

Hindutva: A Case Study of Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

Due to the rise of Christianity, Arunachal has seen a major shift of religion popularity from a Traditionally tribal state with majority Indigenous religion to Christianity. Loss of culture is rampant due to many reasons and one of them being the rise of Christianity, as some of the Christian beliefs do not align with the Traditional Approach of the tribals towards their daily life.

But a new Hero has emerged, regarded as the ‘Saviour of the Animism’ by some, but we shall refer to it as Hindutva. In this Article we shall learn as to how Hindutva has assisted with the cultural preservation of Arunachal Pradesh. This paper examines Arunachal Pradesh’s reactions to Hindutva and how the influence of Hindutva checked the state from a mass conversion to Christianity.

Keywords: Culture preservation, Indigenous Religion, Hindutva, Conversation

Introduction

Arunachal is a tribal dominated state, but according to the census of the year 2011, Christians constitute 30.26% of the state’s population. In the year 2021, the census could not be organised due to corona spread, however it is suggested that Christians constitute more than 40% of the total population of Arunachal Pradesh.

This article provides a detailed exploration of the intertwining dynamics between Hindutva and the cultural, religious, and political landscape of Arunachal Pradesh. It delves into the historical context, the role of Rashtruya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in the region, and the impact on indigenous faiths like Donyi-Polo.

The Article sheds light on the strategic initiatives taken by the RSS in the Northeast, particularly in Arunachal Pradesh, to counter the influence of Christianity and ensure cultural preservation in the state. The establishment of educational institutions, such as Vivekananda Kendra Vidyalayas (VKVs), and efforts to associate indigenous faiths with Hinduism are highlighted as mechanisms to prevent conversions and preserve cultural identity. The discussion around the formation of the Donyi-Polo religion and its subsequent influence by Hinduism demonstrates the intricate dynamics at play. It also emphasizes the socio-political strategies employed by the RSS, such as adapting to local languages and food habits, to integrate with the diverse tribal populations in the Northeast.

Literature Review

Hindutva and Arunachal Pradesh

BJP assumed government in Arunachal Pradesh in the year 2019, one may speculate Hindutva was Introduced to Arunachal only when BJP came into power but in actuality BJP coming to power was the result of years of work done by the RSS (Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangha). The group is structured

hierarchically under the guidance of a national leader, while regional leaders are charged with overseeing the local branches. A major emphasis is placed on dedication and discipline, both mental and physical, as a means to restore strength, Valor, and courage in Hindu youth and to foster unity among Hindus of all castes and classes. Paramilitary training and daily exercise and drills are part of this discipline. The RSS reveres Hanuman (in Hindu mythology, the commander of the monkey army) and in the organization's early years made him the centre of its initiation ceremony.

Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sanghanh and Arunachal Pradesh

RSS came to the North-East for National integration as ethnic diversity and large minority populations was posing as a deterrent for those seeking to create a Hindu nation. Two years after RSS pracharakas (karyakartas) first arrived in Assam, Eknath Ranade was posted as the North-East's Prant Pracharak. He set up several Vivekananda Kendras in the region, for the "cultural expansion" of the RSS, as well as seven residential schools in Arunachal Pradesh called Vivekananda Kendra Vidyalay. These seven schools were established in the year 1977, namely

VKV Balijan,

VKV Jirampur,

VKV Kharsang,

VKV Oyan,

VKV Roing,

VKV Seijosa

and VKV Sher.

That network has expanded today, with shakhas, Vivekananda schools, balwadis, Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas, vocational training centres and a hospital. As missionary school aims to spread Christians religious beliefs and values, The teachings of VKV are based on Swami Vivekananda's preachings of life-reforming principles and Hindu Ideals. Prayers are done twice every day, Morning and Evening in Sanskrit. Slokas and Hymes are recited, from morning Prayer to prayer done before going to bed. Therefore it is safe to say VKVs are Hindu school which is quite akin to Christian missionary schools and their practise of preaching of Christ and promoting Christianity.

Earlier, high-quality private education was provided only through Catholic schools, therefore. Christian missionaries have historically served in native communities. Education was a luxury. There were not many options for education during the '80s which made VKV seem like godsend. But conversion to Christianity was still prominent. The RSS, however, rejected efforts to convert large segments of the tribal population to Christianity. According to the RSS, Christian missionaries have exploited tribals by forcing them to convert in exchange for education and the Sangh is now attempting to "bring them back". Then, in the '80s and '90s, its work among the tribal people increased through the VKAs it had established in the North-East region. This period also saw the RSS, through its affiliates, beginning to sponsor the education of students from the region who came in touch with it in mainland India. Some of them went on to become top political leaders, especially in Arunachal Pradesh, where Hindi is widely spoken, thanks to a conscious government decision following India's Chinese debacle in 1962.

Its affiliate organisations have done pioneering work in taking education and social welfare initiatives to the tribals in far-flung areas. when the elected governments did not provide basic education to the tribals of far-flung hilly areas of the North East, it was the RSS which Provided them an opportunity to learn through their affiliated organisations Not only the Hindu society, Sangh institutions like the Vanvasi

Kalyan Ashram and Eklavya Vidyalaya have earned appreciation even from the Christian community for their educational work. This work later persuaded the tribals to get familiar with the ideas of RSS and as BJP was already affiliated, it has certainly assisted with BJP's success in Arunachal Pradesh.

VKV's has made a huge impact on the rural and urban educational scenario of Arunachal Pradesh since its establishment. VKV now runs 40 successful school in the state. Some of the Alumni of the Schools are top officials working in Arunachal Government, capable of influencing many.

On Culture and Identity

Popularly known as the 'land of Dawn-Lit-Mountains', Arunachal Pradesh a state in northeast India, constitutes of a mountainous region bordered alongside Bhutan to west, Tibet Autonomous region to the North and Myanmar to south and the Indian state of Nagaland to the south east and the Indian state of Assam to the south and southwest. with Itanagar as its capital, The Abode of 26 Major Tribes and 100 subtribes, is a treasure trove of rich and vibrant tribal cultural practices, is the least densely Populated state and a special region even for a Culturally diverse country like India. As stated above Arunachal Pradesh is the least densely populated state of India has a total population of roughly 1.4 million (as of 2011) on an area of 84,000 km², amounting to a population density of about 17 pop./km² far below the Indian average of 370 pop./km². The "indigenous groups" account for about two thirds of population, while immigrants, mostly of Bengali/Hindi belt origin, account for the remaining third. Arunachal has always been a Tribal state, it was initially a Part of NEFA (North-East Frontier Agency) therefore traditionally speaking the religion in the region with Majority should have been an indigenous religious belief which would mean the Animist religion, but the statistics expresses an alternative statement.

Owing to its ethnic and cultural diversity, religion in Arunachal Pradesh has been a spot for the syncretism of different traditional religions. Much of the native Tani populations follow an indigenous belief which has been systematised under the banner "Donyi-Polo" (Sun-Moon) since the spread of Christianity in the region by Christian missionaries in the second half of the 20th century. The province is also home to a substantial Tibetan Buddhist population in the north and northwest who follow Tibetan Buddhism, of ethnic groups who subscribe to Hinduism, and other religious populations. Christianity is followed by over 30.26% of the population, mostly by natives. Official figures say Christianity is the largest religious group with 32% adherents now but Christian organizations claims that as much as 55% of people of Arunachal have been converted to Christianity. A 100% Hindu/ Buddhist/ pagan/ Indigenous state became near Christian majority in a span of just 40 years, starting from 1970 only.

Donyi-Polo, Sun and Moon

On 28 August 1968, a meeting of Adi (a major tribe of Arunachal Pradesh) intellectuals was held in Along, West Siang, to discuss countermeasures to be taken against the gradual erosion of indigenous identity and traditions attributed to India's policy of integration of Arunachal Pradesh, and particularly the spread of Christianity in the area since the 1950s which has caused an enduring crisis in the cultural mosaic of the north-eastern state. Seeing the rapid loss of Culture and conversion to Christianity a new religion was formed. Donyi-Polo (also Donyi-Poloism) is the designation given to the indigenous religion, of animistic and shamanic type, of the Tani and other Tibeto-Burman peoples of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam in Northeast India. The name "Donyi-Polo" means "Sun-Moon", and was chosen for the religion in the process of its revitalisation and institutionalisation. The Donyi- Poloism has been there from since immemorial. The religion has developed a congregational system; hymns to be sung, composed in the Tani ritual language of shamans; a formalised philosophy-theology; and an iconography of the gods and

temples. The pioneer of the revival was Talom Rukbo. He emerged as the father of Donyi-Poloism according to him the main reason for the easy erosion of traditional culture was that it lacked written literature. So, with the aim of recovering the endangered rituals, prayers, and hymns, within 1986 three major cultural organisations were founded: the Tani Jagriti Foundation, the Donyi-Polo Youth Federation, and the Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang.

Hindutva and its Influence on Donyi Polo

Ever since the founding of the Donyi Polo religion by Daadi Botté Talom Rukbo, the indigenous religious movement has been heavily influenced by Hinduism. Donyi Poloism, along with other ancient religions, such as Hinduism, share a common belief on nature and the philosophy of maintaining the balance of nature. There was a fear among the followers in the early days of the movement that the religion would be incorporated into Hinduism as a result. This was refuted by Daadi Botté Talom Rukbo himself in a religious conference when he established similarities between Donyi Polo and Bön, ancient Maya religion, Egyptian Ra Sun Worship, Tengri Worship & Japanese Shinto religion; and as such, all the world's ancient religions share a singular philosophy and are a part of a world community of nature worshippers and thus, asserted the need for a more independent approach. A prominent Donyi Polo worship place in Aalo town is reminiscent of a Hindu temple. External influence upon the local indigenous religious traditions has been met with increasing opposition and severity among the Tani intellectuals.

RSS' approaches on North-East were different from what they have been previously doing in the other Parts of India. With its tribal-dominated states and Christian-majority populations, the NE region provided a peculiar challenge to the RSS' Hindu nationalist agenda. In Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Manipur, for instance, Christians make up almost 75 percent, 87.16 percent, 87.93 percent and 41.29 percent of the state population, respectively. And Arunachal was a special case as there were more than twenty-five major tribes and hundred sub-tribes. Each tribe had their own dialect and beliefs. The Sangh replaced its volunteers and propagandists in the NE, emphasising that the pracharaks should necessarily know the local language.

The organisation then turned its energies to "reworking" the region's religious fault lines, choosing to describe its effort as taking a "radical view on infiltration" and "correcting distortions": it now began to target the Christians who were converting in large number and posed a threat to the local indigenous religion, while extending support to the Hindus among them. RSS claimed indigenous faiths to be part of Sanathan Dharma, the word 'Sanatan' has its roots in Sanskrit which can be translated into "eternal", "ancient", "venerable", or "unshakeable". Hence, 'Sanatan Dharma', as per popular Hindu beliefs, is a religion which has existed since time immemorial. Tribal people are Nature worshippers, Animist as they are called who worship the five elements – Water, air, fire, earth and space which also is the belief system of Sanathan dharma. And as in views of Hindutva, Religion that have an origin in the Indian-sub continent, are the true Hindus (Indians), the Indigenous faith of the tribals fall under it, as Arunachal is also a part of Indian sub-continent. The RSS has been playing a major role in influencing the state's indigenous faith believers to institutionalise and document their belief systems in order to check conversions to Christianity.

Associating with and appropriating local icons and tribal myths has been a key part of the RSS' expansion in the region. Through stories such as the marriage of Krishna, the Hindu god, with Rukmini, an Idu Mishmi princess from Arunachal Pradesh, the Sangh not only links the NE with the rest of India, it also defines the nature of this relationship.

Hindi teachers, exclusively upper caste Hindus, started being sent to Arunachal Pradesh from UP and Bihar as part of the state project,” says Tarun Bhartiya, a documentary filmmaker based in Shillong. “It was these teachers who started reading local myths, icons and tribals hymns in a “Hindu way,” he says. The appropriation of the myths of Rukmini and Parshuram Kund are part of the expansion of the sacred Hindu geography.

Conclusion

Tangsa people have traditionally been animists, with their supreme spirit, the Rangfraa, not bound to temples, idols or any form. In spite of it, The Rangfraa idol looks like a Mongoloid white Shiva. This Shiva-like Rangfraa is a creation of the RSS affiliates who have converted the animist belief system of Tangsa in to a sect of Hinduism and Rangfraa into a clone of Shiva.

The BJP created a Department of Indigenous Faiths and Cultural Affairs. The Department has started codifying and formalising faiths like Donyi-Polo, Amik Matai, Nani-Intaya and Rangfrah to create a front against the Christians. An interesting aspect of the formalisation of the religions is the construction of Hindu deity look-a-likes. Until a few years ago Rangfrah, a spirit worshipped by the animist Tangsa tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, did not have a form. But now Rangfrah has a Shiva-like form with a Mongoloid white face. In a way, Hindutva is trying to revive and protect and support the indigenous faiths. One simply cannot ignore the fact that this approach of Hindutva that has been used by the BJP and the RSS has helped contain the converting to Christianity.

As per 2011 census 1/3 of the population of Arunachal are Christians, without the assistance of RSS Arunachal would have become a Christian majority state by now.

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