, on the basis of sharing a common mythical origin. Considerable fluidity is noticeable in the realm of identity formation. All these trends are part of socio-political transformation process. However the traditional institutions of the tribes have been affected due to new changes, like the modern administrative system, money economy etc, which has affected the inter-community relationships and transactions. For example the, introduction of 'Gaon Bura'(Village headman) and Panchayati Raj systems have undermined the chieftainship among the Wanchos, Noctes and few other tribes. However, the democratic systems of governance through hereditary '*kebang*' (traditional village council) and certain other traditional institutions have not lost their importance completely. A very interesting thing to note is how, the new politics of 'vote-bank' in the state reinstated the significance of clan and tribe in the changed context²⁹. At the same time, money has now come to play an important role in power politics in the state

Thus, the tribal identity of the tribes of Arunachal, are manifested in costumes and attires, festivals and performance of religious rites and in emphasizing on endogamous marriages within the tribe.

Outsiders and Insiders

The hilly terrain has made external influence on the life and culture of the people inevitable. The essentially kinship based society had very rigid lines of demarcations between tribes and between tribals of Arunachal and the non-tribals. The clan, kinship and village level ties are the most important structures with which the tribes identified and associated themselves with. However, "today it is fast transforming to a regional society where new lines of inter-tribal communication are emerging cutting through former tribal boundaries" (Bhagbati 2001:19). These we can attribute to today's fast changing society, where it has become almost impossible for a tribe to isolate itself and keep away from the happenings around him

Tribal-level endogamy is still regarded as ideal. However, inter-tribal marriages are taking place nowadays. There are cases of Arunachalee girls marrying non-tribal boys. Government encourages inter-tribal marriage to promote inter-tribal solidarity

²⁹ Bhagbati and Chaudhuri. 2002. Social Transformation in Arunachal Pradesh. Bull. Dept. of Anthropology, Gauhati University, Spl. Issue, Pp. 15.

though it has not yet gained wider acceptance. Certain adaptations, particularly in the field of material culture, are noticeable. Effects of outside culture has been noticed in many aspects, whereby the tribals are integrating into the wider society.

2.4 Religion in Arunachal Pradesh

Religious landscape in Arunachal Pradesh is quite complex. Being a tribal society, here religion, is one of the most important aspect of the society; it is closely knitted with other elements of the social life of the tribals and thus it determines their way of life in many ways.

The concept of religion, like the concept of culture, is equally vague and full of complexities and ambiguities; it has different connotations for different people. Defining religion is not an easy matter and there are many definitions offered by authorities on the subject, which disagree markedly with one another. In the context of Arunachal Pradesh, religion would come very close to definition provided by, Emile Durkheim as ‘A unified system of beliefs and practices relative to the sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called the church all those who adhere to them’ (Durkheim 1961:62)³⁰. What was central to Durkheim’s definition was the distinction between the sacred and the profane, which unites people together. His definition contains a functional element in referring to religion uniting followers into single moral community, the ‘Church’. Thus, even in Arunachal Pradesh religion serves as a strong binding force to the adherents of the same religion and fosters a kind of unity among them.

With regards, to the religious aspects of the way of life of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, *the entire state of Arunachal can be roughly divided into three main groups* :

- In the first place, we have the tribes who fall in the *Tani*³¹ group of constellation like the Nishis, Hill Miris, the Apatanis and the Adis and the

³⁰ Durkheim, Emile. 1915. The Elementary Form of the religious belief. London, George Allen and Unwin, pp. 62.

³¹ *Tani* group of people refer to all those tribes who trace their descent to one common ancestor ‘Abotani’.

Mishmis whose animistic faith has evolved into an organized natural religion called “**Donyi- Poloism**”. However, even within these tribes there are variations in their religious beliefs and practices, inspite of many commonalities in their cultural traits and beliefs.

- The second group consists of tribes like the Monpas, the Sherdukpens, the Singphos, the Khamptis, the Membas, and the Khambhas who come under the influence of **Buddhism** and their religious life is deeply influenced by this religion.
- The third group comprises of the tribes like the Noctes, the Wanchos, and the Tangsas of the Tirap region who are related to the **Naga tribes** to their South-West and had a very strong tradition of head-hunting in the past. The religion of these tribes also fall in the category that has broadly been classified as animism.

However, each group is found to have accommodated features of *animism* in their religious systems³². For example, the Kamptis, though profess Buddhism of Theraveda cult, believe in spirit worship and propitiate to Phi Mung (Village diety), Phinoy (Spirit of jungle/hills), etc (Behera and Chaudhury 1998: ii,iii).

Below, I have attempted to study the major religious cultures as practiced by the different tribes, i.e. *Donyi-Poloism*; Buddhism and finally the Brahminical religion that was traditionally practiced in the Arunachalee Society by various tribes.

- **Indigenous system of faith- “Donyi-Poloism” in Arunachal Pradesh.**

The state of Arunachal Pradesh is one of the few remaining places on earth where indigenous faiths are still living systems. Unlike in most other places, where tribal religions have either been drastically modified or abandoned altogether due to prostelytization or conversion to other faiths in Arunachal Pradesh, traditional faiths are not curiosities of a by-gone era. Here, traditional customs and rituals constitute vibrant systems of the society and are very much a part of the tribals.

³² Behera, M.C. and Chaudhuri S.K., 1998. Indigenous Faith and Practices of the Tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Itanagar, Himalayan Publishers, pp.i, ii.

The tribals of Arunachal have a system of faith (i.e, *Dony-Poloism*), which are suited to the real situations they face in their life and whereby they try to seek solution to their life and hardships through it. A very useful insight into the tribal religion of the Arunachal Pradesh (formally NEFA) has been provided by Dr. Elwin, in his book, *A Philosophy for NEFA*. The five outstanding qualities of the indigenous faith of NEFA, as pointed out are, “ Firstly, there is a very general belief in a Supreme God who is just, benevolent and good; secondly, in the tribal religion there is genuine emphasis on the spiritual realities behind the events of everyday life; thirdly the tribal religion is built up from an elaborate mythology; fourthly, the tribal religion is associated with a social ethic that unites the tribe in its discipline; and finally, the tribal religion gives the people power to reconcile themselves in eternal emergencies of life” (Elwin 1964:210). In comparing the tribal religion of Arunachal Pradesh to other religions of the world we would find that, unlike many other religions of the world, the tribal religion is not a separate institution in itself controlled by a particular section of the society³³. Their religion for the Arunachalee tribals is a part of their everyday life, not confined to the shrines or temples only. It has social ethical codes that unite the people and foster the tribal qualities of hospitality, simplicity, truthfulness and integrity.

Among the indigenous communities of Arunachal Pradesh, nature in its varied manifestations is the object of religious inspiration, reverence, often of awe and fear, worship and propitiation. For the tribals, elements of nature such as the sun and the moon have awesome power and implications for man’s existence and survival, this explains why the tribes belonging to the *Tani* constellation have evolved an extraordinary faith based on “*Donyi, the sun*” and “*Polo, the moon*”. *These are symbols of divine and creative supreme power, omnipotent and Omni-present.*

The assembly of magico-religious system is very rich in tribal religion³⁴, as is the case with the adherents of the Donyi-polo faith. These magico-religious ideas, beliefs and practices of each tribal community have evolved over a long period, in response to adaptive needs and strategies for survival in different ecological niches. Some of the

³³ Pandey, D., 1997. History of Arunachal Pradesh. Pasighat, Bani Mandir Publication, Pp. 139

³⁴ Behera and Chaudhuri. 1998. Indigenous Faith and Practices of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Itanagar, Himalayan Publishers, Pp.3.

reasons are, because there are diseases to be prevented and sickness to be cured. Also there are dangers and uncertainties that a tribal has to cope with like for a successful *Jhum* crop to be ensured; success in hunting and fishing has to be ascertained and hazards both man-made and natural- are to be averted. Above all, good health, prosperity and peace in the community must be ensured and maintained. Thus, the indigenous faiths, sustained by customary sanctions and rituals provides the tribals the required mental resource and strength to cope with the trials and tribulations of life and ensure peace and happiness of the community, and at a larger scale of the society as a whole.

“Donyi-Poloism as a form of Animism”- ‘*Donyi-Polo*’ religion of the tribals of Arunachal Pradesh is often termed as a form of animism. Therefore, we need to understand what it exactly implies. The popular terms like animism, ‘primitive religions’, etc have been used by western scholars to understand the tribal religion.

Durkheim was of the view that even the most primitive religion expresses a kind of truth. He was particularly concerned to challenge the prevalent notion that religion is largely false and illusionary. For Durkheim, while the tenets of religion may seem odd and strange, we have to see them as essentially symbolic in nature and we have to go beneath the symbolism to appreciate what they are really expressing. When we do so we find, that ‘in reality there are no religions which are false. All are true in their own fashion’(Durkheim 1915: 3). Religion, then for Durkheim, is nothing other than collective force of society over the individual. It is the religious rites, he argues, that generate, strengthen and renew religious sentiments and a sense of dependence upon an external spiritual and moral power which is infact society. It is the collective nature of such gatherings which is responsible for effervescence and which gives the participants a sense of the importance of the group and the society, couched in religious terms. Further, belief in various spirits and gods is explained by Durkheim as being derived from belief in ancestral spirits which are actually the souls of ancestors and therefore, the social principle manifested in particular individuals.

The term ‘animism’ properly refers to a theory set forth by English Scholar, Edward Tylor in order to account for the origin and development of religion, Tylor proposed what he calls a minimum definition of religion, namely ‘belief in spiritual beings’ (Tylor 1903: 424). This definition was bound up with Tylor’s account of the origins

of religion in a system of thought which he referred to as 'animism'- the belief that all things, organic and inorganic, contain a soul or spirit which gives them their particular nature and characteristics.

For Sigmund Freud "animism itself is not yet a religion but contains the foundations on which religion are later built (myths are based on animistic premises)" (Freud 1950: 77).

M.C. Behera and S.K. Chaudhuri in defining religion emphasized on "the belief in soul power in all beings, objects and natural phenomena", they emphasized on the belief in the existence of impersonal supernatural forces in nature, become the bases of nature worship in tribal societies(Behera and Chaudhuri 1998:3).

Thus, the Donyi-Polo faith of the tribals of Arunachal, represent features of animism as given by various scholars, in it that to these tribals all beings are supposed to be endowed with a living spirit, animals and plants, rivers and mountains are no exception to this rule. The followers of Donyi- Polo faith believe, that the dead who have apparently left them are with them; and it is through remembrance and offerings that they have to renew their relationship with the dead on due occasions. The dead, for the tribals are again reborn in the shape of offspring in the present generation, which are thus propitiated by the tribals³⁵.

However, the supreme powers, usually benign, are not directly propitiated and there are no set rituals and sacrifices to appease them or win their favour. In ordinary day-to-day life, the world of religion of the tribals, is one of lesser deities and spirits some of whom are benevolent, but many are malevolent or evil spirits³⁶. Thus, Donyi-Polo system of faith among the tribals of Arunachal comes very close to the definition of animism as propounded by various social scientist, as it is the belief in spiritual beings and it attributes supernatural powers to these spirits, who are endowed in the nature and the tribals believe, these spirits influence the happenings in their day to day life.

³⁵ Behera and Chaudhuri. 1998. Indigenous Faith and Practices of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Itanagar, Himalayan Publishers.

³⁶ibid ,pp.3.

- **Buddhism.**

The salient feature of Arunachal Buddhism is that both the Mahayana or the Great Vehicle and the Theravad, are existing in the state in different geographical zones: Mahayana in northwestern zone and Theraveda in south eastern zone. Mahayana is spread among the Monpas, Sherdukpens, Ngas, Membas and Khambas. On the other hand, Theraveda is spread among the Khamptis and Singphos.

- **Brahmanical Religion**

The people of Arunachal Pradesh were also influenced by the religion of the plains of Assam from the very early days. The influence of what is called as the 'Brahminical Religion' can be noticed in the foothills of Arunachal Pradesh³⁷, as attested by the literary as well as the archeological evidences, for example the Malinithan temple located in this state, as a notable centre of Shakti worship has been identified in the Kalika Purana, Shiv temple in Lohit district of the state etc. Of this Brahmanical religion, traces of Shaktism, Shaivism and Vaishnavism are particularly noticed in some parts of the state.

2.5 Recent Developments in the State in the Realm of Religion.

The Arunachalee tribes have been experiencing a new reality of life culminating into the series of changes in response to new opportunities with wider market economy, flow of new world-views and tremendous avenues resulting from contact with outside cultures. As a result of these exogenous forces, this transition has compelled the tribal people to cast aside and modify many of their customs, traditions, faiths and practices and on the other hand, they have incorporated new elements within the emerging socio-cultural matrix.

The state, of late, has been experiencing a great spurt in religious activities. Christianity, which could not make enough inroads here, seems to be in a great hurry to make up for its earlier lapses by vigorously carrying out its proselytizing activities among the tribals. The Sangh Parivar and many Hindu religious sects, claiming tribals as Hindus, are equally active in zealously undertaking the agenda of Hinduisation. Hindutva has also promoted Hinduisation and institutionalization in the state, which

³⁷ Pandey, D., 1997. History of Arunachal Pradesh. Pasighat, Bani Mandir Publication, Pp. 139

can be observed in various aspects like, from building temples and inventing new Gods and Goddesses to composing hymns and reviving priesthood. Thus the Hindutva in the state has been actively working on the culture, traditions and religious faiths of various tribal communities like the Adis, Niishis and more particularly on the faiths like Donyi Polo³⁸. Thus, the religious landscape of Arunachal Pradesh is quite complex, which has further been complicated by the present changing scenario with the new forces that are at work in the state.

Religious conversions in the state- An important dimension of social transformation lies in the domain of religion. Christianity has replaced the traditional animistic faith in many tribal belts. The only exception is the tribes professing Buddhism (both Theravada and Mahayana varieties) and some other tribes such as Mishmis who have not been much influenced by conversion. Introduction of Christianity has had decisive impact on many tribal institutions. For instance, institutions like the youth dormitories of Wanchos and many of their oral traditions were affected by the spread of Christianity. In order to ensure continuance of Indigenous faiths and to counter conversion, some NGOs became active in different parts of the state. Also, the rise of reformist movements have been evident among a number of groups belonging to the so-called Tani constellation of tribes (Nyishi, Adi, Apatani, etc). The trend is visible among some non-Tani tribe also, such as Tangsa and Idus. New images such as Intiya, Rangfra, Etc, have been invented representing both gods and goddess of some tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. In many cases, the influence of Hinduism (e.g., in the depiction of gods and goddesses in iconic form) is discernable³⁹. New edifices of prayer and worship in the form of temples are constructed. Oral incarnations and prayers have been formalized and printed. The preachers are trained in the art of conducting weekly prayers and conduct standardized rituals and ceremonies. New ideas, symbols and rules have to an extent reorganized the so-called 'animistic' indigenous beliefs and practices of many non- Buddhist tribes in the past few years. Many of these communities have coined names for the new faiths disseminated through the formal structures (viz, Nyidar Namlo of the Nyishi tribes), along with the

³⁸ (Source: National Conference on Towards a New understanding of North-East India, 2008, organized by North-East India Studies Programme, JNU. Speaker- Prof. Pralay Kanungo, Centre for Political Studies, SSS, JNU.)

³⁹ Bhagabati, A.C and Chaudhuri, S.K., 2002. Social Transformation Process in Arunachal Pradesh. Bull. Dept of Anth, Gauhati University, Spl. Issue 10, Pp. 15-16.

painted images of gods and goddesses. Such contesting religious ideologies have created a new space outside the framework of traditional social relationships. This is visible in the case of Christian and non-Christian members of a family, clan or other social formations. Except in some parts of Tirap, Changlang and Papum Pare districts, the spread of Christianity did not create any serious social conflict though today within the same tribe such new religious ideologies have strained their traditional convert social-relationships, since Christianity is averse to indigenous ritual processes, the deities and the most important element of Sacred structure-the religious specialists. However, community cohesiveness is still preserved largely through the finer threads of understanding at family, clan and village levels, which often got disturbed. A sense of skepticism emerged especially among the young generations and so-called educated class about the old faiths, beliefs and practices. According to them, many of the components and the processes involved in the traditional belief systems and practices are based on superstition. That is why these are not viable in this modern world. In addition to this perception, Christianity, a new religion has come which made its entry around the early half of 19th century, i.e from 1840's⁴⁰. However the inflow was very much confined only to the the plains areas of Arunachal Pradesh adjoining the state of Assam. This limited entry of Christianity in the state is assigned to geographical difficulties as well as non-exploration of the mainland of Arunachal. But the entry began to take a new course from 1950 onwards when Arunachal Pradesh was opened to mainstream administration. The inflow of administrative machinery, educational establishments, roadways etc. paved the way for entry of missionaries to Arunachal, and it has greatly influenced the people. It has been argued that "The adherents of new religion openly denounced the rituals and sacrifices involved in traditional belief systems and practices. It has necessarily set a new outlook among the people evolving a kind of separate identity based on Christianity" (Bhagabhati and Chaudhuri 2002: 21,22). Recently, many Arunachalee tribals have converted to Christianity. The reasons are many dimensional and cannot be attributed to any single cause. However, one cannot overlook the economic and

⁴⁰ Downs, F.S., 1983. Christianity in North-East India- historical Perspective. Delhi, ISPCK.

educational benefits accruing from conversions and even 'faith healing' qualities attributed to new religion aiding its spread among the tribals⁴¹.

Revival of traditional faith. On the other hand, there is an attempt among some sections of the society (some educated youths and the culturally conscious older people) to revive and reform the traditional religious practices so as to make them acceptable for the people in this changed scenario and also to counter the onslaught of the new religion (Christianity)⁴². Now this group, led by educated youth has initiated some measures by forming religious forums like Nyishi Indigenous Faith and Culture Society and Nyedar Namlo, place of worship of Donyi Polo which earlier did not exist.

2.6 Relation between Culture and Religion

In a tribal society like Arunachal, religion and culture are very intricately linked. Religion and culture works as a part to the whole. This is amply evident when changes in religious faith of the adherents is often accompanied by changes in the cultural way of life. For instance the converts to Christian religion in the state, most often denounce tribal rites and festivals.

The Sociology of Religion, one of the most important sections from Max Weber's work on *Economy and Society* (1966), gives a comprehensive survey of his most mature conclusion about the place of religion in society, the connection of religious institutions and practices with other aspect of social structure, and the causal role of religion in social change. In *Protestant Ethic*, Weber raised a set of theoretical problem in the field of human social action of the very first order of importance. The central problem was "whether men's conceptions of the cosmic universe, including those of divinity and men's religious interest within a conceptual framework could influence or shape their concrete actions and social relations" (Weber 1966: xxi). Weber thus, inaugurated a new phase in the understanding of the relations between religious aspects and other aspects of human behavior. Weber embarked upon a broad comparative study of relations between religious orientations and social-structure,

⁴¹ Bhagbati and Chaudhuri. 2002. Social Transformation in Arunachal Pradesh, Bull. Dept. of Anthropology, Gauhati University, pp.21.

⁴² Nabam, T.R., 2005. Emerging Religious Identities of Arunachal Pradesh. New Delhi, Mittal Publications, Pp preface.

also between economic organizations and religious orientation. In the case of Arunachal too, we would find that their religious inclinations, shaped other aspects of their life, and guided their activities and their social and cultural life in many ways.

Thus, we see that religion, of course does not exist separately from other aspects of culture. Religious behavior patterns influence and are influenced by what happens in the rest of the culture. The two are intricately related, and this would amply be visible even in the case of religion and culture in Arunachal Pradesh.

In the tribal society of Arunachal Pradesh, the sociological, psychological, philosophical, ecological, economic, political and religious aspects are inter-woven into a complex whole and no activity comes down entirely to fall within specific domain of society. Therefore, understanding of any specific issue needs a holistic approach.

2.7 Social Transformation In Arunachal Pradesh

Today, the tribal situation in Arunachal Pradesh is changed to a great extent: whether it is economy, polity, education, material or other elements of culture, religious beliefs and practices, changes are noticeable everywhere. If we look at the contemporary tribal situation of Arunachal Pradesh, there is no doubt that the society has undergone spectacular changes in the past few decades; multiple forces have been working simultaneously to bring changes.

But, the character and extent are not homogenous on all the tribes. Variations have been due to differential access to developmental programmes, exposure to forces of modernization, numerical strength of the tribes and their geographical location, and finally, their access to share in the power structure as well as administration. Also “the numerically dominant tribes play a dominant role in these spheres” (Bhagbati and Chaudhuri 2002: 22,23). Another important emerging trend needs to be mentioned here; almost every tribe has its own students’ union though there is a common platform like AAPSU (All Arunachal Pradesh student Union). Here also leadership remains in the hands of dominant tribes. Every district, especially every urban centre, has these days, civic bodies like literary and cultural societies, which are working for the development of respective tribal languages and scripts and preservation of customs and values. Even the priests of different tribes (believers or followers of Abo-

Tani, for example) have already formed a central organization of the priests(Nyibus) who are trying not only to promote and preserve the institution of priesthood, but also negotiating with the government of Arunachal Pradesh for monetary assistance in the form of pension⁴³.

Occupational mobility is very much evident with the rapid spread of education, urbanization and expansion of developmental activities. All these have led to rise of a small, articulate and affluent section of 'elites' (as often designated by the people themselves) within the tribal societies.

The entire process of modernization triggered by greater administrative penetration, developmental initiatives in various forms, introduction of a new political system, contesting religious ideologies and diverse changes in the economic sphere have had great impact on the traditional social structure, social relationships, cultural life and value systems of the tribal communities of this frontier state. The politico-administrative conditions before 1947 were such that each tribal society, large or small, maintained a sort of autonomous status in its dealing with the world outside its defined boundary. "For a tribal segment, with an essentially kinship-based social structure, there was very little scope or need to expand the network of social relations involving other tribal segments in the surrounding habitat, except for certain well-defined trade and Barter transaction" (Bhagabati and Chaudhuri 2002: 22,23).

Another important development from indigenous culture to modernity is the aspect that the indigenous tribals have culminated in including 'outer' modern culture into their realm which is in fact taking a vast departure from their tradition. For instance, festivals might take the traditional form, however inclusion of music entertainment, beauty pageant contests etc, have been added to it. This new trend explicitly has been inducted through modernization and other external sources. Further, with the growth of administration women's participation, emancipation and empowerment aspects have come into the forefront.

Again, it would be very interesting to note that some tribals have started recording the hymns and spells of the priests when they conduct rituals. Perhaps, they know that

⁴³ Bhagabati, A.C and Chaudhuri, S.K. 2002. Social Transformation Process in Arunachal Pradesh. Bull. Dept of Anth, Gauhati University, Spl. Issue 10, Pp., 24.

with the days to come modernization would completely wipe out the youths from taking the place of the priest and thus, they have started recording the spells and hymns.

But it would be wrong to say that much has changed, even though the incursions have been rapid. Remote areas and villages of distant places even today exhibit indigenous tribal cultures and have preserved it, but days are not far when perhaps, modern roads, transport and other communications would also bring them into its fold.

On the other hand, there is gradual erosion of collective enterprise at clan, kinship and village levels⁴⁴, which are regarded as the basic features of tribal social-structure. This is more noticeable in urban and semi-urban centers and villages on the fringe of these centers. The neo-local nuclear families are growing rapidly in these places. This has an effect on many traditional social practices and institutions and on many other tribes which symbolized polygamy(polygny) as well as the joint family-centered household system.

Change is evident in almost all socio- economic and cultural aspect of life including inter-tribal and intra-tribal relationship, which ultimately affect the pristine traditional social structure as well.

It is beyond the scope of the present work to discuss in detail the religious rites, beliefs, and practices of each and every tribe, so my work would focus on the Donyi-Polo system of Faith among the *Tani* group of people. It may be pointed out that that the religious divisions of the tribals of Arunachal Pradesh are not water-tight, and have overlapping influence on each other as, we have seen that almost all the religions among the tribals of Arunachal have incorporated elements of animism in it.

⁴⁴ Ibid,Pp 25.

Chapter 3

“*Donyi-Poloism*” in Arunachal Pradesh

3.1 Introduction

Every ‘tribal’ society has its own explanation about the creation of universe or the various elements of the world around them. Through such faiths and practices, ‘tribal’ people try to explain various natural and supernatural phenomena and try to take control over them. Their day-to-day activities, achievements, successes or failures they attribute to supernatural powers or destiny. Religion is conceived as a system of beliefs and relationships and action conducted in relation to supernaturalism. These gives rise to ‘tribal’ beliefs and practice, which pervade all types of social activities, be it economic, cultural or social, and gives shape to the idea of tribal religion. Therefore, indigenous faiths and practices in a ‘tribal’ society have a domain inclusive of sociological, economic, psychological, cultural, religious elements and even ecological considerations. All these distinct aspects are inter-woven into a complex whole and no activity comes down entirely to fall within a specific domain of social action. Thus, indigenous faith and practices are the reflection of the existing socio-religious system of a society, which emerge in certain given conditions of life, which people strive for securing their material existence and for finding answer to their ideological queries. It has special significance so far as the tribal people are concerned, as it provides a rationale for their existence and makes intelligible and acceptable the world within which their social system operates.

For ages, the people of Arunachal Pradesh have lived in isolation from the outside world, living very close to nature and devising ways and means to adjust with the social and physical world surrounding them. They have developed their own system of faith and belief system, which harmonize with the nature and at the same time provide them with explanation of the things in the world surrounding them. Through their faith, practices and beliefs, which largely revolve around Nature, they have developed their own mode of life and a system of logic to interpret the happenings in their world. The ‘*Tani*’ group of people in Arunachal which comprise the *Adis*, *Gallongs*, *Nyishis*, *Apatanis* and *Tagins*, believe that there is unseen supreme power

of the Universe which is the source of heavenly objects like sun, moon, stars, earth and the source of organic ingredients of life elements like air, water, heat and light. This Omnipotent, Omniscient and Omnipresent Supreme Being is called *Donyi-Polo (God)*. Their faith in the supernatural is not only the most influential forces of social control but also the most effective guide of human behavior. Their faith, as we shall see later is closely associated with morality and has elaborate rules of conduct. As a way of life, compartmentalization of culture, tradition, festival, etc., from religion is very difficult in their society. Durkhiem and Mauss in the book, *The Primitive Classification*, observes that the object of classification of the tribes into different classes, i.e., into moieties, clans and sub-clans, is to make intelligible the relations which exist between things, “the Australian divides the universe between the totems of his tribe, because the idea of the totem being cardinal for him, he is under a necessity to place everything else what he knows in relation to it. The ties which unite things of the same group or different groups to each other are themselves conceived as social ties. The expressions by which we refer to these relations still have a moral significance” (Durkheim and Mauss 1969: 84).

This chapter is divided into two parts: The first part attempts, to understand the *Donyi-Polo* system of faith among the *Tani* group of people in Arunachal Pradesh, which originally was a faith and a cult. Under this, I have tried to understand the doctrines and philosophy of ‘*Donyi- Poloism*’ as a working way of life for the adherents and the ways through which it shapes and guides the adherents in their daily life. In addition, under this section I have tried to understand the past policy of the NEFA administration towards the indigenous faith in the state, as it helps us in understanding how the essence of religion and culture in Arunachal Pradesh was preserved, and explains why Christianity could not make enough inroads in the state until very recent times. The second part of the chapter, tries to examine the recent development in the indigenous faith ‘*Donyi-Poloism*’, due to various intervening forces, both endogenous and exogenous factors and how the ‘*Donyi-Poloism*’ which originally was an abstract form of faith, gradually become institutionalized, so as to appeal to the people.

3.2 “*Donyi-Poloism*” as an Indigenous Faith

In the context of Arunachal Pradesh, it becomes extremely difficult to define religion, since religion and culture remained interlinked for all practical purposes. Hence, in this society, the essence of religion can hardly be determined by providing definitions. The *Tani* group of people – Adi, Apatani, Nyishi, Hill-Miri and Tagin- believes in the supreme power of *Donyi* (The Sun) and *Polo*(the Moon). The faiths and beliefs they profess is called ‘*Donyi-Poloism*’. “Indigenous faith”, has been defined in the ‘*Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act, 1978*’ (Act No.4, 1978) as “such religious beliefs and practices including rites, rituals, festival, observance, performances, abstinence, custom as have been found sanctioned, approved, performed by the indigenous communities of Arunachal Pradesh from the time these communities have been known and includes Buddhism as prevalent among the Monpas, the Membas, Sherukpens, Khambas, Khamtis and Singphos, Vaishnavism as practiced by Noctes, Akas and Nature worships, including worships of *Donyi-Polo*, as prevalent among other indigenous communities of Arunachal Pradesh.”⁴⁵ It is important to mention here that the people have been practicing their religious belief in *Donyi-Polo*, since the time immemorial but the problem lies mainly due to lack of recognition in absence of an equivalent term to name their religion. However, at present the term ‘*Donyi-Polo*’ has become analogous to the ‘tribal’ religion in Arunachal Pradesh.

Concept of “*Donyi-Poloism*”, a Traditionally established Symbol of Faith

Since, *Donyi-Poloism* has been shrouded with innumerable myths, stories, legends, belief and superstitions, it becomes difficult to arrive at what exactly is ‘*Donyi-poloism*’ for its adherents, what are its origin, what is the concept of *Donyi-Polo* and is *Donyi Polo* a religion or a god?. Moreover, due to modern education, developments, science and technology and growth of rationality the younger generation has started questioning the beliefs and assumptions of the *Donyi-Polo* faith, often labeling those beliefs and practices as superstitious and redundant in the modern world, thus further aggravating the situation.

⁴⁵ Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act, (No. 4, 1978), Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh, Itanagar.

One would find it surprising but nowhere one would come across the teaching of religion and God-hood in *Donyi-Poloism*. Also amongst most of the groups of people who follow Donyi-Poloism, there are no equivalent words for religion and God in their dialect⁴⁶. Further, it has no prophets and preachers. In *The Elementary forms of religious life (1915)*, Durkheim observes that, there are great religions from which the idea of gods and spirit is absent, or at least where it plays only a secondary or limited role, Buddhism is a case, which emphasizes on the four noble truth, and attainment of salvation by *Nirvana*. Therefore, “Religion is more than the idea of gods or spirits, and consequently cannot be defined exclusively in relation to it” (Durkheim 1915: 35). Most of scholars who have worked on ‘*Donyi-poloism*’ agree that, it is an evolutionary outcome of human faith. Therefore, if traditional faith and practice is called a religion, it may be so.

Meanings of ‘*Donyi-Polo*’.

The term ‘*Donyi-Polo*’, connotes many meanings for the adherents. *Donyi Polo*, argues Mibang has three different meanings; “firstly it is used to refer to the Almighty god. It is also used to denote the sun and the moon. Secondly, it is the name given to the traditional belief system of the people. Finally, *Donyi Polo* is neither God nor the two celestial objects nor an object of worship but the spiritual, ideological and philosophical aspiration to lead peaceful and meaningful life on this earth. In other words, the faith on the supreme power, the God that is manifested in the form of the sun and the moon and the practices associated with the worship of this absolute power is called *Donyi Polo*” (Mibang 1999: 8). Thus, it is a traditionally established symbol (The Sun and the Moon) of faith of the Believers.

The Arunachalee people who follow the *Donyi-Polo* faith inhabit amidst the natural environment. The landscape, mountains and peaks, hill ranges, green forests, river, animals, the blue sky, stars, meteors, cloud, rain, air etc are all around them. Being so, they constitute a part of nature. They learn from nature and each object of nature is their educator. They draw their opinion, on closely observing the behavior of natural objects. Among all these natural objects, the *Donyi(Sun)* and *Polo(Moon)* are prominent and impressive to them. The Sun and Moon, existing at great distance

⁴⁶ Oshong, Ering. 1998. The Search of Donyi-Polo,(Art. In Indigenous faith and practices of the Tribes of Arunachal Pradesh). Itanagar, Himalayan Publishers, pp. 47.

beyond the reach of man render useful services to the humanity on the Earth. The warm rays and light of the Sun and the Moon exhibits the benevolence of it to the adherents. As per Ering Oshong “to lead a more meaningful life, they need spiritual and ideological feeding also. Thus, they desire to see the perfectness of things through their natural guide- the Sun and the Moon” (Oshong 1998: 47). However, inspite of various myths and tales about the Sun and the Moon, the people do not consider ‘*Donyi-Polo*’ as gods and goddesses by tradition. They rather consider ‘*Donyi-polo*’ as a ‘representation of the god who himself is invisible.’⁴⁷

Donyi (the Sun) and Polo (The Moon) as eyes of Conscience- the traditional way of thinking is that Donyi-Polo is the eyes of human conscience, “the piercing eternal eyes that watch the human ceaselessly” (Oshong 1998:50). To the adherents these eyes are represented through the Sun and the Moon. Just as the two objects in the sky focus light to enable us to see what is what, the eyes of conscience ie, *Donyi –Polo* illuminate our mind to identify what is wrong or right⁴⁸.

Origin of “Donyi-Polo”, An Evolutionary Outcome- At present, the term ‘*Donyi-Polo*’ has become analogous to the ‘tribal’ religion in Arunachal Pradesh. As far as origin of Donyi-Polo is concerned, almost all the groups belonging to the *Tani* constellation believe that it was created by the supreme power that created the entire universe including the man. However, there are some minor variation among different tribes regarding the meaning and role of *Donyi-Polo*. Among the *Tani group* of people, the *Adi* ‘tribes’ are the first to formalize *Donyi-Polo* as their indigenous religion.⁴⁹ The ‘*Adis*’ believe that a supernatural power or creator who is called ‘*sedi*’ by the Padam-Minyong(tribe) and ‘*Jimi*’ by the Galos (tribe) has created all beings and things of the universe. The myth goes like this, “in the process of evolution, ‘*Sedi*’, the creator himself transformed parts of his body into rivers, valleys, air, water, stones, rocks, flora, fauna, the moon and the stars. ‘*Sedi*’s hair was transformed into vegetation on the earth, his tears into rain and water, his bones into rocks and stones

⁴⁷ Oshong , Ering (Art)in Behera, M.C and Chaudhuri , S.K., 1998. Indigenous faith and Practices of Tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. New Delhi, Himalayan Publisher.

⁴⁸ Behera and Chaudhuri. 1998. Indigenous Faith and Practices of the Tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Itanagar, Himalayan Publishers, pp. 50.

⁴⁹ Nabam, T.R. 2005. Emerging Religious Identities of Arunachal Pradesh. New Delhi, Mittal Publications, pp.119

and his eyes into *Donyi* 'the sun' and *Polo* 'the moon'. 'Sedi' has become obscure and silent after creation. But, he continued to keep a vigil on humanity through the pair of searching eyes. Hence, '*Donyi and Polo* are the manifestation of two eyes of Sedi' (Nabam 2005: 119), and is regarded as the symbol of creator and protector of mankind. '*Donyi-Polo*' is the religion of the *Tani* group of people, but the *Tanis* are not the worshipers of the sun and the moon, although in literal meaning the word '*Donyi-Polo*' is the planetary sun and the moon. '*Donyi-Polo*' which the *Tanis* worship is far superior, far profound, far beyond and invisible. *Donyi Polo* is the embodiment of the spiritual aspect of the people and it is in abstract form.⁵⁰ In the strict sense of term, *Donyi* was treated neither as a creator nor as supreme power, at least in the beginning but with her consistent benevolent gesture upon the human race, the man started realizing the inevitable nature of *Donyi*. The belief that *Donyi-Polo* watches all creatures living and non-living in the universe and no one can escape from her sight has evolved a strong spiritual sense that *Donyi-Polo* is the supreme power on this universe. But interestingly people do not profess or worship *Donyi-Polo* separately in pomp and show manner. However, among the Nyishi tribes, during *Yulow* ceremony a ritual structure called *Sii-Donyi Weyi Yuganga* (altar) is erected, where a fowl is sacrificed to symbolize the worship of *Donyi Polo*. Verrier Elwin, described *Donyi-Polo* in the following ways :

“Although this August being does not seem to have created the world, he reigns unchallenged in the heaven; he is the eye of the world; he is important to man as the eye is to the body. He watches everything; he is witness of truth; he shows man the way to go; he protects them; he treats them with money. Above all, he is the lord of truth and an oath taken on his name is the most binding of all. Though he is not offered special sacrifices, for he does not need them, his name is invoked on every ritual occasion” (Elwin 1988: 211).

Gender of 'Donyi-Polo'- Regarding the gender of *Donyi-Polo*, it is still a subject of confusion among the people. Some consider it as male (as Elwin did), while others consider it as a female and still others treat it as divine being having common gender. But traditionally the term *Donyi* (Sun) is regarded as female while *Polo* (moon) is

⁵⁰ Oshong, Ering in *ibid*, pp.123.

treated as male⁵¹. In ordinary sense, they can be called as a couple. In the myths of the *Tani* group of people there are many instances when *Ane or*⁵² *Abu*⁵³ (mother or father) *Donyi* has helped and rescued *Abotani* (ancestor of the *Tani* group of people) during his difficulties.

Thus, the Sun and the Moon are traditionally established symbols of faith for the *Tani*'s of Arunachal Pradesh. *Donyi-Polo* is an evolutionary outcome for the adherents, based on nature. The Sun and the Moon are natural objects and so, they stand as logical symbols of traditional faith. Having been unable to see the supreme power the adherents of *Donyi Poloism*, take the Sun(*Donyi*) and Moon(*Polo*) as the representatives of the supreme being in material life which exercises all its power and authority.

Therefore, it would not be wrong to deduce that, the adherents of *Donyi-Polo*, evolved their own religious beliefs and practices in their search for adjustment with nature.

Philosophies and Doctrines of 'Donyi-Polo' faith

The spiritual and philosophical doctrines of *Donyi-Polo* faith are⁵⁴:

- It is the supreme governing power of the universe.
- It is the ever probing power which is almighty, omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent
- It is the supreme judge of highest court of law of eternal
- It is the source of all life and energy of living beings.
- It is the divine light, wisdom and knowledge, truth and brotherhood.

⁵¹ Nabam, T.R., 2005. Emerging Religious Identities of Arunachal Pradesh. New Delhi, Mittal Publication, pp. 127.

⁵² 'Or' has been used since the gender of *Donyi-Polo* is controversial and is varied among the different tribes.

⁵³ 'Ane' means *Mother* and 'Abu' means *Father* in the local dialect of the *Tani* group.

⁵⁴ Rukbo, Talom in Behera, M.C and Chaudhuri, S.K., 1998. Indigenous Faith and Practices of the Tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Itanagar, Himalayan Publishers, pp. 58,59

In addition to these doctrines, the adherents also attributes the following virtues on '*Donyi- Polo*', Talom Rukbo an active Socio-religious reformer and championer of the Donyi-Polo faith points out :

“All living and non-living objects are the creation of *Donyi-Polo*. Purity, openness, truthfulness, love, peaceful co-existence are eternal laws. Right, Justice, kindness are path to Donyi Polo. Equality, fraternity, self-respect, and self-reliance are the qualities and qualification of Donyi-Polo faith. Mercy, apology with understanding are divine qualities of Donyi-polo faith. Theft, lies, hatred are against Donyi-Polo faith and therefore they are sins” (Rukbo 1998: 58,59).

Thus, the philosophical aspect of *Donyi-Polo* can be traced by analyzing the importance attached in regards to the behavior, conduct, expression and various traditional myths and legends of the people who adhere to it. They believe this searching and piercing eternal eyes watch the human ceaselessly. These eyes are represented through the Sun and the moon for common or layman. Ering Oshong writes, “ As the two object in the sky focus light to enable us to see what is what, the eyes of conscience, i.e. *Donyi-Polo* illuminate our mind to identify what is wrong and right.....Human being may not punish another fellow being, but Donyi-Polo imposes a psychological pressure on wrong doers. A person, after committing a theft may pretend to be happy but in reality he/she is not a happy one” (Behera and Chaudhuri 1998: 50). Thus, the right conscience guides a man all the time and so they generally abstain themselves from committing crime or wrong.

'Donyi-Polo' an abstraction- Fundamentally, by *Donyi-Polo*, the tradition conceives of truth, for the adherents, *Donyi-Polo* is the purest of the pure, wisest of the wise and greatest of the great. *Donyi-Polo* is a commonly used term among the people. In the village council, social gathering, public meeting and individual discussion, one will hear them pronouncing *Donyi-Polo*. This shows that consciously or unconsciously they adhere to the idea of truthfulness and purity. But at the same time if someone questions them about the meaning and concept of *Donyi-Polo* they become puzzled. In fact, in the midst of innumerable traditional myths and belief in the benevolent and malevolent gods and goddesses, it becomes somewhat difficult for them to answer in a convincing manner. As the tradition in these societies have been handed down orally, common people become perplexed. Nevertheless, they say that '*Donyi-Polo*'

means truthfulness. Beyond this, they are very vague. Levi-Strauss's analysis of conscious and unconscious models, which emphasizes on looking beyond the actor's model of society is relevant here, as there are "principles of organization which are not visible and often unconscious", "in the structure of society there are underlying principles which operate, which are real though they may be unobservable and unconscious" (Levi-Strauss 1963: 282). Similarly, Robert Merton provides a distinction between manifest and latent functions; "the first referring to those objective consequences for a specific unit (person, sub-group, social or cultural system) which contribute to its adjustment or adaptation and were so intended; the second referring to unintended and unrecognized consequences of the same order" (Merton 1968: 117). To highlight the example, Merton cites the example of the "Hopi Indian rain ceremony"⁵⁵, this ceremony is rarely followed by rain, yet the Hopi Indians have been performing it. When we view the ceremony from the focus of latent function, then the sociologists realize that the consequences of ceremony exist not in the rain god but for the groups, which conduct the ceremony. This ceremony performs the latent function of reinforcing group identity.

Hence, to interpret '*Donyi-Polo*' one requires familiarity with the oral literature, myths, legends and practices, of the people of Arunachal Pradesh.

Myth: Creation and Evolution

In order to examine the prevailing socio-religious system of the *Tani* society, it is equally important to know the basic knowledge about origin, evolution and genealogy of that society.

According to Eliade, (1964) the myths in general, tells us how something came into being, the world, or man, or an animal species, or a social institution and so on. Eliade holds that mythology is considered a true history; it relates how things came into being, providing the exemplary model and the justification of man's activities. The sacred history is preserved in the great myths. Thus, myths of the sacred history are still alive in many traditional societies. A tribe or a cult will conduct its serious daily affairs in the light of models inherited from the mythological past.

⁵⁵ Merton, Robert. 1968. *Social Theory and Social Structure*. New York, The Free Press, pp. 117, 118.

Levi-Strauss in his “The Structural Study of Myth” (1955) attacked Jung’s interpretation of myths as pre-scientific. According to Levi-Strauss, if the future is to be livable, as the people believe, man must stay in touch with the archaic and unconscious psychic levels. He holds that language, art, marriage, myths are all communication system which have a common structure. Myths for him are narratives made out of language. They, would of course, share in the meaning-giving capacity of language. The wishes expressed in myths are incompatible with the constraints of reality but the myths provide a means of expressing the unconscious paradoxes publicly.

The religious belief of the followers of *Donyi-Polo* faith is lucidly and extensively expressed in their traditional oral literature in the form of myths, legends, folklore of folk culture that is transmitted from generation to generation, though there are slight variations in the versions, amongst the various groups of people belonging to *Tani* group. The myths and the religion of these people depend on memories and oral literature⁵⁶.

3.3 The practice of faith.

By learning the above lights of knowledge of spiritual power of *Donyi-polo*, the believers adopted and applied faithfully practices in their day-to-day life to bring nearer to oneself and seek divine help from Donyi-Polo.

Donyi- Polo as witness of truth- The adherents seek divine help from the almighty Donyi-Polo, to stand as witness of truth, for example, in cases of injustice in respect of dispute and allegation. If a person is fully confident of being non-guilty, he will utter immediately by pointing towards the Sun, “*Ane Donyi Kalanka*” –Meaning, ‘may Donyi Polo punish the liar’. In greater dispute the trial for truth and justice is performed in public gathering and in open field with materials which the these people consider pure and sacred like, egg, chicken, mithun(Bos Fronatlis), tiger’s teeth, snake teeth, water, rice, soil , fire , banana etc, by chanting rituals related to the effective acts of these materials. These practices have been prevailing in their society since

⁵⁶ Pandey, B.B. () Arunachal Pradesh: tribes in transition. Itanagar, Himalayan Publishers, pp.74,75

time immemorial and give moral strength to the minds of people. This is also a kind of worship to Donyi Polo at hard situation⁵⁷.

Belief in Benevolent and malevolent spirits- Another practice of faith of the people is on the benevolent gods/goddesses/deities for good health of humankind, domestic animals, food and grains. These are performed during festival times by worshipping the divine protectors, who the adherents believe look after the mankind in day to day life and so they organize festivals to honour them. There are different rituals for different gods, goddesses and deities in the festivals, for example for the mother goddess beneath the earth, god of domestic animals and household god etc.

The sprawling forest, full of mysterious whispers; generated among these people a feeling of fear of unknown powers that thwarted human will. The people believe that the spirits are everywhere- in the hills, in the rivers and streams, in the trees, on the rocks, in the powers which cannot be ignored, also it is these spirits who will let food grow and let them survive and have happy houses. Evans Pritchard in studying the “Nuer Religion”, found that basic to Nuer religious thinking was the concept of supreme god as the creator, unseen, disembodied and universal and also of a vast range of spirits inhabiting the world. Among the Nuer, Evans Pritchard mentions, there was systematizing of all experiences in terms of spirits, which seems to have made magical thinking unnecessary⁵⁸. In the case of Arunachalees, they believe that these spirits have to be kept appeased for their support. The evil ones are “to be purchased” on terms dictated by them and, as interpreted by the priests. The Guardian spirits of houses, clan, villages, fields, crops, cattle, game, wealth and all that constitute well being are also kept in their favourable moods by periodical observance which provide occasions for seasonal rejoicing and feasting. The highest gods are remembered with due respect but left unworshipped because they do not need them. The human soul stands close to the lesser spirits, easily wronged and vengeful if not suitably honoured and entertained after death.

⁵⁷ Rukbo, Talom in Behera ,M.C. and Chaudhuri,S.K., 1998. Indigenous Faith and Practices of the Tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Itanagar, Himalayan Publishers, pp.60.

⁵⁸ Evans Pritchard. 1956. Nuer Religion. New York, Oxford University Press.

Priesthood and the role of Priests.

In the Arunachalee society (among *Tani* group), priest offers himself as a liaison between the human beings and the world of unseen powers. J. N. Chowdhury writes⁵⁹ “they are shamans par excellence with the knowledge and power of negotiating with the spirit world. Their services are sought after during sickness or other misfortunes, when they prescribe the necessary rites or sacrifices for propitiating the inimical or orams”. Among the Tani groups of people the priest plays a vital and multi-faceted role. When a person is ill he is called for diagnosis; he is consulted to save crops from damages and enables the farmer to yield harvest; he ensures the protection of livestock and makes them to thrive; he also ensures the safe journey and assures a comfortable life even when a person departs from this world; he forecast lives impending disasters and averts them; and above all, he has been the refuge, the solace to the people living in the darkness of evils surrounding them. Levi- Strauss in his essay, “The Sorcerer and magic”, suggest that if the relevant community believes in the power of the sorcerer it is true, who counts as a shaman, doctor, patient depends on group consensus, belief by the community, consensus, may contribute to producing belief in the individual patient. It is believed “certainly the sorcerer/shaman maintains an intimate relationship with the forces of the supernatural and thus sorcerer’s are believed to possess supernatural power” (Levi- Strauss 1963: 175,176). Emphasizing on these aspects he has examined the role of shamans in healing, among the Kwakiutl Indians and the Zuni of New Mexico⁶⁰. Eliade in the analysis of shamans argues that shamans have played an essential role in the defense of the “psychic integrity”⁶¹ of the community. It is hard for us to imagine what such shamanism can represent for an archaic society. In addition to the gods and supernatural beings to whom prayers and sacrifices are addressed, there are “specialists in the sacred”, men able to “see” the spirits, to go up into the sky and meet the gods, to descend to the netherworld and fight the demons, sickness, and death. It is difficult for us, modern men, to imagine the repercussions of such a spectacle in a “primitive” community. The shamanic “miracles” not only confirm and reinforce the pattern of the traditional religion, they

⁵⁹ Chowdhury, J.N., 1971. Arunachal Panorama, Directorate of Research, Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh. Shillong, pp. 142.

⁶⁰ Levi-Strauss. 1963. Structural Anthropology. New York, London, Basic Books, INC, pp, 175-180.

⁶¹ Eliade, Mircea. 1961. Recent works on Shamanism. History of Religions, Vol.1, No.1, pp.152-186.

also stimulate and feed the imagination, demolish the barriers between dreams and present reality, open windows upon worlds inhabited by the gods, the dead, and the spirits (Eliade 1986:186). Unlike, among the world's religious traditions where a whole variety of institution, training and initiation for work as a priest exist, in the Arunachalee society, a priest is neither inherited or appointed nor imparted any formal training. He is inborn and has imbibed himself a divine vision to become a priest⁶². A priest carries out his service through various modes and methods of divination, which are spiritually evolved out of conventions and practices. A priest is also decided well before the birth of a child. In this light, T.R. Nabam writes, "With the guiding spirit (for example, *Chene Wey Among Nyishis*), a person, brings up enthusiastically on the lines of priesthood. When a person becomes mature enough, he will see typical dreams relating to the life and work of the priest. A prospective priest shall perform an appropriate ritual; with this, he enlightens himself and achieves the miraculous power to heal and cure the sick person thorough different processes" (Nabam 2005: 29). There are different categories into which the priests are grouped, on the basis of their dealing with spirits, i.e, **ordinary ailments**; the ones who deal with the **highest order of rituals or sacrifices** and finally those gifted with **extraordinary spiritual power**, who could predict impending dangers, cure epidemics, detect theft, heals fractured bones, cures dog and snake bites etc. However, in most of the 'tribes' the women do not become priest.

In the strict sense of term the Priests in these societies do not occupy distinguished position in society, as there is no separate class or status form for them. The priest do not belong to a separate class. They belong to the community and have spiritual talent, which the people believe is grafted in them by the spirits, usually departed ancestral souls who had been priests

But it is by virtue of their indispensable and yeoman services, because of which they are always honored, respected and acknowledged in the society. In almost every major rituals or festival ceremonies, the priest solemnize the rituals..

The priest above all is the custodian of the communal ethos. He preserves the lore and the philosophy, which directs the life and action of his community, which are to be

⁶² Nabam, T.R., 2005. Emerging Religious Identities of Arunachal Pradesh. New Delhi, Mittal Publication, pp.29.

found in hymns and prayers he has kept alive in his memory and attending the rituals in practice. His technique may appear irrational and unintelligible to the modern people. But each one of his actions, gestures and movements has its basis in the philosophy of life for the followers of Donyi-Polo faith. Being what he is, the priest cannot be entirely artificially trained in his profession. "His teachers are the spirits themselves and they only can make one priest. In this sense the priests are like born poets who are not made by human beings" (Pandey 1999: 76). In these communities of Arunachal Pradesh, the priesthood is an individual achievement and not an organized institution. The priestly gift is an additional acquirement, which does not take him off his occupation as a cultivator of agriculture. He is just one of them in every respect except when he officiates in his special callings, during such occasions; he has special dress, special equipments, a special position and a special share in food and drink.

Rites, Rituals and Community Participation

Propitiation of Spirits- The spirits and guardians, malevolent and benevolent, are important parts of religion among the *Tani* community. Agriculture being the most important of human occupations for foods, the rites are performed to the guardians of agriculture. Every stage of the cultivation circle is presided over by the deity to whom one has to be grateful for bountiful and unhampered growth of the seed. Most of the festivals are concentrated on rites. Cattles have been an important item of wealth in their society. All the domestic animals have their own deities, which have to be worshipped with food and wine.

Other aspects of a human's life, such as illness, accidents, epidemics, ill fortune etc have specified rites which are performed by the priest in accordance with divination. In all worships, small or big, communal or individual, sacrifices become an important part of rite. The animal sacrifices vary from chicken to a '*Mithun*' (*bos frontalis*) to appease spirits, which depend upon the economic condition and status of the person concerned. Ritual purity has not been conspicuous in the performance, though some abstinence and restraints are put on the priests and the performers. Generally the participants are treated with meat and drink (local beer, made out of rice) which are parts of a feast. The young and the more hilarious of the grown-up persons are

engaged in songs and dances, while the priest continues chanting the lengthy texts, wherein a few devoted and aged participate.

Festivals- In these communities, where life has been an unending chain of rites and rituals to appease the innumerable spirits encompassing and controlling it, a few of these rites and rituals have gained the importance of becoming festivals. The adherents worship various benevolent gods/goddesses and deities in the festival for the good health of mankind and domestic animals with the belief that these benevolent god/goddesses and deities are representatives of *Donyi-Polo*. For example, *Nyishi's* (a tribe of Arunachal Pradesh) celebrate *Nyokum Festival*, the annual festival in the month of February to propitiate deities, which continue for many days with songs, dances, merry-making and entertainment. The *Apatanis* perform the festivals like *Murum, Myoko and Dree, Mopin and Solung of the Galos and the Adis* of Arunachal Pradesh. The festivals are marked with greater emphasis on rejoicing and gaiety, which also includes a day of worship and sacrifice. The deity gets his share of the offerings of the sacrifice and the beer that are feasted upon in the festival.

Among the various groups, the ritual practices may vary from one community to another, but essentially, there dwells uniformity in spirit behind festivals and rituals, *Mopin of the Galo* may be different from *Nyokum of Nyishi* or *Dree of Apatani*, but the underlying spirit in all these festivals, for example, is human prosperity.

Appeasement of the evil Spirits- Another important aspect of the indigenous practice of faith among the people of Arunachal Pradesh is the system in which evil spirits are worshipped so as not to attack humans. In these systems, the priest plays the commanding role and performs all worship for the ill person. After detecting the intruding evil spirit the priest will advise the family of the patient to kill costly animals like *mithun*, pig, dog and chicken to offer to the intruding spirit and prescribe taboos for months together. Here several green leaves, woods and bamboos are used for erecting of image of evil spirit and with these rice, '*Apong*' (local beer) in liquid form, soft ginger and blood of sacrificed animals are offered to quench the thirst of evil spirit by chanting rituals⁶³. "It is observed that every material is treated as living

⁶³ Rukbo, Talom, Article in Chaudhury and Behera. 1998. Indigenous Faith and Practices of the Tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Itanagar, Himalayan Publishers, pp. 67

being because the power and energy they carry is still alive according to traditional faith”(Behera and Chaudhuri 1988: 71). Therefore, every material is personified.

Rituals and Sacrifices- Rituals and sacrifices are the essential elements of tribal society. Both are complimentary in nature, because there cannot be a ritual without sacrifice and vice-versa. T.R. Nabam in the context of the Nyishi tribes maintain that “in simple term, ritual is a process of identification and negotiation with the aggrieved deity or spirit, while sacrifice is the final agreement between the two” (Nabam 2005: 31). In each ritual followed by the adherents of *Donyi-Polo*, there are elements of invocation, persuasion and petition followed by offering of sacrifices. The sacrifice of all nature are made in terms of domesticated animals such as *Mithun*, cow, pig, goat, fowl, ritual, egg, dog etc, depending on the demand and liking of the concerned deity or spirit. The adherents trace the origin of this process from the days of *Abotani* (ancestor of the *Tani people*).

Mode, method and duration of any ritual and sacrifice are entirely dependent upon the desire of the concerned deity or spirits that are invariably indicted in the omen examination. For instance, the *Nyishi tribes* never intend to kill elephants, tiger and such animals, as they believe that killing any of them is equivalent to kill a man. Both elephants and Tigers are believed to be dread evil spirits, hence one who kills these animals has to undertake a series of rituals and sacrifices, followed by strenuous and complicated taboos⁶⁴. Ritual and sacrifice has become a part and parcel of the followers of *Donyi Polo* faith, which is encompassed with numerous belief system, faiths and practices. It starts from the birth of a child and goes on until the death. But even after death, the living members continue to worship their ancestors. There is a strong belief that if the ancestors are not worshipped up to their satisfaction, they may curse the living members who eventually suffer. Generally, *mithun* is sacrificed after an appropriate ritual in the name of dead person during the burial of dead body.

Taboos

The word ‘taboo’ denotes prohibition, which could mean a forbidden activity, something that is not permitted, something that stands against social approval and is

⁶⁴ Nabam, T.R., 2005. *Emerging Religious Identities of Arunachal Pradesh*. New Delhi, Mittal Publication, Pp. 32,33.

also disallowed by religious norms of a given society and in the present study it implies ritual prohibition on certain activities. The taboos extends into all the aspects of human life and always acts as a restraining force for physical actions and mental desire. According to the traditions of the people of Arunachalee society, taboos are of two types⁶⁵ i.e, the conventional or customary taboos and the taboos are pronounced by the priests. Here, in these societies a taboo is an integral part of every ritual and sacrifice without which it is treated as incomplete. After solemnization, the priest pronounces restrictions to be strictly observed by all the concerned, the negligence of which will tantamount to the relapse of the problem. For instance, the movement of a patient is restricted for specific days depending on the nature of ritual involved. His food is drastically reduced as he is permitted to take only a few items. The restricted items most often include green chilly, raw vegetable, pumpkin, cucumber, root, fruit, certain meats etc. After a considerable time these restrictions are lifted, again through a ritual. The days of prohibition are determined by the nature and seriousness of the event or incident. For example, if there is a death of old and prominent person in the village, the prohibition days could be stretched from three to five days consequently; whereas for the death of minor or grown up children it could be a day only.

3.4 'Tribal Religion' under NEFA Administration

The NEFA administration (of which Arunachal Pradesh was a part of, previously) designed its administrative policies based on Pt. Nehru's famous '*Panchsheel*', the five principles under it, envisaged that tribals should be allowed to "develop along the lines of their own genius'. The policy makers understood that the tribal religion has its own beauty, which needed to be guarded zealously and promoted, if necessary. The Administration, Dr. Elwin believed, should observe a policy of strict religious neutrality and would not impose even tribal religion on those who do not want it⁶⁶.

Dr. Elwin's 'four mantras' gives a glimpse of the past administrative policy towards the religious culture of Arunachal Pradesh. These are,

⁶⁵ Ibid, pp. 34,36.

⁶⁶ Bath, Nani. 2006, (Art.) Understanding Religious Policy of Arunachal Pradesh , Dialogue, Vol. 7, No.3, Jan-March, pp.120-129.

- *“The officials and social workers should study and try to understand the religion of the areas where he lives. This is not only a fascinating pastime but, if it is done with tact and sincerity, this will in itself help to encourage the tribal people in their faith.*
- *They should extend to tribal religion that attitude of sincere respect which we are trying to give to tribal life and institutions generally. He should never on any account criticize or laugh at any tribal ceremony or belief.*
- *He should be very careful about how he talks and the words he uses. We should not speak of ‘animism’ but of ‘Wancho religion’ or the ‘Adi religion’. Which will suggest that the tribal faith has for its adherents just as much authority and dignity as the faith of the outside world.*
- *Whenever we refer to the supreme Being, or administer oaths, we should use the local name. Some simple prayers might be used in the local languages” (Elwin 1969: 216).*

Thus, Verrier Elwin had been far sighted in recognizing the true nature of the ‘tribal’ religion of the people of Arunachal Pradesh and gave it the due recognition it deserved, by recognizing the inherent system of logic in the belief system that can be understood only from the native’s point of view, which might on the outside look irrational and irrelevant to outsiders, but the very religion, provides a working way of life and explanation to its adherents.

In November 1963, the Adviser to the Governor wrote to all Political Officers, outlining the general policy of the Administration with regard to religion. The main points emphasized are⁶⁷: “India being a secular democratic state, the officers of the Government are expected to be strictly neutral in their approach to religious questions concerning the people within their jurisdiction”. The letter indicated that the activities of propagandists of any religion are undesirable in NEFA. All the Political officers were directed that land for building religious institutions should be given only with previous sanction of the Local Administration. An understanding of the Policy followed by the NEFA Administration with regard to religion suggests that it had

⁶⁷ Elwin, Verrier, Shastri, B, and Simon. 1967. Important Directives on Administration of NEFA. Shillong, Pp. 209-210.

been actively influenced by Nehru-Elwin's 'A Philosophy for NEFA'. The policy intended to restrict the missionary activities of Christian missionaries. It was necessary, as it was a question of survival of the cultures of the people here that they intended to address. The administrators during those days, who were greatly influenced by Pt. Nehru's thoughts and ideas, were determined to protect the tribal culture from outside influences. It was thought that any external influences would corrupt the minds of innocent tribals.

In addition, the Administration initiated several steps to promote the essence of tribal religion and culture. Cultural aspects of various tribal groups were highlighted in school textbooks. The textbooks at primary and secondary standards contained chapters on customs, traditions and other cultural traits⁶⁸.

Hence a close study of the Past policy of the Government of India, shows that, the Government of independent India, under the dictum of 'Nehruvian model' of development, followed a policy based on protective measure, cautiously and carefully, in the erstwhile NEFA, now Arunachal Pradesh with a view to safeguard the 'tribals' and their distinct culture from sudden exposure to the outsiders.

3.5 New Religious Movement and Identity

If we look at the contemporary tribal situation of Arunachal Pradesh there is no doubt that, the societies have undergone spectacular changes in the past few decades. These changes can be attributed to the stage of absolute isolation in the past to consolidation for administration, which has extended to this part of India, educational development, development of roads and communication and economic developments in the post independence phase.

With the advent of modernity, changing world view, increasing opportunities in almost every aspects and its tremendous impact on the society, obviously many of the indigenous belief systems, faiths and practices are now getting eroded. The changes are visible not only in materialistic viewpoint but also in moral and spiritual aspects. This is inevitable in accordance with the emerging wider context within which 'tribal' societies interact with each other and the world outside. The Slogan 'loss of culture is

⁶⁸ Ibid, Pp. 209-210

loss of identity' perhaps visualize the dilemma that the present generation is facing, since often these younger generation refuses to attend religious ceremonies conducted during festivals because of influence of an alien culture.

As a sequel to it, various forms of revivalist or reformist movements have surfaced and as an extension of such process, indigenous faiths and practices have created a new cultural space for the people⁶⁹. There are many elements in the traditional customs, rituals and practices that are inconsistent with the modern day of life. But, this is also true to most of the religion in the world that have passed through successive reform movements initiated by great men and thinkers. Like any other system the faith and belief system of the followers of '*Donyi-Poloism*' is not a static one and naturally it goes on changing either by incorporating some new elements or by relinquishing older ones or through the combination of both the processes. Recently, in the state there are organized efforts in search of *Donyi-Polo* faith in the indigenous *Tani* tradition. The *Donyi-Polo* faith of the *Tani* group has evolved and remains the guiding force for their socio-cultural life. The activists, are hopeful of building up a new society to attain new era of the contemporary scientific age through revolutionary spirit and activities without losing the basic identity of traditional faith and practices transcended through the forefathers.

Dilemmas in the traditional Donyi-Polo Faith

In the *traditional Donyi- Polo faith*, there are certain dilemmas, and inconsistencies in addition to originally being an abstract form of faith system rather than an institutionalized religion. For example, the priest never mentions a word about *Donyi-Polo* and all the rituals are chanted in the 'classical language'(i.e in the words which are not ordinarily used in daily lives, so is comprehensible to the older people only) , which cannot be followed by the present generation, therefore, there is a diminishing tendency of its use in the society. Particularly, the educated people take it as obsolete. It may be observed that some people believe and have faith on *Donyi-Polo* in their inner being, but due to lack of ritual expression of their faith on *Donyi-Polo*, many people take the *Donyi-Polo* faith as a concept only and not as a faith. This is so because there is no regular prayer, or no physical representation or iconography and

⁶⁹ Chaudhury and Behera. 1998. *Indigenous Faith and Practices of the Tribes of Arunachal Pradesh*. Itanagar, Himalayan Publisher, pp.ii.

other forms of communication with Donyi-Polo under the traditional system of faith and practice. There is no written code of moral conduct and social discipline to bind the people together in a wholesome way. There is mere belief, but no behavior, there is mere conviction, but no conduct, there is mere faith, but no functioning activities. Hence, the question that arise is how to improve these faith and practices to a standard form for preservation is the question now? And this is the very issue, that the activist and reformers are addressing so that the *Donyi-Poloism*, becomes acceptable to the people and appear not simple as an abstraction.

From abstraction to institutionalization

The *Donyi -Polo* religion is undergoing reformations. Some of the intellectuals from among the *Tani* group, started developing new religious movements, to defend their indigenous belief system. The launching of various movements are the offshoot of such effort. Through these movement, consistent efforts are being made to transform the existing religious practices to a more viable and institutional one. Hence to deal with dilemmas in the Traditional *Donyi-Polo Faith*, various movements and assertion of *Donyi-polo* identity has begun in the state in the late 1980's and early 1990's. For instance, there is inculcation of the cult of *Donyi-Polo* symbolizing the sun and the moon, example *Donyi-polo Dere(gathering hall)* at *Along town* and the logo inscribed 'All mighty sun' is used in many of the newly created Donyi-Polo worship centres. Among the *Adis*, Late Talom Rukbo was an icon for promotion and propagation of Donyi-Polo as an Indegenous religion of people. He has taken this religion to the World Religious Body and got it registered in the international Association for Religious Freedom(AFR) in the year 1981. In fact, Talom Ruko has given a practical shape to the *Donyi-Polo* faith. Under his guidance, logical modes and methods of worshipping *Donyi-Polo* have been developed and numerous literatures to this effect have also been published. However, many of the faiths and practices where actually the *Donyi-Polo* faith lies are being denounced as superstitious. These customs and practices are inconsistent to the present day world whether scientific tamper reins the minds of the people. Thus, reinterpretation and redefining of traditional practices in tune with the changing reality of life are imminent. While pointing out this aspect, late Talom Rukbo (active propagandist of *Donyi-Poloism*) compared the stages of indigenous faith and belief with the biblical notion of "old Testament and new Testament". According to Rukbo, traditional belief system is an Old Testament while

the modified or changed one will be a New Testament. Also “Now the society needs a new Testament of faith and practices and to achieve it we need a revolutionary type of reformative action with modification and rectification, and organization to dig out the vital things. To do it, the society needs practice of spiritual aspiration and salvation” (Rukbo 1998: 71,72). Rukbo along with his followers advocated the need to give up necessary practices like animal sacrifice, taboo and worship to evil spirit. They believe, there is no purification of heart, peace and strengthening of mentality but full of dark and superstitious. To bring peace, confidence and strength in the mind, they advocate a system of direct communication to *Donyi-Polo*. The activist of *Donyi-Poloism* have tried to ensure that, there is no doubt that *Donyi-Polo* has come to stay as an indigenous religion, because it has a deep rooted socio-religious philosophy, which is vital living force to guide the people towards the spiritual destiny.

In the case of Arunachal Pradesh, we would find that when it adopts a new system of beliefs and faiths, due to both internal and external forces, its original practices and faiths do not die away altogether. Infact the new system that emerged, in course of time, accommodated features of the traditional and new faiths and hence exists as a synthesis of the these various elements.

Rediscovery of Traditional Practice

To preserve the identity of traditional practices, the various organizations like *Donyi Polo Mission*, *Yelam Kebang*, *Nyedat Namlo*, has collected all kinds of traditional rituals of different occasions, as they exist. All rituals are recorded in the precious classical language. Many rituals are modified to fit a particular occasion. All religious materials with their rituals are recorded and books on them published and used in performance of rites for ill men and women. To remove the fear of evil spirit from the minds of the common people religious books are published⁷⁰. With the new practices of faith, like publication of religious books, pamphlets, institutionalization(setting up of worship centers), form of direct worship of *Donyi-Polo*, and rejection of old superstitious practices(like animal sacrifices) is developed gradually and people have accepted almighty *Donyi-Polo* as the central figure of faith.

⁷⁰ Rukbo, Talam in Chaudhury and Behera. 1998. Indigenous Faith and Practices of the Tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Itanagar, Himalayan Publisher, pp. 73.

The activists who are actively championing the cause of reformation, preservation and promotion of Donyi-polo faith argue that they are trying to build up a new society to attain a new era of the present scientific age through revolutionary spirit and activities without losing the basic identity of traditional faith and practices of the their forefathers.

Attempts are being made to make things intelligible; otherwise, traditional beauty they think will remain hidden. Some intellectual groups of people of the present generation are attracted by the beauty of traditional culture. These people are taking interest in reviving, preserving, maintaining and developing the traditional faith and culture of the *Donyi-Polo* in various ways , for example, some organizations are coming up in the name of Donyi-Polo now-a days. There had been no organization and organized move to carry on the message of Donyi-Polo traditionally. As, a result, Donyi-Polo was almost buried in oblivion. Infiltration of modern ideas and ideologies are creeping in fast in the minds of the people of Arunachal Pradesh. These organizations realized that, adoption of foreign ideas, practices, images and symbols of faith may ultimately cripple the traditional freshness of culture. Hence, the various movements, organizations , are trying to reinforce and assert that, the Sun and the Moon are traditionally established symbols for their faith. It is in the fitness of these things that the *Donyi Polo Mission* is organizing a study circle on traditional faith and culture of the tribes . Similarly, with the spirit of achieving a new Testament of faith and practice, the educated youth of various communities have established religious organisation like *Donyipolo Yelam Kebang, Nyedar Namlo etc*, under the guidance of cultural and Literary societies of the communities in the state. Among the *Nyishis (a tribal community of Arunachal pradesh)*, the revival of faith in Donyi-Polo practically began from the early part of 1990's. The increasing trend of Christian converts among the people and subsequent erosion of the indigenous customs and practices have created concern for like-minded people. Indifferent attitude on the part of some people towards the age-old culture and tradition, thereby imminent possibility of losing it, necessitated the urgency of reviving and promoting the indigenous systems of Organizations such as '*Tani Jaagriti, Arunachal Pradesh Priests Association, Nyishi culture society etc*. sprang up in these years whose main thrust was to preserve and promote the indigenous customs and traditions of the community. Need for the revival of faith and culture was urgently felt by the people and for that a formal forum

was required to carry out the movement. The various, *Indigenous faith and cultural Society* in the state, aims at preserving, promoting and popularizing the age-old customs, traditions, faiths and practices. It also aims at reforming through necessary changes and modifications without undermining the value system of those traditions and culture. The motto is to “ preserve promote, and propagate indigenous faith and culture’ and the instilling slogan like ‘*loss of faith is loss of culture, loss of culture is loss of identity*’,” (Nabam 2005: 25). With the formation of these societies a new twist was given to the revivalist movements. A need for formal teaching and preaching was urgently and inevitably felt among the people, as people were in a fix as to what exactly would be so-called ‘indigenous religion’.

Change is an inevitable law of nature: Arunachal Pradesh is no exception to this rule. The winds of change is also slowly blowing over this land of rising sun, but the change here is carefully guided one so that the people are not completely uprooted from their traditional cultural milieu, in conformity with the age old tradition of the people.

Conclusion

In general, the, the ‘tribal’ way of life is holistic one; there is integration of social, economic, and religious institutions. The intellectuals among the *Tani* group of people of Arunachal Pradesh have perceived threat from alien religions especially from Christianity and Hinduism. Therefore, they are seeking their identity from tradition through an indigenous religious movement. Attempts have been made among these groups to reinterpret their religious traditions and in the process certain practices were sought to be eliminated and certain practices were selected, thus giving birth to invention of certain new forms. This process has led to selection and rejection of certain elements and at the same time adaptation from the other religions, particularly, Hinduism. New developments in the state along with the onslaught of other religions like Christianity and Hinduism, to which a large number of Arunachalee people have converted to, would be the area of study in the next chapter. The chapter would also deal with the resulting changes in their socio-cultural practices due to the onslaught of the new religions; the reaction of the followers of indigenous faith *Donyi-Poloism* in the state and lastly, on the forging of religious identity based on indigenous religion in the state.

Chapter 4

Emerging Religious Trends

Outline of the Chapter

Having discussed in detail in the previous chapters, the *Donyi –Polo* system of Faith, which is indigenous to the ‘*Tani*’ group of people in Arunachal Pradesh, which gradually got institutionalized as a result of various factors. In the following chapter, my attempt would be study the recent activities and trends that have come about in the state in the realm of religion and culture. It proposes to study the onslaught of Christianity among some sections of the population, who had previously been adherents of *Donyi-Poloism*. Within this, I have tried to understand, the modes, motivations and meanings of conversion to Christianity. Further, it also looks at the influence of Hinduism in re-emergence of *Donyi-Poloism*. Secondly, my analysis would also try to understand the relation between religion and culture among the people of Arunachal Pradesh i.e. to say -does the change in religious adherence, result in corresponding changes in cultural way of life?

4.1 Introduction

The indigenous people of Arunachal Pradesh have been maintaining their age-old religious traditions since the time immemorial. A look back at the history shows that the neighboring rulers be it the *Ahoms* (rulers of the ancient North-East India) or British had not dared to interfere and impose outside religions, despite the fact that they had patronized religions in the plains. The reason that the ‘tribals’ of Arunachal Pradesh could be able to preserve their customs, traditions, faiths and practices is mainly because they practically remained separated and were later on put in a state of complete isolation(through the system of ‘inner line regulation’, started by the British in 1873). Even during the initial years of independence, the similar situation prevailed as the government envisaged a policy of ‘protectionism’ towards the people of the then NEFA. However, gradually the changes emerged owing to the developmental activities initiated by the government. This state induced changes brought about an inflow of modernity, modern ideas and also religion which had so far been unknown

to these people, especially Christianity and Hinduism (although a few 'tribes' followed Vaishnavism).

As far as conversion and influence is concerned except Christianity and Hinduism other religious communities are practically negligible and are unknown to the people in the case of Arunachalee society. Both the communities have been accusing and blaming each other of destroying and endangering the indigenous faith and belief system. In the case of the Christians, there is direct conversion and the converts generally cease to perform the traditional rituals, sacrifices, faith and practices. In this way, they are identifiable and thus have separate religious identity. 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 whereas Hinduism is an Indigenous religion or Indian religion. However viewed very objectively one needs to understand that, neither Christianity nor Hinduism has ever been indigenous religion for the nature worshippers of the Arunachal Pradesh. Hence, both of these religion are equally alien to the indigenous people. The only difference is that earlier the government had favorable and encouraging attitude towards Hinduism and allowed its missionaries to carry out their activities in the state while on the other hand the entry of Christian missionaries was almost banned. Due to this discrimination, Christian Missionaries came very late in Arunachal Pradesh, despite its praiseworthy role especially in education and health care in several neighboring states in education and health care in several neighboring states including Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram, etc.

Conversion doesn't necessarily imply that a converted community would radically and completely overthrow its earlier moorings. "Societies do not give up their old ways and models in an radical manner. Rather change comes about gradually and selectively. The new is perceived through and integrated with the old" (Robinson 1998: 17).

In studying the conversion of the people of the Arunachalee society we need to analyze how conversion took place in these society, what were the efforts of the missionaries and the attitudes of the missionaries towards the of the indigenous culture.

One should not assume that all the missionaries are homogenous in their attitudes towards local cultures and traditions. In some cases they may be tolerant of them and in others they make every effort to eradicate them. Even in the former case, it could vary, as every aspect of the existing culture is not tolerated. It is also rare that missionaries seek conversion only in terms of change in religious beliefs or dogmas; often they also demand from the converts outward manifestations of this change in terms of a transformation in cultural practices.

Thus, any study of conversion should be viewed, in the light of the reformulation of social relations, cultural experience and personal experience. My study is an attempt to throw light on these aspects and also to understand how in the context of Arunachal Pradesh, incorporation into a larger social order through interaction and contact with the wider society, acts as catalyst for both conversion, as well as reformulation of indigenous religion in terms of Indigenous Faith Movement.

4.2 History of Christianity in North-East India

Milton Sangma in his book *History of American Mission in North-East India (1987)*⁷¹ referred to a chronicle of the Augustine Friars of Bandel in Bengal, which mentioned that in 1682 about 7000 Christians were flourishing in a place called Rangmati in Lower Assam. Hence, we may say that Rangmati was the first place where Christianity entered into North-East Region. Bondashill situated, in Cachher District of Assam was the next place where Christianity could exert influence in the region. The inhabitants who had migrated from Meerut in present U.P. were the Roman Catholics of Portuguese origin and were sent by the Mughals to fight against the British. However, in “1765 when Bengal and Sylhet were brought under the British dominion, these people took refuge in the kingdom of Raja of Cachher where they were allowed to settle in Bondashil” (Becker 1980: 99,103). From the above facts, it is clear that among the foreign missionaries, the Roman Catholics were the first to enter into this region.

However, it was with the foundation of Serampore Mission in 1793 by the Baptist Missionary Society of England, that the missionary activities first set in motion. The

⁷¹ Sangma, Milton. 1987. *History of American Mission in North-East India*. Delhi, Mittal Publication, pp. 15.

Charter Act of 1813 formally permitted the missionaries to preach Gospel in India and it emboldened them to expand their Missionary activities. William Carey who was closely associated with the Serampore Mission, founded the Serampore College in 1818 A.D. The institute soon became a nodal centre for academics as well as missionary works. It was on the suggestion of W.N. Garret, a Judge at Sylhet that Carey was prompted to send one Krishna Chandra Pal, a first Serampore convert to undertake the work of evangelization among the Khasi refugees, who had probably fled from their native hills (present Meghalaya) in order to escape inter-tribal feuds. But despite his fullest effort the mission proved to be short-lived as it could not be able to establish a regular missionary centre and even utterly failed to create enthusiasm among the local people. In 1829 A.D. with the initiations of William Carey and David Scott, the Serampore Mission opened a mission centre at Guwahati (in Assam). James Ray, the first missionary to this mission centre reported in 1830 that he had under his charge twelve interesting youths—three Khasis and nine Garos, and also informed that “many were willing to accept Christianity but could not openly confess due to fear of persecution and social ruin” (Sangma 1987: 21)). But his mission also could not make much headway and later on Ray himself left the missionary works to take up the educational work under the British Government.

In the meantime, the American Baptist Mission Home Board was eagerly looking for a passage to enter China for evangelization. The Government in India was under pressure to impart education and other related services to the people. Hence, they looked upon the missionaries for their works. In 1835, Captain Jenkins invited the American Baptist Mission in Burma to work among the Shans (*'Khamptis' and 'Singhpos' tribes* of Arunachal Pradesh) in upper Assam. While accepting the government invitation, American Baptist Mission sent its two missionary families from Burma mission centre to open mission centre at Sadiya in Upper Assam; on 23rd March 1836 it was set up. The driving motive for the American Baptist Mission to open a centre here was of course not their desire to expand in the North East region but their long cherished desire of entering into Northern Burma and China. Nevertheless with the opening of mission center at Sadiya, a humble beginning was made in both evangelization and education. A few schools were opened but to the surprise of the two missionary families, the Shan populations were negligible and inaccessible too, as many of them treated the Europeans or outsiders as their enemy.

Therefore, their prime purpose of acquainting and evangelizing the Shan tribe could not be materialized.⁷²

Giving up the Shan mission, the American Baptist Mission took up a new mission at lower Assam in 1841 A.D. The non-conducive atmosphere due to the inhospitable behavior of the Shan tribes was the main reason for the abandonment of this mission. The new lower-Assam mission –centre was formally launched on May 24, 1841 at Sibsagar(in Assam) as its headquarters. Mr and Mrs. Berker, who were soon joined by the Brown family and Miles Bronson, operated it. With their joint efforts, a humble beginning was made in the missionary works, especially in the field of education. From the mission centre, the missionaries were sent to different parts of the region for spreading both evangelization as well as education. Thus, the schools were used as an effective medium by the early missionaries. It is important to note that, one of their main thrust areas was the translation of their local languages and the publication as well as circulation of the gospel materials among the people. Gradually the Baptist mission extended mission centers and schools to the tribal hills like Garo hills, Jaintia hills, Khasi hills, Mizo and Manipur hills and later on to the territory of present Arunachal Pradesh.

The Roman Catholic Mission started its work in India since the fifteen century onwards. But, till the nineteenth century this mission had only occasional contact with the north east region. There was no remarkable missionary works prior to 1890 A.D. The official establishment of the Catholic mission in northeast India started with the arrival of Salvation Fathers in 1890.⁷³ The missionary activities gained little momentum with the formal conversion of first Khasi to Catholicism in 1891 A.D. Subsequently the mission centers were established at Shillong(1890), Raling (1892), Shella(1893), Cherapunji(1897) and a number of schools were also established simultaneously.

⁷²Ibid, pp.21.

⁷³ Syiemlieh, David,R., 1990. A brief history of the Catholic Church in Nagaland. Shillong, Vendrane Institute Publication, pp.25

The mission gained strength when it was joined by Fr. Christopher Edmund Beker in 1906 A.D.⁷⁴ He took up the task of opening schools for the local and poor people. But it got momentum again with the arrival of eleven missionaries in January 1992 at Shillong. And, since then Catholic missions entered into a period of stability and expanded its activities throughout the region. Later on a group of Silesians Sisters also arrived and began their significant educational cum medical services for the downtrodden and needy people. After the second World-War and subsequent Indian Independence, the expansion and growth was still rapid and remarkably extended to almost all parts of the region.

Besides the two major denominations, there are many Christian Churches spreading over the region. These Churches include Anglican Church, Seven days Adventists, Revival, Pentecostal, Welsh Calvinist, Presbyterian and also some Churches of indigenous origin like Church of God, Church of God-Ecclesia, Christ National Church, the Assembly of Churches of Jesus Christ, All-in- Christ Church Fellowship and the Unitarian Church.

4.3 Christianity in Arunachal Pradesh

The early Christian contacts with the people of Arunachal Pradesh were basically from two strategic places .i.e, Sadiya and present Lakhimpur, both in present Assam. It has already been mentioned, that the foreign missionaries including the Roman Catholic and American Baptist Mission were primarily looking for a passage to enter into the soils of China and South-East Asia. The Home Board of American Baptist Mission had been a long cherished wish of introducing Christianity among the *Shans* (*refers to the Khampti and Singpho tribes of Arunachal Pradesh*) in North-East and through them to enter into China by inland routes as the sea ports were then closed to the foreigners. However, the ongoing raids and warfare of the rebels of *Khamptis* and *Singhos* were vitiating their maiden attempt of evangelizing and imparting basic education. The impending bleak future of the mission compelled the American Baptist Mission to give up the Shan mission in 1841 and decided to take up the new mission in lower Assam. Prior to the arrival of American Baptist Missionaries in Sadiya, the British Baptist Mission and Serampore Mission were already preaching gospel in

⁷⁴ Snaitang, O.L. , 1993. Christianity and Social Change in North-East India. Shillong, Vendrane Institute, Pp.79.

Lower Assam but without much success. The Roman Catholic missionaries also entered into the hills and had brief contact with the *Adis* and *Mishmis*(tribes of *Arunachal Pradesh*) in 1840 and 1854 respectively. However, the *Mishmis* murdered, cold bloodedly the two French Catholic missionaries namely Father Krick and Father Bourry when the duo was on their way to Tibet.⁷⁵ And so the mission was ended.

The Sadiya missionaries was reopened in 1905 after a gap of about 66 years, with the “new object and purpose of evangelizing the *Miri* and *Abor* tribes” (Sangma 1987: 174, 175). The missionaries brought out a literature on the dictionary of *Abor - Miri* language. The schools were also established for providing education for the *Abor - Miri* language. However, the missionaries could not make much headway primarily because these hills lie inside the inner-line boundary. Nevertheless Rev. John Firth was designated as a first and independent missionary who started the mission centre in 1893 A.D. Soon after the establishment of mission centre at Lakhimpur, John Firth toured entire region. He soon encountered the tribe such as *Daflas*(*Nyishi*), *Miris*, *Abors*(*Adis*), etc who dwell along the foothills and realized that there is a prospect of missionary works among these tribe. Hence, he pleaded the authority to depute separate missionary to them, to which a *Garo*(tribe of *Meghalaya*) young man, Tosin by name was sent in 1898, especially to work among the *Daflas* and the *Miris*⁷⁶. In recognition to John Firth’s contribution, later on Lakhimpur Mission school was named after him as John Firth Mission School. Evenetually, this school had practically become a centre for missionary activities especially in the *Subansiri* belt of *Arunachal Pradesh*.

The spread of Roman Catholic Church among the *Arunachalee* tribes slowly began with the foundation of mission centers/schools along the borders (in Tezpur in 1934 and North Lakhimpur in 1944 A.D of Assam). Despite their consistent attempt to extend their activities towards the *Arunachalee* tribes, the result was not encouraging, maybe because *Arunachal* being a closed territory, the outsiders including the missionaries were not allowed to enter freely. But, gradually their scheme of spreading Christianity gained little success by way of imparting education at mission

⁷⁵ Sangma, Milton. 1987. History of American Mission in North-East India. Delhi, Mittal Publication, pp.176.

⁷⁶ Ibid. pp .144-145.

schools. This process gained momentum after foundation of mission school at *Harmutty*(in Assam) near *Doimukh*(Arunachal Pradesh) in 1977 A.d. Many tribal boys and girls from Arunachal Pradesh flocked into this school as it imparted free education. It was found that besides teaching general subjects, the student's were also taught Christianity and when they came back to their villages they started preaching Christian religion and hence the beginning of Christianity in Arunachal Pradesh.

4.4 The Present position.

As per the latest Census Report of 2001, the Christian population constitutes 18.70 percent of the total population in the state. The percentage of Christian population stands at 29.12 percent of the total tribal population. There was not a single recorded Christian in Arunachal Pradesh in 1951, their numbers rose to 1438 in 1961, and 2593 in 1971; *Tirap* district of Arunachal Pradesh has the highest percentage of Christian population with 49.93 percent⁷⁷. As per 1981 census, those who profess "*other Religion*" constituted 51.60 percent of the population, which came down to 36.22 and 30.70 per cent respectively in 1991 and 2001. Therefore, it wouldn't be wrong to assume that, the data reveals that the Christian population gained its strength mostly by converting those who professed "other Religion" including '*Donyi-Polo*'.

4.5 Christianity among the '*Donyi-Polonians*'

It has been observed that despite the repeated attempt of missionaries for evangelization among the tribals, there was no taker at least in the beginning. Although they received medical assistance, as many of them were prone to different types of diseases, but usually they refrained from formal conversion to Christianity. The early converts believed that god really does the miracles. As per them even the severest nature of illness, where the indigenous mode of treatment and cure through rituals and sacrifices completely failed, were being easily healed and cured with a simple prayer without giving away anything. To cite a few examples⁷⁸, Shri Nabam Taram revealed that, once his elder son fell seriously ill and he was in a state of coma. He could not get any priest at the moment. His wife was crying profusely by seeing

⁷⁷ Statistical Abstract of Arunachal Pradesh, 2004, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, Itanagar.

⁷⁸ Narratives and examples taken from, Nabam, Rikam. 2005, Emerging religious identities of Arunachal Pradesh. Delhi, Mittal Publications.

the son's condition. Somehow, he got one photo of Jesus Christ. He spontaneously uttered, "I heard you can give life to a dead person; I beg you please give life to my son." Suddenly his son started crying. He took his son to a few Christians and after their prayer their son was cured. Subsequently Taram established Church at *Nimte* Village. Another person by name Shri Nabam Poha narrates how his family became the first Christian Family in the area:

"Probably in 1968, my elder brother fell ill seriously. Despite all efforts including taking services of many priests and arranging a number of rituals and sacrifices, his condition persisted. My parents were at loss what to do and what not to do in order to save their son. At that, moment came news from *Dorum Duyi* area that the Christians are effectively giving treatment to all kind of ailments. So, my mother decided to shift my ailing brother to *Sito* village. At *Sito* special prayer was arranged for my brother and within a couple of days, he was completely cured. Since my brother was at his youthful age of around 24 years, he was fully attracted to the new religion. After coming back from *Sito*, he established the Church at our village (*Taw*), the first ever in the region. Subsequently, my second elder brother was sent to John Firth Mission School at North Lakhimpur in Assam".

For many of the Arunachalese, in the beginning spiritual aspect has never been the factor for conversion. Undoubtedly, the economic factor dominated the other reasons. Many people feel burdened with the rituals and sacrifices, that the traditional faith and culture obliges them to perform on various occasion and sickness, throughout life. The majority of people simply cannot afford to sustain this expensive mode of rituals and sacrifices. Some of the early Christians openly revealed that they were more concerned about the expenditure incurred in the rituals and were easily attracted to the new religion, which could serve them free of cost. A few examples of the convert's narratives⁷⁹ bring out this point more clearly. Likha Taba of *Panyu* village under *Ziro-II* area had incurred heavy expenses including *mithun*, pig, fowl, etc. to cure his only son who was in prolonged illness. He heard the news of Christian people curing all types of diseases or ailment. One day he took his ailing son to *Talo* Village for prayer. To his utter surprise, his son was completely cured after a congregation prayer by

⁷⁹ Nabam, Rikam. 2005. *Emerging Religious Identities of Arunachal Pradesh*. New Delhi, Mittal Publication.

Talo Christians. So, he at once decided to embrace Christianity and consequently became the first Christian family of the Village.

Education has undoubtedly played a vital and decisive role in ushering changes in the society. Among the Arunachalese , and especially those who were exposed to other cultures and studied in the Mission schools started questioning the validity of various rituals and sacrifices involving huge expenditure and even to some of the superstitious customs and practices. They found in the new religion an alternative making the costly rituals and sacrifices redundant. Many students studying in the mission schools, when they came back to their villages started preaching the new religion i.e. Christianity and openly denounced the traditional priest centered ritualistic belief system. It may be noted that earlier no missionaries including the indigenous early converts were allowed to propagate Christianity in the region. But, later on, the students of particular communities itself started preaching among their people and through them the outsiders too came for preaching. Hence, gradually Christian population swelled remarkably in many areas.

Understanding the '*Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religious Act, 1978*'.

The missionary activities were restricted to the foothills areas of the state because of Inner Line restriction. *Lohit* and *Subansiri* districts came under the active influence of missionaries as early as in 1950's and sizeable number of tribals were brought into the fold of Christianity. The prostelyzation activities increased greatly thereafter, which alerted the indigenous representatives of Agency Council. The Agency Council was an advisory Body of the Governor.

The Councilors felt the urgency of the situation and urged upon the Government of India to take suitable steps to protect and promote the indigenous faiths of various tribes of the areas.

A resolution to this effect was passed in 1969. In October 1972, the then Pradesh Council passed another resolution, which reads : “ *a person belonging to any indigenous tribal community of Arunachal Pradesh who renounces the traditional belief and or faiths should be deemed to have deserted the community or tribe and to*

*have forfeited all facilities, benefits, and advantages, considerations deriving from his/her being a member of that tribe/community”.*⁸⁰

The Arunachal Pradesh Development -cum -Cultural Convention held at *Pashighat* in 1976 passed a similar resolution requesting the Government of Arunachal Pradesh to take immediate steps to safeguard the indigenous faith and culture of various tribes.

The first elected Legislative Assembly of Arunachal Pradesh in 1978 unanimously adopted a Private Member’s resolution urging upon the Government to take immediate Legislative measures on the basis of the resolutions passed by the then Pradesh Council in 1972. The Assembly passed the Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Bill on the 19th May 1978. It was presented to the then Lt. Governor, K.A.A Raja for his assent.

The Bill was reserved for the consideration of the President of India because of protests from some quarters. Christians resented the passage of this Bill in some of the states of North-East India. Mr. Bakin Pertin, Peoples Party of Arunachal(PPA) leader and Member of Parliament, assisted by some of his Christian friends actively voiced against the bill and serious campaign was launched to persuade the President of India not to give his assent to it. A resolution was passed by some legislators in Meghalaya, pleading the President to withhold the affixing of his signature on the Bill.

P.K. Thungon, the then Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh reacted strongly to those leaders who were attempting to block the passage of the Bill. He took very strong exception to a step taken by the Nagaland Legislative Assembly, considering it as interference in the internal affairs of Arunachal. Thungon reminded that “the Bill was not an infringement upon the Fundamental rights of a person to propagate one’s own religious beliefs nor did it debar voluntary acceptance by individuals of any faith. It simply sought to prohibit, conversion by “force, fraud and inducement” (Nani 2006:124).

The Government of India after considering both positive and negative aspects of the bill and its fallouts decided to return it with suggestions for incorporating certain minor modifications. The Bill in its amended form was passed again on 6th October

⁸⁰ Nani, Bath. (2006). Understanding religious Policy of Arunachal Pradesh. Journal- Dialogue, Vol.7, No. 3, Jan- March, Pp. 120-129.

1978. Finally, the Bill received presidential assent on October 25th 1978. And, became the law of the state which extends to the whole of the territory. “The Act seeks, to prohibit conversion from one religion to any other religious faith forcefully or by inducement or through deceitful means, which is a cognizable offence”⁸¹. The Government of Arunachal Pradesh may make rules for the purpose of carrying out the provisions of this Act.

The persons responsible for conversion of any person from one religious faith to other religious faith shall have to bring to the knowledge of the Deputy Commissioner of the District (to which the new convert belongs), of the act of such conversion. An offence under the Act is cognizable that shall be investigated by an officer to below the rank of an Inspector general.

On the other hand, the Christian fraternity countered the moves of those who favored the Act by giving the issue a political touch. The Arunachal Christian Forum (ACF) termed the Act as “useless Anti-conversion Act” and appealed to the then Chief Minister Gegong Apang to scrap it. The ACF president, Tana Hali had gone to the extent of calling all Christian leaders in the state to resign from BJP if the state government failed to repeal the Act immediately.⁸² An open letter was also sent from Mother Teresa, addressed to the Prime Minister, Morarji Desai and the Parliamentarians, in which she writes, ‘After much prayer and sacrifice, I write to you asking you to face God in prayer, before you take the step which will destroy the joy and the freedom of our people... today all over the country because the very life of freedom of conscience is being touched.’⁸³ She attacked on the biased attitude of the government by saying, ‘Turning to another sad point, I wish to inform that I have been trying to get into Arunachal Pradesh for some time now, but so far I have not succeeded and yet the Ramakrishna mission members are entering freely. We are in 87 places in India. Why are we not with our poor people in Arunachal? (Khan 1979: vii, viii).

⁸¹Ibid, pp. 120-129.

⁸² The Arunachal Times, Dated- 18.04.2004, Itanagar.

⁸³ Rahmutulla Khan, cited in, *The Defenseless Christian Minority in North East India.*, Published by Christian Association of Arunachal Pradesh, 1979; pp.vii-viii

However, the rapid growth of Christian Population within a short period reflects that the Freedom of Religion Act remains an obsolete ornamental piece of legislation. At present, no provision of the Act is seriously followed or implemented. Many feel that the sudden growth of Christian population was because of the non –implementation of “Freedom of Religious Act, 1978” and strongly urged upon the government of Arunachal Pradesh to implement it with utmost sincerity.

4.6 Anti-Christian Activities

The history of Christianity in Arunachal Pradesh is embodied with a series of persecution and denial of rights and privileges. The outsiders and missionaries were not allowed to propagate Christianity in the state until very late. In the beginning, the local converts were also discouraged from propagation of new religion. Instances of persecution and torture to the converts and preachers in the early days are not unheard of. The persecution in one form or the other began since the early part of 1969.⁸⁴ Churches were burnt down in many districts of Arunachal Pradesh, especially in *Siang* and *Tirap* District. In Subansiri district alone a total of 47 churches were burnt down till 1974.⁸⁵ It would be surprising to know that, earlier the *Jawans* of Home Guards (SSB) had carried out the persecution; but later on with the constitution of Panchayat body, the members with the tacit support of the administrators perpetrated the anti-Christian activities. The early converts had been subjected to physical manhandling. They were tortured, punished and also levied fine. “In May 1972, five converts from the *Nyishi* community were captured and put under confinement for about three months at different interior places allegedly by the Panchayat members with tacit support of local administrators. They were neither formally arrested nor charge sheeted nor produced before the magistrate for trial and release. The physical and mental tortures were meted out to them, as they were asked to do against their wish and any sort of contact with their relatives was completely cut off. It was only after their complete exhaustion, they were finally freed on 17th July 1972 that too without any formalities”(Toko, 2002: 20). The year 1977, witnessed the climax of anti-Christian activities. For instance, the plunder and burning down of about 40

⁸⁴ Nabam, T.R., 2005. Emerging Religious Identities of Arunachal Pradesh. New Delhi, Mittal Publication, pp-92.

⁸⁵ Neelam, Taram. 2000. A glimpses into Baptist Churches in Arunachal. Itanaga, Mittal Publication, pp-3.

churches and villages in *Sagalee* sub-Division alone and the outrages on the Christians of other parts of Arunachal Pradesh occurred in this year. Neelam Taram in his book, *A glimpses into Baptist Churches in Arunachal*, gives an account of such tortures and manhandlings meted out to Christian converts; “On 25th April 1974, one Taka Ekha of *Sango* Village under *Sagalee* circle was mercilessly beaten up. He succumbed to his injuries after six days. On 20th July 1974, one Teli Tad from *Khemlee* Village of the same circle was stripped naked and tied on the post upside down in full public view. Interestingly, the local E.A.C (B.Kumar) was also present during this ordeal perpetrated by one Techi Takang, a Zilla Parishad Member from *Sagalee*” (Taram 2000: 3). These are only a few of innumerable instances in which many people were subjected to torture physically and mentally for their only fault of embracing Christianity. “Ironically such injustice, illegal and unconstitutional persecutions were carried out in connivance with some of the Government officers and representatives”(Toko 2002: 88-95). The plunder, torture and harassment had created an anxiety and thus feeling of insecurity mounted among the converts. The converts were forced to denounce the new religion and they were asked to surrender ‘*mithun*’ or other domestic animals in lieu of physical harassment and material destruction. A number of *mithuns* were forcibly taken away from the converts, which were either used in feast or shared among the persecution.

The news of the persecution soon spread to outside Arunachal Pradesh and there were corresponding condemnations from all quarters. But, this did not change the scenario. Persecution continued unchecked. The extent and the quantum of persecution was distorted and the sufferings of the people were not correctly reported.

The mounting pressures from all quarters compelled the government to send Prof. A.K. Kishku, MP, primarily to assess the ground reality and to find out some amicable settlement to the problem. With his arrival at Itanagar, a peace meeting (reconciliation meeting) was convened at *Doimukh* on 6th May 1975 under the Chairmanship of K.A.A. Raja, the then Chief Commissioner. A five point resolution was adopted in the meeting, which among the others sought to maintain status-quo between the Christian converts and the non-Christians and reaffirmed to endeavor for

the greater cause of the community, state and the nation.⁸⁶ The Students Body, i.e. All Arunachal Student's Union (APPSU) had also played a vital role in the peace process. The representatives of AAPSU visited the camp at North Lakhimpur(Assam) mission, to enquire about the people and heard their respective stories of atrocities. They requested them to return to their respective villages and assured full cooperation in creating congenial atmosphere in the localities. Later, they called on the Chief Commissioner and expressed their concern about the incidents. They also condemned the actions and the role played by a few individuals who had perpetrated the persecutions. In fact, with the pursuance of these students' leaders, both the group agreed for reconciliation meeting at Doimukh.

After the Doimukh meeting, the general perpetration of persecution was checked to some extent. But in the remote villages still the fear and tension haunted the people, as many of them were forced to take the flesh (meat) of sacrificed animals as an evidence of returning to the indigenous faith.

Some *Nyishi(tribe)* intellectuals argued that anti-Christian activities especially the mass persecution during the early part of 1970's is one of the most important causes for widespread conversion among the people. Shri Joram Begi⁸⁷ (presently Director, NERIST), opined that Christian converts were very negligible during the pre-persecution period. Many people did not know Christianity and its spread was limited to a few pockets. But, the persecution has enlightened almost all people about this religion, as there were widespread protest, propagation and condemnation too. "The undue publicity and panic reaction on the part of the non-converts became counter-productive as after the persecution and spread and conversion of Christianity had just multiplied".

Now the pertinent question arises, why these anti-conversion activities?

Those who favour governmental legislation against conversion argued that there was alarming growth of Christian converts as Churches increased just from 5 in 1963 to about 50 in 1974. However, the Christian converts have countered the point by

⁸⁶ Toko, Kach. 2002. Growth of Baptist Churches and Socio-cultural life of the Nyishi Tribe in Arunachal Pradesh. Guwahati, Amar Jyoti printers, Pp.107-109

⁸⁷ Joram Begi in Rikam, Nabam, 2005, Emerging Religious Identities of Arunachal Pradesh. Mittal Publication, New Delhi.

substantiating the census report of 1971 where no Christian population was reflected in Arunachal. But a considerable Hindu population was shown in the census, that too in District wise. i.e. 19.68 percent in *Kameng*, *Subansiri* 13.2%, *Siang* 13.27% and *Lohit* 49.96%..(Census of India, 1971). It may be mentioned here that in Elwin's survey of NEFA tribes in the late fifties there was no reference of Hindu population in the territory except among the Noctes of Tirap⁸⁸. Then the question arises how the Hindu population figured that too substantially in the census report of 1971? Was it the settled outsiders in the territory? Or was the census being manipulated. Perhaps all these happened.

The next accusation against the Christian missionary is of "detrribalizing the tribal people". The chief complaint against the Christianity is that it has destroyed their culture, tradition, custom and practices. The Christian converts, counters the charges by saying that it was not the Church, which entered the tribal land or abode. The first to enter the difficult and rugged terrain was the administration followed by the so-called modernization process. Then came the merchant, shopkeepers, petty traders, contractors and labourers, etc. They, argue when Christianity first entered the scene, the detribalization process had long been ruining the tribal society. However, a careful examination would show that, in fact, the detribalization process we are speaking of is too complex to allow simple answer. There is no single agency which can be termed responsible for detribalization of a given tribal society. For example, money economy destroyed the barter-system and accentuated inequality. Modern education has broken the tribal simplicity, work culture, unity and discipline even among the villagers. Christianity is said to have westernized the tribals especially in the North-east India. Many feel that the converts adopted western mode and western way of life and discouraged the tribal arts and crafts, dances, songs, music etc. As against these, the Christian community asked; have the Indians remained true to their original identity despite imbibing western political and social notions? If they have, can the tribals not remain true to themselves after adopting western elements of culture and religion they think suitable?

⁸⁸Rahmutulla Khan, cited in, *The Defenseless Christian Minority in North East India.*, Published by Christian Association of Arunachal Pradesh, 1979.

The Christian community strongly resents the propaganda of some section of the people blaming every trouble in Christianity. According to them, the Christian missionary brought to the tribals education, health, care, good habits, music and peace. It has given their language a script, a grammar, a dictionary and rich literature. When the administration entered, when detribalization started under the impact of modern civilization, there was a spiritual vacuum, which needed to be filled. They argued, it was neither the administration nor the development officer who could have given what the missionary did. Also 'In many areas Christianity appears to have served the role of filling up the intellectual and spiritual vacuum caused by the growing skepticism among the tribal population about their traditional faith and world-view' (Burman 1979: 6).

4.7 Impact of Christianity

As far as impact of Christianity is concerned, there is clear dichotomy not only among the general people but also among the scholars. Some of them argue that Christianity has completely displaced the traditional culture while others have expressed the opinion that the tribal culture did not undergo significant change in spite of the influence of Christianity. F.S. Downs writes, 'Christianity has not displaced or ruined the tribal identity; instead a new community emerged that was a synthesis of the old and new which nevertheless maintained a distinctive tribal identity.'(Downs 1993: 142). While commenting on the humanitarian services given by the missionaries, Downs asserts that 'service was provided to all, cutting across family, clan, village, tribal and racial boundaries. The local Christians were similarly encouraged to transcend their traditionally narrow loyalties in service to others'(Downs 1993: 182). On the other hand scholars like, J.H. Hutton has expressed his antipathy towards missionaries in these words: 'Old beliefs and customs are dying, the old traditions are being forgotten, and the number of Christian and Quasi-Christians is steadily increasing and the spirit of change is invading and pervading every aspect of life' (Hutton 1996: 198). It is to be noted that, education and literature were closely related to evangelization. Education was in fact, one of the most effective instruments for the spread of Christianity. The missionaries tended to make a distinction between the religious (what they referred to as 'superstitious') and the non-religious elements that they did not regard as contrary to Christianity and was positive. Thus, for instance, their attitude towards the indigenous language was positive and in putting it into

writing, they actually re-enforced the culture. Their main trust on development of language and literature has positive impact on the people, as even the village folk could be able to read and write in simple way.

In the words of Toko Kach ‘the role of Christianity was mainly acculturative. Those who have studied the tribe have demonstrated that Christians are more educated, change oriented, successfully engaged in modern economic activities than the non-Christians’ (Toko 2002: 20). Usually this impact is identified as being due primarily to the educational work of the Christian missions. For the evangelical missions, only Christianity was the true faith, and therefore any other faith system was dismissed as superstitious and incompatible with the gospel. From this perspective, the cultural elements that they rejected included sacrifices, belief in spirits, cremation of dead, totemism and ancestor worship. One shouldn’t also overlook the differences in the various denominations of Christianity as they vary in their approach. For instance, unlike other denominations, the Catholic Church gradually approved some of the traditional religious elements. While opposing the religious component of the traditional culture, the missionaries provided substitutes in the form of sacraments, congregational life, prayers, songs, burial of dead, the Bible as the source of life, liturgy, hope and courage, ordained priests and a new form of religious life. According to the Christian converts “the rejection of 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 elements had not contributed that in the first place. In fact, it was in the new forms of religious life that the tribal identity was strengthened because the practices and structures of the Church operated at ethnic rather than sub-ethnic level” (Nabam 2005: 89,90).

Strength wise in terms of number of adherents, the Baptist Church and the Roman Catholic Church are neck to neck while denominations like Revival Church, Pentecostal Church etc are far behind. In the field of education the Roman Catholic is far behind by running as many 11 schools in Arunachal Pradesh as on 1999-2000⁸⁹ and recently established a college at Itanagar.

⁸⁹ Diocese of Tezpur: Directory, 1999-2000, Bishop’s House, Tezpur, Assam.

Haimendorf notes that the impact of Christianity among the *Nyishi* youths educated in the Christian missions has led to a kind of 'dissension'. "While numerous Hindu children go to such schools without being induced to change their religion, a good many Nishi youths have been converted to Christianity... they allegedly refused to share the houses of adherents of the old faith, this means that old parents were abandoned by their converted children, who claim that they could not stay in dwellings where "devils" were worshipped and the meat of sacrificial animals was consumed... it was alleged, moreover, that converts, not satisfied with this symbolic withdrawal from village life, went a step further by abusing and physically attacking priests as they invoked the gods in the performance of traditional Nishi rituals" (Haimendorf 1985: 306,307).

However it would be unfair to declare the authenticity of what Haimendorf says, as the views of the converts has not been considered on the same.

However, an internal psychological tension is emerging between the Christian community and the non-Christians. The latter charges the former of uprooting socio-cultural fabric and indigenous faith, belief system and practices. The Christians are being charged of eroding the cultural and religious fabric of the society. The Christian converts desist themselves from associating or joining social function including the festivals. The practices, which are contrary to their religion, are termed as sin and hence they openly denounce and disassociate from such practices. But the intellectuals and even the growing youths who have cultural consciousness are openly joining the festival without undermining their religious belief. It may again be repeated here in this context, that in comparison to other denominations, the Catholic Christians seem to be more liberal and more accommodative as far as their dealing with the socio-religious aspect of the tribals is concerned. To cite an example, The Catholic Mission School at *Juli*(Itanagar) has been celebrating *Nyokum* Festival(of the *Nyishi* tribe) for the last three years with great pomp and show. Similarly their attitude towards the indigenous food habits are quite adjustable as, they do not insist restriction of *Opo*(local beer) and sharing of sacrificed or killed animals. In traditional *tani* communities, hospitality of a guest is generally marked with sharing of *Opo*, *Aching*(meal) and *Ading* (meat) but in Christian life taking of wine is prohibited. Whatever may be the religious significance, but from the point of view of health, the banning of alcohol has a positive impact.

The other important and positive quality of Christianity among many of the Christian converts in Arunachal Pradesh is the complete management of churches in the hands of people. In other words, there is no direct control from outside agency or organizations far as the functioning of church is concerned while temples and mosques in the state are generally run and managed by the outsiders. However probably, the schools and health centres run by the Christian missionaries receive grants or donations from some organizations and individual, which is common to all such institutions. Nevertheless, the outside missionaries and evangelists are occasionally invited at the Christian conventions or congregation meetings purportedly for preaching. The funds are locally mobilized through donations, gifts and offerings. In many case there is no clue or authentic record of direct monetary funding from outside agency.

One striking feature of Christianity among the various communities is that the evangelization or spreading of Christianity is fully taken up by the indigenous people themselves. Generally the local youths are sponsored for undergoing the theological training and after their successful completion of the course, in turn, they preach among the people.

Nevertheless there is some feeling of desperation even among the Christian converts who complain of discrimination from the church management committee and the fellow Christians for not attending services to the needy one. "Their only reason is that, they did not attend the church regularly and pay offerings or gifts in the Church" (Nabam 2005: 109). The non-Christian community has many more to complain, which includes social boycott from them (converts) during the rituals and sacrifices, death of non-Christians, festivals, marriages etc. They also refuse to take/share food and drink especially during such occasions saying that these are simply worshipping of evil spirits, which is contrary to Christian belief. Taba Nyere, a prominent traditional priest, argued: "The basic values of morality have been destroyed when one converted to Christianity. In Nyishi Society, women are restricted during her menstruation period especially on her diet, movement, and bodily contact with the male member or the husband. Similarly, the murderer, thief, adulterer, incest, etc. are always subjected to rigorous punishment and they are restricted from joining any socio-religious function because the moral of the Nyishi demands that a person should be free from such vices or crime. However, there is no such provision in the Christian

religion. All types of crime or sins committed by a person could be pardoned just through confessional prayers'. According to him this is not a solution to the problem, rather it is indirectly encouraging the people to go for such immoral activities. The punishment is so mild that, it will never restrain a person from committing crime" (Nabam 2005: 110). Many also argue that the Christian community sometimes adopts unfair means to convert the innocent people who ultimately create tension in the family as well as within the villagers. Further, although the Christian preachers say that the primary purpose of them is to extend physical helping hand especially to those needy ones. However, they refuse to go for helping the non-Christian families, despite repeated requests.

However, the Christian converts argue that, with the coming of Christianity, the morality of people has not degraded but a lot of immorality that prevailed in the society has been wiped out. There was confusion and a feeling of insecurity mounted in all respects, because of the fear psychosis prevailing owing to superstitious beliefs and practices. Economic condition was unstable because their income is almost wasted in the performances of rituals and sacrifices that the traditional religious faith (*Donyi-Poloism*) demanded. They argue Christianity has opened up the people's mind and put a new vision to the tradition bounded society. Further, one cannot also ignore the fact that, the art of good living is imparted and people share their joy as well as sorrow. The age-old practices and habits that are detrimental to the sound growth of the society are being discouraged and discarded. The polygamy, child and forced marriage, inhuman acts of animal sacrifices etc, are gradually being done away with. The most important contribution in this regard is of course the prohibition of restriction of local beer/ alcohol. Often the alcohol is one of the major causes of quarrel or friction, which leads to tension in the family and the community as well.

4.8 Influence of Hinduism on Indigenous Religious movement

Over a period of time when two communities come into contact with one another it is bound to influence each other in some way. The extent of these influences may vary from one society other. Hinduism being a a dominant religious community in India has undoubtedly influenced almost all minority religious communities directly or indirectly. So far as the 'tribal' religion is concerned there are many similarities that sometimes it (tribal-religion) has been defined as crude form of Hinduism. At the

same time there are also strong points of dissimilarities, which cannot be easily dismissed. There has been a long history of tribals being used, suppressed and exploited by the dominant or ruling classes in the society. But in the case of the 'tribes' in north-east India, especially Arunachal Pradesh, it is quite different. They could maintain their distinct identity till recently as they were in isolation. Their faith and practices are purely need based which evolved out of their interaction with nature and natural objects. In this context it would do to quote Elwin:

"I doubt if the NEFA people will accept Hinduism in any organized manner, between them and the great religion stands the gentle figure of the cow. Yet there are many things, which should attract them in popular Hinduism; the same belief in a supreme deity ruling over a host of lesser spirits; the same sacrifices; the same colourful festivals; myths and legends of rather a similar pattern. But the tribal people, even the educated ones, will not give up their mithun, beef and beer; they are likely to reject the caste system, the new and unfamiliar taboos, the prevailing Puritanism" (Elwin 1969: 209).

During the initial years after independence, the government of India had a careful watch in order to restrict all kinds of religious activities other than the practice of 'tribal' religion in NEFA (former name of Arunachal Pradesh). Verrier Elwin strongly advocated the continuance, preservation and promotion of tribal religion and opposed the undue entry of other forms of religions in NEFA. The officials of the NEFA Administration were directed to observe a policy of strict neutrality and were advised not to impose even tribal religion on those who did not want it. They were directed to take exactly the same attitude to Hindus, Buddhist, or Muslim missionaries as it did to the Christian missionaries.⁹⁰ No religious bodies, whether they were Buddhists, Hindus, or Christian Evangelists were allowed to settle, to own land, or to make propaganda without the prior approval of the local administration. The NEFA administration also emphasized the need to restrict the activities of the American Baptist Mission, which was believed to offer tacit support to the activities of anti-governmental organizations.⁹¹ Regarding the change in culture, the administration

⁹⁰ Elwin, Verrier. 1969. A Philosophy for NEFA. Shillong, Published on behalf on advisor of Governor of Assam., pp.218.

⁹¹ NEFA Administration, 1956. The Policy of the Govt. of India for the administration of NEFA. Pp. 49.

held that, 'change will come everywhere even in the remotest places and our task is not to check it but guide it in order to help them evolve a truly tribal culture' (NEFA Administration 1956: P-21).

However, after the Sino-Indian war in 1962, *Nehru-Elwin policy* based on 'revivalist-protectionist approach' was replaced by 'progressive integration', with active and speedy administrative penetration into the NEFA⁹². The government also effected 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 subsequently the Ramakrishna Mission extended its network in other parts of NEFA as well. Apart from the Ramakrishna Mission, a few other Hindu Religious Organizations were also allowed to make an easy access in NEFA since the late sixties. One can argue that the government had the good intention of imparting education to the illiterate people because by that time the administration was convinced that without proper education the development of NEFA is next to impossible. But in contrast, unlike Hindu and pro-Hindu organizations, the Christian Missions did not find any easy entry into the soil of NEFA. Perhaps their role in other north-eastern states especially in Nagaland and Mizoram where they were suspicious of provoking and encouraging the secessionist's elements had worked behind the virtual ban of their activities in NEFA.

Following the rapid growth of activities of the Hindu missions, many Hindu gods and goddesses seem to have been adopted by the local tribal population. For example, not only the pupils reading in the Hindu missionaries school, but in other government as well as private schools take active part in the worship of goddess Saraswati, the Hindu goddess symbolizing learning and knowledge. Although the Hindu missions do not formally convert the tribals but their loosely organized religious practices are viewed as one of the various shades of Hinduism.

The other factor responsible for the prominent influence of Hinduism on the people of Arunachal Pradesh is that the Hindu adherents were the first among the outsiders to come to Arunachal Pradesh. This includes the Government employees, business men and teachers in both private and government schools. Naturally, the Arunachalee

⁹² Das, Gurudas. 1995. Tribes of Arunachal Pradesh in transition. New Delhi, Mittal Publication, pp.92.

people, who practically lacked education till 1950 got easily influenced as in course of transactions and official interactions, they had to meet and come in close contact with these people frequently, either to do business or to buy essentials of life or to make any official dealings or to educate their children. The people at large are taking active part in Puja Celebrations like- Saraswati Puja, Durga Puja, Kali Puja, Viswakarma Puja, Holi, Dussera etc. Further the Hindu teachers, to some extent are also responsible for influencing their faith on the young school children. It is seen that most often the primary teachers while enrolling the students on the school register would tend to change either fully or partially the names of the children⁹³. This is being applied by both the adherents of Hindu as well as Christians, for example Takam Sanjay(Present MP, Lok Sabha),Toko Rajesh, Toko Anil, Nabam Ruth, Tana Paul, etc.

However, nothing can be generalized, as all the Hindus working in Arunachal Pradesh cannot be termed indifferent or of having malicious intention to indigenous faith and culture. There are quite a good number of different religious adherents who are progressive and have deep respect for the Indigenous belief system and recognize its distinct features. Such secular minded people always oppose any sort of imposition or assimilation of their religion in the aborigines.

Nevertheless, it is an undeniable fact that several Hindu organizations including Ramakrishna Missions, Vivekananda Missions, Sharda Missions and Vivekananda Kendra Vidyalayas are giving yeoman services to the people especially in the field of education and health care. But still there are many Hindu organizations like Rashtriya Syamsevak Sangh, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Bajrang Dal, Arunachal Vikas Parishad Banwasi Kalyon Ashram, Nari Kalyan Vishwavidyalay, Shanti-Kunj Ashram etc., with their committed agents and workers are trying their best to impose or assimilate some Hindu elements into the indigenous faith and belief system of the people. The irrefutable truth is well evidenced with the fact that today a sizable number of Arunachalese including top politicians, bureaucrats, technocrats, business communities, doctors, teachers and even students are either regular members or sympathizers of various Hindu organizations and some of them worship and put

⁹³ Nabam, Rikam. 2005. Emerging Religious Identities of Arunachal Pradesh. New Delhi, Mittal Publication, pp.138.

statues of Hindu gods and goddesses in their homes and establishments. There is some inclination towards the Hindu way of life when we closely study the attitude and behavioral pattern of the people. Some people used to go to the Hindu priest or Sadhus who generally foretells impending events and suggest remedies to overcome such danger. Usually these priests advise the people to put on amulets or figure rings minted with certain things inside it with a prescription that it would certainly protect a person from the danger and it may also lead one to fortune. Almost all politicians and even the top bureaucrats tend to consult these priests. During election, the candidates go from one priest to another to ascertain their victory and sometimes spend huge amount in the venture. For naming, a newly born child is also taken to the priest who advises certain name by seeing the *Rashi* of the child. At Pasighat in East Siang district, a large number of people throng to a Nepalese priest for naming the new born child.

In the context of Arunachal Pradesh as a whole, the activities of Hindu religion have knowingly or unknowingly played as a restraining force for mass conversion to Christianity. Interestingly the Indigenous populace did not resist the entry of Hindu missions except a few instances of expressing reservation in the print media.

As we have seen that the Hindus do not go for formal or mass conversion in Arunachal Pradesh, instead they try to assimilate some of the Hindu faith and belief into the indigenous religious fold. It may be said that wherever Hindu influences are there the Christian conversion is less. For example in Lohit Valley being a seat of Hindu pilgrimage at Parasuramkund, the Christian influence is very little and similarly in Along(town) being the first mission centre of Hindu wing, conversion to Christianity is effectively checked. The 1991 census has returned with a few Mishmis converted to Hinduism in Lohit district.⁹⁴ However there is no proof of formal conversion to Hindu fold by the local people throughout the state. Nevertheless, for the last one decade, there has been quite rapid growth of Hindu Organizations and the temples too especially in the twin capital city of Itanagar and Naharlagan. The statistics reveal that the Hindu Temple is numerically far ahead, followed by Christian Churches, whereas other two are almost negligible. Organization wise also the pro-Hindu is well ahead of the others as the survey revealed that there are many as 15

⁹⁴ Census of India, 1991: Arunachal Pradesh, pp.148.

such organizations working in the state. It is pertinent to note that out of these four religious communities, only the local people manage the Christian Churches whereas other three including the Hindu Temples are purely managed and looked after by the outsiders or non-Arunachalese.

As far as the influences and activities of Hindu based organizations are concerned, some are very active while others are in dormant stage. The contributions of Vivekananda Kendra Vidhyalaya (V.K.V) Missions, especially in the field of education cannot be underrated. Being a pioneer in education sector, it has immensely contributed in the development of human resources in the state. Similarly, the Ramakrishna Mission is also giving yeoman service to the needy and downtrodden people of the society in the field of education and health care. The Akhil Vikas Parishad (AVP) under the disguised nomenclature of Arunachal Vikas Parishad too, is doing yeoman services to the needy people in the form of relief and rehabilitation. The Vivekananda Kendra Arunjyoti (VKA) is actively involved in creating awareness among the rural folk and they are vocal in opposing the Christianity. While participating in a seminar, Miss Sujata Naik, an activist of Vivekananda Arunjyoti, termed Christianity as 'Foreign or Western Religion' and defended Hinduism as 'Hindustani, Karma or way of life'(Nabam 2005: 141). These organizations openly enroll the local youths and through them carry out their works. But how far they have achieved their mission and whether the local youths are inclined to or embraced to Hindu fold is still to be properly studied and seen.

The Hindu based organizations are being accused of having undue association with the Indigenous organizations such as *Donyi-Polo Mission*, *Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang*, *Arunachal Pradesh Nyobu Welfare Association(APNWA)*, *Indigenous Faith and Culture Society etc.* and thereby try to assimilate or induct some Hindu elements into the tribal religion. These organizations are charged to the extent of financially helping the so-called indigenous organization for their sheer vested interest. In the name of Indigenous faiths/organizations, the pamphlets, posters, cards, photos, calenders etc. are clandestinely published by Hindu based organizations and circulated among selected people. For example the priest's nameplate is inscribed with VHP(Vishwa Hindu Parishad) and similarly under the name of Hindu based organizations, the postcard and calendar of *Nyedar Namlo(religious places of worship of Donyi-Polo)* are recently published. There is open participation of the functionaries of Hindu wings

in the functions of the indigenous religious organizations. They are sometime formally invited to deliver a talk in the indigenous religious functions including in the Nyedar Namlo. In one of such functions at Doimukh Nyedar Namlo, Swami Viswatmananda, Maharaj of Ramakrishna Mission Hospital, Itanagar said:

“I am joining the first ever Donyi-polo function here today; while joining here, I feel I am not attending other religious function but in my own religion. In our religion, the same arrangement is made like here. *Donyi or suryo* is a part of Hindu religion. In Hindu religion, Ram and Krishna are the principal gods or the embodiment of Hindu Gods. Likewise, *Donyi and Polo* are the embodiment of tribal religion. This is nothing but a brother religion of a Hindu and is inseparable part of a Hindu. I have read a book on Donyi-Polo written By Ering Oshing and I believe that there is hardly any difference between Hindu and *Donyi-polo* religion. *Gayatrimantra* in Hindu religion is a devotion or prayer to sun. This is why *Donyi-Polo* or sun-moon God is inseparable to Hindu religion” (cited in Nabam 2005: 142).

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/accommodate some of the Hindu elements into the tribal religion. But in contrast, the other religious leaders are not formally associated and welcomed in these functions.

Some people have pointed out that the using of *Dup-Duna* (Incense) and utterances of ‘*OM*’ sound in the proceedings of the *Donyi-Polo* establishments of the various tribes, 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. This has created a sense of discomfiture or doubt especially among the likeminded people of the society. Because of that, many people who are genuinely interested in their indigenous faith and practices are hesitant to openly join in the recently institutionalized Donyi-Polo establishments or other religious functions. These people argue that if we are to retain our indigenous religion, we must maintain it in its original form and we should closely avoid closely association or assimilation with other religious group. There should be no admixture or imitation from any other religion, which will dilute the meaning and sanctity of our indigenous faith and belief system. At the most, we can effect some changes through reform but not necessarily by copying, the elements from other religion. Similarity

and dissimilarity is quite common among different religions but one should not take it as a yardstick to claim and denounce the tribal religion.

To sum up, the state of Arunachal Pradesh has been witnessing a whole lot of changes in the realm of religion, with the coming in of new religions, which are not indigenous to this society, namely Christianity and Hinduism, each influencing in their own ways and with its adherents, supporters as well as opposers within the society. In the case of Hinduism though there are no formal conversion to this religion in the state, many of its elements have been successfully incorporated in the indigenous faith system that is into *Donyi-Poloism*. With regards to Christianity, the spread of Christianity among the Arunachalee people was very slow before 1970s, but gradually the number of converts adhering to *Donyi-Polo* faith have been embracing Christianity rapidly since then. Being alarmed at the phenomenal growth of Christian population the believers of indigenous faith(*Donyi-Poloism*), vigorously launched *Donyi-Polo Movement*, giving it a new direction. The most important factor for the spread of Christianity has been the priest-centered expensive rituals and sacrifices. There are two divergent views regarding the impact of Christianity on tribal traditional culture. The proponents of one view argue that Christianity has completely eroded the indigenous culture while the others have expressed the opinion that the tribal culture has not undergone any significant change, inspite of the influence of Christianity. Looking at the positive side, impact of Christianity is discernable, even if in indirect ways, in diverse spheres of life beyond the realm of religion, e.g, in improved health care and educational facilities. But one thing is clear, there has developed major division between the Christian population and the adherents of the *Donyi-Poloism*.

Conclusion

The main purpose of my study in the dissertation was to understand the changing scenario of the Indigenous faith of the *Tani* group (which comprises the tribes of Galos, Adis, Nishis, Tagins and Apatani) of Arunachal Pradesh, i.e, the '*Donyi-Poloism*' which originally was merely a system of faith, as the adherents never worshipped '*Donyi-Polo*' directly. However, it was only later due to a number of factors that '*Donyi-Poloism*' as a religion got institutionalized.

Further my study had also tried to make an analysis of onslaught of Christianity in the state, how unlike the other North-Eastern states of India Christianity could not make enough impact in the Arunachalee society- due to policies of the government and secondly, the hostile attitude of the people of Arunachal. In Arunachal Pradesh, we find that the administrative policies and strategy followed by the government debarred the entry of the Christians during the early days in the post- independence era.

However the conversion to Christianity did lead to some changes in the cultural way of life of the converts, leading to a social and psychological tension and conflict between the *Donyi-Polonians* and the Christian converts.

However, the study does not mean to suggest that conversion has led to an abrupt giving away of the traditional culture and beliefs.

Remarkable changes have been witnessed by the Arunachalee people in all aspects of their life since the dawn of independence. These changes are also clearly visible in the religious realm of the various communities of the Arunachalee society, which is going through a transitional phase. In the past the religious life of the various communities of Arunachal who had traditionally followed '*Donyi-Poloism*' was intricately related to their total ongoing way of life, to their culture and social life. Their religious belief as expressed in their myths, legends, folklore and rituals was practically linked to their daily life, as we had seen how they evolved a system of propitiating the spirits for the societal and familial well being, and also through these myths they explained their ancestry, etc. Traditionally the *Tani* Group's conception of '*Donyi-polo*' faith was far away from an organized religion and there was no form of worship towards the '*Donyi-polo*'. It was rather based on worship and propitiation of malevolent spirit on various occasions which sometimes took the form of community participation.

However, this religious belief system has been undergoing changes in the post-independence period. The various factors that could be attributed to it as we discussed are, the penetration of the administrative system into this formerly cut off land, the activities of the Hindu organizations like the Ramakrishna Mission, Vivekananda Kendra Vidyalaya, etc, the activities of the Christian missionaries, the modernizing forces of education, market economy, rationality, etc,.

It could be concluded that initially '*Donyi-Poloism*' existed in abstraction even among the adherents, as they did not have any form of worship or propitiation; there was no regular prayer and other form of communication with *Donyi-polo* instead it was the spirits that were propitiated. However, it was only later after Christianity entered the society and a good number of people got converted that the adherents of *Donyi-Polo* became aware and conscious that an abstract religion would not have much appeal to the people, and hence it gradually got institutionalized. Under this new light there was the rejection of old superstitious practices, and people including the younger generation have accepted *Donyi-polo* as the central figure of faith. Here, we see how the people have not merely imitated the ancestors but have been inventive and creative in redefining the old religion in a new way. For them now it had become vital to improve these faith and practices to a standard form for, the question now was the preservation of their culture of which religion was an intricate aspect. *Donyi -Poloism* has been institutionalized in the form of worship centers, iconography, and rituals that have been recorded and books are published and used in performance of rites, etc....all these had never been known before.

What is unique in the context of Arunachal Pradesh is that, unlike the other North-eastern Indian states the Christian population in the Arunachalee society is very low. This can be easily discerned to the NEFA administration, as I had discussed in detail the how the cultural policy pursued by the NEFA administration in fifties was to "develop the tribes along the lines of their own genius". Therefore, administration adopted protectionist policy and thus created conditions for promoting and developing the tribal cultural practices. Also the strong resistance among some sections of the Arunachalee population (pioneering role of Talom Rukbo) had been discussed. The Government attempted to check the conversion through legislation popularly known as *Arunachal Pradesh Indigenous Faith Act 1978*. Besides, Christianity made a very late advent into Arunachal Pradesh due to geographical isolation as well as general

hostility of the local people towards outsiders; although in 1840's it made an initial entry it could not make enough inroads, it was only after independence (only since 1950 onwards) inspite of the government's effort to contain the spread of Christianity that it managed to maintain its strong hold.

Inspite of the strong resistance put up by the central Government as well as the state government of Arunachal and the local people, Christianity managed to find its way among a good number of the population. Although the motivations for conversion have been many, in the state undoubtedly it was the unending rituals and sacrifice that are involved in the tribal religion, and not the spiritual concern for religion that motivated the conversion. I had also explained in the chapters how in the beginning the people were little concerned with the actualities of the new faith, their prime and immediate concern was to give up the rituals and sacrifices mandatory in the traditional faith that involved huge expenditure. The converts found in the new religion an alternative to the costly ritual and sacrifices. However one cannot overlook the fact that some of the younger generations have embraced the new religion 'Christianity' due to its appeal, as these people who were exposed to the modern world view saw the traditional beliefs and religious practices as redundant and superstitious and thus spiritual aspect in their conversion is evident. Another motivation to conversion is the healing practices of the Christians that appealed to many people.

Coming to the relation between the Christian community and the *Donyi-polonians*, I had discussed how there has developed social and psychological tension between the two. This tension arises from the allegations by the latter that the Christian community are giving up their culture and tradition by not participating in the rituals, sacrifices and the community festivals. These have led to growing hiatus between the Christians and the *Donyi-Polonians* at the familial, village and community level and resultant segregation. Nevertheless, in reality though some sections of the Christian community have desisted from participating in the these social function, the educated and well to do Christians are actively participating in the traditional community festivals and even some of them offer leadership in these celebrations and thus these group plays a role of bridging the gap between the Christian and the Non-Christians.

It would be wrong to assume on our part that the conversion to Christianity has led to an abrupt break away from the traditional culture and life as it is intricately related to their religion. The converts still believe in the same myths, folklores and have very much the same food habits and traditional attire are still reserved for special occasions. Also when it comes face to face with other communities in the state it is their tribal identity of belonging to the particular community that they assert their identity rather than their religious identity. Also it had been mentioned that for majority of the converts it was not the spirituality of the new religion that they converted, rather the crisis situation was the motivating factor, in such a circumstance it becomes difficult for such converts to move away from their previous mindset and so they still strongly identify with their old ways of life. Today, what we find in the state is that the Christian converts are on a midway, neither completely have they left the old faith, nor have they fully adopted the new one. The pull of the old faith over them can be explained by the reason that the religious beliefs and sentiments are too deep-rooted to be abolished to be brushed aside by the decisions of the conscious mind. Further in the case of the converts to Christianity in Arunachal Pradesh, most cases was not for spiritual ends but for social ends, therefore, abrupt or completed giving up of old faiths became rather difficult. In the economic sphere, it appears that most of the Christian converts in Arunachal Pradesh form the lower strata- due to lack of education, low occupational status. There existed a feeling of relative deprivation and frustration among the converts in evaluating their social status as compared to the well off sections who adhere to '*Donyi-Poloism*'. Besides in Arunachal Pradesh, in the case of conversion to Christianity there has been an indigenization of the new faith; this indigenization is in the form of the Bibles which are published in local language, the church prayers and meetings are all held and conducted in local language, the locals have been chosen to preach in the churches, the local costumes and attires are worn to the churches, etc.

The study has also discussed in detail the efforts made by some sections of the society at reinventing the indigenous faith system. It was mainly due to the Charismatic leadership offered by Rukbo, who championed its cause and what we have today is a modified and reinvented form of the '*Donyi-Polism*'. Further the study had also thrown light on the resurgence of *Donyi-Poloism* in the state, in this we have seen that there are two visible trends-

1. Reform; by trying to give up the superstitious elements in the religion and also giving up the lavish expenditure incurred in the rituals and sacrifices.
2. Going back to ones tradition and religion as these are valuable possessions inherited from the ancestors, and assertion that 'one's culture is one's identity' and that all other religion is alien and makes one loose one's culture.

In the state the contacts with the Hindu's led to the gradual adoption of popular Hindu deities, festivals and religious beliefs, this did not entail any significant break with the past. The tribals adopted these practices without giving up their own deities and the gods. But in the case of Christianity, the Christian missionaries went for direct conversion, these led to giving up of their tribal religion and often it entailed a break away from the traditional culture as the converts in many cases refrained from participating in the community celebrations, rites and rituals. Christianity introduced a new kind of leadership and a new principle of social control. The priest became all round leader and the path finder, the friend, philosopher and guide. The importance of the traditional leader or priest at once went down. The concept of sin and fear of retribution becomes powerful instruments of social control. This was accompanied by changes in outlook on life, world view, etc. as well as loss of faith in magic and witchcraft. It is also worthy of note that the impact of the mission is felt not only among the converts but also among those who come in contact with the Christians and are influenced by them by education, precept or example. Unlike the Hindu and Muslim Missions, the Christian missionaries have been carrying along with their message of cross, a social message and a social programme. And that is why a Hindu missions finds it difficult to fight it on an ideological level as they do not possess a socio-economic programme.

The present scenario of the state in the religious sphere is an entirely changed one, never known before in the history of Arunachal Pradesh. These changes we have seen have been triggered by forces, both endogenous and exogenous.

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