

2022

BJP and Donyi-Polo: New Challenges to Christianity in Arunachal Pradesh and Northeast India

Dyron Daughrity

Pepperdine University, dyron.daughrity@pepperdine.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/faculty_pubs



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Missions and World Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Daughrity, D. B. (2022). BJP and Donyi-Polo: New Challenges to Christianity in Arunachal Pradesh and Northeast India. *International Bulletin of Mission Research*, 46(2), 234-246. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2396939320951563>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Open Access Scholarship at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Faculty Open Access Publications by an authorized administrator of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu.

BJP and Donyi-Polo: New Challenges to Christianity in Arunachal Pradesh and Northeast India

Dyron B. Daughrity

Religion and Philosophy Division, Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA

Recommended Citation:

Daughrity, D. B. (2022). BJP and Donyi-Polo: New Challenges to Christianity in Arunachal Pradesh and Northeast India. *International Bulletin of Mission Research*, 46(2), 234-246. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2396939320951563>

Abstract

Located on the disputed border with China, Arunachal Pradesh is the most remote of India's northeastern states. Christianity is growing there—from 1 percent in 1971 to 30 percent in 2011—but that number may have reached a plateau. Arunachal Pradesh is undergoing rapid sociocultural change. While Hinduism is not well-established in the region, there is tremendous interest in a relatively new religion called Donyi-Polo. Some Hindus argue Donyi-Polo is actually a branch of Hinduism, and they are having some success in making this claim. This article explores the changing religious, political, and cultural dynamics of Arunachal Pradesh.

Keywords

India, Donyi-Polo, Hinduism, Arunachal Pradesh, BJP, Hindutva, Nyishi, Talom Rukbo, RSS, Adivasis

Corresponding author

Dyron B. Daughrity, Religion and Philosophy Division, Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA

Email: dyron.daughrity@pepperdine.edu

Christianity is ancient in India, dating possibly to the first century. Historically, we know that Syrian missionaries regularly traveled to India in the first few centuries of the faith in order to bring the gospel to Jewish communities as well as to Gentiles. The Syrian Christians of India—also known as Thomas Christians—are associated with the apostle Thomas and claim to be descendants of his missionary work there (although scholars debate the historicity of the story). The Roman Catholic Church arrived when the Portuguese began trading with India in the late fifteenth century, resulting in important Catholic missions on the west coast (Kerala, Karnataka, and Goa). Protestantism entered India in the early eighteenth century through the work of the Danish Tranquebar mission in southeast India. In India today, there are a total of around 25 million Protestants, 25 million Roman Catholics, and six million Orthodox (Syrian) Christians.¹

The rather remote northeastern states of India—Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura—began to be evangelized in the nineteenth century by Scottish Presbyterians and American Baptists. In 2014, 2018, and 2019 I traveled to various points in Northeast India for ethnographic research. Many discoveries have come out of that larger research project, but for this article I concentrate on what is happening specifically in Arunachal Pradesh, the remotest of the northeastern states, located in the far north along the disputed border with China.

Arunachal, “the land of the rising sun,” was not a state until 1987, but its history goes back around 2,500 years, as it is mentioned in India’s beloved epic poem, the *Mahabharata*. This extreme northeastern state is contiguous India’s easternmost border. There are twenty-six documented major tribes in Arunachal, and over a hundred subtribes.² The state shares a border with Bhutan, Myanmar, Tibet, and China. The indigenous inhabitants have much in common with nearby Himalayan people. Religiously, these tribes are currently undergoing rapid change, as an influx of new ideas has now permeated this once-isolated part of the world.

The geography of Arunachal Pradesh is contested, as part of the state is claimed by China. Officially, Arunachal has twenty-five districts, but the historic boundaries of India’s northeastern states are blurry. The English language and Christianity have created bridges among the people, leading to a surprisingly peaceful context today. There are violent movements that rise up occasionally, but considering how rapidly this area of the world has changed, the relative calm is impressive.

There are around 1.5 million people in the entire state of Arunachal Pradesh. The largest tribe is the Nyishi, with around 250,000 members, followed closely by the Adi tribe. The Nyishis have made a notable move toward Christianity over the last few decades and are now nearly 90 percent Christian. This increase is linked to patterns and influences coming from nearby states Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram.

India’s northeastern states comprise mainly people that Indians refer to as Tribals, or Adivasis. They are not heavily Sanskritized, meaning they do not typically speak Hindi, and they are not historically connected to Hinduism. Since they do not share the same cultural background as Hindus, and do not typically follow any form of Hinduism, they are not included in caste considerations, at least for now. In some ways this status frees them up, giving them agency and autonomy, but in other ways it puts them off the map of Indian society, leading to a historically widespread neglect from the Indian political system and a lack of direct access to the national economy. The religions, languages, and cultures of Northeast India are unique, even when compared with one another. The indigenous people of the region are organized into tribes, and while there is an increasing level of interpenetration and cross-pollination among them, this process is only beginning, largely because of the unifying language of English, improved transport, and technological advancements that have given them a much greater awareness of ideas and realities outside of their local affiliations. The English language is spoken quite commonly in Northeast India, largely because English-speaking missionaries evangelized the region.

Christianity enters Arunachal Pradesh

The English language, as well as the Christian faith, arrived in Northeast India in the eighteenth century. The rugged terrain, frequently hostile responses to foreigners, and the extreme foreignness of Tribal societies caused Europeans to avoid the region. Even in the nineteenth century, no major Western industries caught on in the northeast. The few missionaries who did

go there—such as the Baptists Nathan and Eliza Brown, who arrived in 1836—rarely had the luxury of connecting themselves with any other missionary communities. These pioneers worked alone, and their only chance of success was to endear themselves to local leaders. Numerous missionaries were killed, as Northeast India is infamous for its history of head-hunting. For example, Catholicism entered Arunachal Pradesh in the 1840s, when French fathers Nicolas Krick and Augustin Bourry were making their way to Tibet. The region’s Mishmi tribe, however, martyred them.³

A few missionaries, especially Scottish and American, figured out how to make themselves useful to these populations, and, over time, they spurred the development of indigenous movements that led to some Christian conversions. Missionaries Joan Park, John Brown, and Rev. C. E. Petrick evangelized the region in the 1880s and 1890s. Park converted some Nyishis in Arunachal, and Brown established a school in Arunachal in 1884. In the 1890s American Baptists such as Petrick led a mission at Sibsagar (now Sivasagar), in nearby Assam, in order to reach the northeastern tribes. Eventually, some missionaries in the area produced an Abor-Miri–language dictionary and, in 1920, a translation of the Scriptures.⁴ (Abor-Miri is a Sino-Tibetan language.)

John Firth, another important American Baptist missionary, went to the Nyishi tribe in 1893. He and his competent wife—Eva Webster Firth—started a primary school at Lakhimpur, in Uttar Pradesh.⁵ Mrs. Firth served as the first principal. “Many of the students came through this school and heard the gospel.” The establishment of the school was critical to the origins and proliferation of Christianity in Arunachal Pradesh. When the school was on vacation, the students who had converted to Christianity would go home and evangelize their friends and families.⁶

Led by these young indigenous converts, Christianity spread widely across Arunachal in the twentieth century. Some of the leading figures were Nara Sensus, the first Nyishi Christian convert (in 1920); brothers Kholie Chiji and Kholie Lezee (teachers); Kop Temi (a translator); and Shri Tayi Bate, “the first formal apostle among the Nyishi.”⁷

In the 1970s, many from the Nyishi and Nocte tribes converted to Christianity, and many young evangelists came out of that movement. In 1977 Roman Catholics established a mission station and school at Harmutty (just inside the Assam border) that have proven very effective to the present day. Education in church schools was usually free, causing many young people to learn about the Christian faith. Many Nyishis and Noctes eventually converted.⁸

Today, the Nyishi Baptist Church Council in Arunachal Pradesh has experienced impressive growth. The council now oversees nearly 500 churches. Overall, as of 2015, Nyishis were 87 percent Christian (inclusive of all denominations). In nearly every Nyishi village there is a Baptist church. The Roman Catholic Church is a distant second. In third is the Christian Revival Church, followed by the Pentecostal movement. Lutherans and Jehovah’s Witnesses are also present. There are some Buddhists and Tribal animists as well. In my interviews, however, I was told, “Christians are backsliding. They are not as strong as a generation ago. Increased prosperity has led to lax religion. These days, the youth are not very religious. Education has broadened their understanding, and religion loses its grip.”⁹

As of 2020, India has twenty-nine states and seven union territories. In the entire nation of India, only about 2-3 percent of the population is Christian, according to the 2011 census. (Many Indian Christians argue that this number is actually double this figure.) In Northeast India, Christianity is strong, vibrant, and growing. In Nagaland and Mizoram, the vast majority of the population—now around 90 percent—is Christian (mainly Baptist). Meghalaya is nearly 80

percent Christian. Manipur is over 40 percent Christian. In Arunachal Pradesh—the case study for this article—the Christian population has risen in recent decades to over 30 percent. Christianity is now the largest religion in the state, followed by Hinduism (29 percent), Donyi-Poloism (26 percent), Tibetan Buddhism (12 percent), and Islam (2 percent).¹⁰

The more recent conversion to Christianity by the Tribal peoples of Arunachal Pradesh (formerly the North-East Frontier Agency, or NEFA) is a fascinating story that is not well known. The 1971 Indian national census—not at all known to fudge statistics in favor of minority faiths—reported the Arunachal’s Christian population as less than 1 percent. In 2011 it was officially over 30 percent, but in all likelihood, the Christian population is higher than the official government statistic. This increase in number definitely meets the criteria of a mass movement into Christianity.

According to local historians, in 1972 there was a major persecution of Christians that “touched off a wildfire” of conversions in Arunachal. One of my informants, Nyelam Taram, former home minister of Arunachal Pradesh from 1991 to 1996, provided fascinating details: “Christians were killed by hanging on the post, some of them upside down. Some of the witnesses of this persecution are still alive. Christian homes and domestic animals were burned and killed. They beat the Christians in those days.” In 1978 an anticonversion bill was passed in Arunachal Pradesh, which had the effect of outlawing religious conversion. I was told, however, “The bill was [passed], but it is sleeping. So we say, ‘Let sleeping dogs lie.’”¹¹

Arunachal Pradesh achieved statehood in 1987. By 1991 the Christian percentage had risen to 10 percent, and Nyelam Taram was the home minister—the highest political office in the state. He said that when he took office, he immediately took steps to stop the persecution of Christians: “So I entered into politics just to have a say. Let my people become Christian!”¹²

The Christian percentage responded to Taram’s pro-Christian, no persecution policy. The Christian population kept rising. By 2001 the national census listed Arunachal Pradesh as being 19 percent Christian.

In 2014, a reporter for the *New York Times* visited the remote state of Arunachal Pradesh and was amazed at the number of Christians, writing: “Many observers say that it is likely that Christians now form a majority of the approximately 1.4 million people in the state, with some tribes almost fully converted.”¹³ Based on my ethnographic research there, I have reached similar conclusions.

It is unclear *why* people are converting to Christianity in Arunachal Pradesh, whether to help themselves economically, because of social pressure, or because they somehow encountered the gospel and decided to follow Jesus Christ on an individual basis. Indeed, these questions and others like them are routinely discussed in the seminaries and theological colleges of the Northeast, with many different answers. One current explanation is that Korean missionaries and Korean television programs with Christian themes have impacted Indians in the Northeast. In my research I have encountered this perspective repeatedly. Another theory is that the widespread use of drugs in the Northeast, along with its associated problems, is being met effectively by Christian mission agencies who are bringing Western medicine and Western approaches to mental health.

Arunachal Pradesh is undergoing rapid, destabilizing social changes. There are intense cultural, political, and religious pressures. The society is modernizing, especially the young people, which has led to a wide range of repercussions, from malaise among the young to dramatic shifts in the state's political composition. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—an explicitly Hindu political party devoted to a central, unifying concept known as “Hindutva”—

recently won forty-eight out of sixty seats in the state's Legislative Assembly. However, as I was told in interviews in 2018, "The blood is Congress Party here. This [move toward the BJP] is a politics of convenience. The BJP votes were to send a message to the Congress Party that we want changes."¹⁴ The message must have been sent, because the Congress Party won only one seat! The "People's Party of A.P." got the remaining eleven votes.

While Hinduism itself is not well-established in Arunachal Pradesh, there is tremendous interest in a relatively new religion known as Donyi-Poloism, a new religious movement we examine further below. Some Hindus argue that Donyi-Poloism is actually a distant branch of historical Hinduism; this line of reasoning is having some success. Buddhism is well-established in the state, but Buddhists tend not to proselytize, nor do they convert to other religions.

News of reconversion or deconversion campaigns is common in India today, stirring up charges similar to the "rice Christians" accusations of a previous era.¹⁵ This time around, however, the purportedly coerced conversions are happening to Christians rather than to Hindus, and they are called "homecoming" (in Hindi, *ghar wapsi*) ceremonies—celebrating the return of Christians to the Hindu fold. US President Obama weighed in on this brouhaha in a 2015 speech in India when he urged Indians to avoid religious discrimination. His speech was "widely interpreted as a message to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party."¹⁶

In spite of the rather well-documented and nationwide pressure against evangelization, Christianity continues to make considerable headway in the northeastern states. Both Protestants and Catholics are seeing numerical success. Today there are over 1.5 million Catholics in the region only a century after the first Catholic missionaries began work there. In Northeast India, fifty new Catholic priests are ordained each year, not nearly enough to keep pace with growth. In Arunachal Pradesh the Catholic population has grown in only a few decades from nothing to 200,000.¹⁷

India's Catholic Church is young and vibrant, in spite of the broad anticonversion mood that has accelerated in recent years. It is not fair to state that anticonversion is exclusively the domain of the BJP. Attempting to convert people from one faith to another is problematic in India, especially after independence from Britain in 1947. When conversion does occur, there will likely be serious consequences for individuals who choose this difficult path: social stigma, family turmoil, and even violence. Anticonversion or deconversion movements are at least as strong as propagation/evangelistic movements in India, whether Muslim, Hindu, or Christian. The "love jihad" movement in India has caused a furor in the nation, deepening tensions between Hindus and Muslims. That movement is supposedly an attempt by Muslim men to seduce Hindu women in order to boost the Islamic fertility rates. The controversy found its way to India's Supreme Court in March 2018.¹⁸ Christianity has also been implicated in the fallout, and now there are strong and vocal movements to demonize Christian organizations such as Mother Teresa's famous Missionaries of Charity.¹⁹

In spite of passionate opposition, Christianity is growing steadily in Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, and Tripura. It is growing modestly in Assam. All four of these states are in the Northeast. Something very special is happening in this remote region: we are witnessing profound social change as a society Christianizes. These numbers must not be overemphasized, however. The population of northeastern India is tiny in comparison with the rest of the nation. The northeastern states have only two or three million people each. Assam is the only northeastern state with a significant population—around 30 million—and Christianity is rather small there, only about 4 percent.²⁰

Donyi-Polo, a new religious movement

The majority of Arunachal Pradesh's tribes were animistic throughout the ages, but with tremendous varieties of gods, spirits, traditions, and practices. When Christianity began to grow quickly, as it had in nearby states Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya, locals made several attempts to stem the tide by asserting traditional ways of thinking. However, since the traditional religions were not nearly as coherent and settled as Christianity was, attempts were made to manufacture religions, borrowing from oral traditions, rituals, and other forms of faith practiced by their elders and ancestors. One scholar argues that Donyi-Poloism was initiated by Tani tribespeople in order to contend with a growing Christianity all around them.²¹

There is a mad scramble for Arunachal Pradesh right now as the BJP, founded in 1980, and its close ally the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a Hindu nationalist volunteer organization founded in 1925), have gone to great lengths to implement a policy of *Hindutva* ("Hindu-ness") across the nation of India, even in the remotest parts. Christians have enjoyed a privileged isolation in the Northeast as missionaries hacked their way through the dense brush in order to make contact with these tribes over the last two hundred years. As a result, the northeastern states tend to have a greater religious connection to Scotland and the United States than they do to India.

In the late twentieth century, it became evident to the government of India that Arunachal Pradesh was moving toward Christianity. Since Arunachal did not achieve statehood until 1987, the Indian government did little to reverse this trend. A statistic that local Christians like to bring up is that in the 1951 census, there was 0 percent Christianity, and 0 percent literacy. But as of the 2011 census, Christianity was at 30 percent, and the state's literacy rate was over 65 percent. As is common in the history of Christian missions, Christian teaching and literacy have gone hand in hand.²²

Literacy is just one of the many reasons conversion to Christianity seems to have caught on. Other reasons are (1) costly indigenous rituals for sacrificing animals, (2) the promise of better education and financial aid, and (3) belief in the power of healing in the name of Jesus Christ. In fact, healing just might be the top reason for the mass conversions, as annual healing crusades are common. The healings are not exclusively for physical health; they are also for mental and spiritual health and usually involve exorcism, the casting out of unclean spirits.²³

The RSS and other staunchly Hindu organizations, however, have taken notice that education of the youth often culminates in conversions. In response, they have sponsored a proliferating number of Ramakrishna schools, which have been difficult for Christians to contend with because they actually work; they provide a high quality education.²⁴ And their facilities are typically newer, with excellent funding behind them.

Furthermore, while Christians in Arunachal have a long history of educating the region, there appears to be a decline in quality. In a 2018 interview with the Arunachal Theological College faculty in Moin Happa, Arunachal Pradesh, I was told that theological education in particular lacks vitality nowadays. Their students are usually "plan B" students who do not take their studies or their ministerial calling very seriously. They currently have twenty-six men and sixteen women. My informants said Christianity in Arunachal is "mixed with traditions and superstitions. We are a confused people. Should we stick with our traditions? Or should we live as Christians? Our customs and our faith are in a state of confusion. Identity crisis is the main issue here."²⁵

My informants told me that Christianity is still outpacing Hinduism in terms of growth, but some of the forms of Christianity that are growing—namely, Pentecostalism—are “emotional-based.” They “bring great success for one or two days. But the emotionalism dies down.”²⁶

While young Nyishis in particular are drawn to Western culture, there is still heightened tension around the issue of Tribal identity. For example, should Christians participate in the Nyishi traditional Nyokum festival—a celebration with animistic and pre-Christian roots. Is it a cultural festival? Or is it associated with paganism? Nowadays, the festival gets co-opted by Donyi-Poloism, which clearly wants to compete with, and undermine, Christianity. Donyi-Poloism emphasizes indigeneity and explicitly characterizes Christianity as a foreign religion.

A great ambivalence is occurring all across Northeast India as globalization and various worldviews compete feverishly for adherents: Sanskritization, Hindutva, Americanization, Westernization, Korean culture—these are all making an impact. Indigenous young people are losing their attraction to the old ways and in many cases are not handling the loss of identity well. For example, drug addiction, despair, and extreme emotional turmoil are social ills that pervade this region. In only a few generations, entire cultures in Northeast India have changed dramatically. While tribespeople seem to welcome the new ideas coming in, dissonance and confusion settle into society when the old traditions die.

Incoming Hindu leaders have entered the region and have tried to graft the indigenous Tribal traditions into the larger tree of Hinduism. The RSS has established thirty-six schools in Arunachal geared for this purpose. Christianity has taken a similar approach, establishing schools and hospitals in order to accomplish the dual tasks of serving society while spreading the gospel. It is a race that is too close to call at the present time. The BJP’s present dominance in the region certainly aids in the Hindutva efforts, but Christianity has a very strong foothold at this point that will be difficult to dislodge. Interestingly, Arunachal Pradesh is one of the Indian states with “anticonversion laws” on the books, but those laws go ignored. If they ever are enforced, then the outlook will be grim for Christians, at least while the BJP is in power.²⁷

Donyi-Poloism is one of several movements attempting to thwart Christian conversion in Arunachal, and it has proven to be the most successful. It began in 1986 as an indigenous faith preservation movement. The father of the movement is an Adi tribesman named Talom Rukbo. He attempted to unite Donyi-Poloism with two other indigenous movements, Rangfraa (“formless God”) and Amik Matai (“sun creator”), in order to strengthen numbers and show that indigenous religions can band together and “take on the mighty [Christian] church.”²⁸ His efforts have proven quite successful, especially among his Adi tribe—a tribe that has proven somewhat resistant to Christianity and has largely embraced Rukbo’s religious ideas.

Donyi-Poloism was first established to restore some of the traditional rituals, prayers, and practices that were slipping away from Tribal memory. Thus, Talom Rukbo attempted an institutionalization process to keep the traditional heritage alive. The term “Donyi-Polo” means “sun and moon,” and is somewhat akin to the male-female interdependence found in Chinese yin-yang concepts. There is a spiritual and a material Donyi-Polo. Donyi-Polo is God; it is God’s power in the world. Rukbo tried to integrate complex myths from the Adi tribe’s historical memory—for example, the story of the two suns. One of the suns was injured and became the moon. And thus light and dark were born. Rukbo focused on God’s powers of light, heat, air, water, and living beings. All these elements need a Supreme Being to survive. There is also an important myth involving the first human being on the planet, named Abotani, and a tree located between the spiritual and the physical that brings everything into existence, both living and

nonliving. The Adi and Tani peoples did not have writing, so their legends were passed around orally, subject to considerable variation.²⁹

In 1986 Talom Rukbo established December 31 as Donyi-Polo Day (later called “Solidarity Day”), and he established a youth volunteer movement that meets on Saturdays and Sundays with a focus on spreading Donyi-Polo teachings. In time, a corpus of literature emerged, with prayer books and hymnals. Temples were constructed. An iconography developed with depictions of gods and goddesses. Valuable ornaments were collected for healing and worship services. Candles and perfumes became integrated into worship. A priesthood developed with a body of rituals, such as sprinkling water onto the heads of the worshipers. Priestly blessings and various prayers developed rapidly, as did exorcisms and healing mantras.³⁰ A second holiday was established for Donyi-Polo on May 6 of each year, revolving around the sacrifice of animals such as the mithun—a highly prized, expensive bovine species.³¹

The Donyi-Polo movement has succeeded on many fronts. Photocopies have been made of their gods and taken to far-off villages, which has stoked curiosity and eventually commitment to the growing religious culture of the movement. In a short time, Donyi-Poloism became an institutionalized religion, with new ganggings (buildings for worship) being built regularly, and sermons coming from the pulpits each weekend. The religion’s youth are enthusiastic, and diligent in their propagation to other tribes and villages.

Donyi-Polo is still rather undeveloped in one particular aspect: the size and quality of its buildings. Christian churches are usually much larger and more established, whereas the Donyi-Polo ganggings are usually small and rather primitive by comparison, but they are improving. Ganggings are used mainly for prayer and worship of the idols located within. As of late 2017 there were estimated to be 450 ganggings in Arunachal, as opposed to the thousands of churches, including both established ones and the more humble meeting houses. Churches have been built since the 1920s, but their numbers have proliferated dramatically since the 1970s.³²

Christians and Hindus debate the legitimacy of attempts to convert people to their movements. Christians decry the *ghar wapsi* activities of Hindus as being contrived, while Hindus condemn Christians for luring people into the faith, a trope that goes back centuries in India, with the “rice Christians” accusations.

Christianity, however, has caught on in Arunachal, and there have been “massive conversions among most of the major tribes” in the state. This result is prompting attempts from non-Christian groups to try to slow the growing trend. In some cases, indigenous and Hindu groups are working together, with help from the RSS. The first documented case of Tribals in Arunachal trying to institutionalize their indigenous religion was from the Adi people in the 1950s. It was in response to an indigenous identity crisis; however, the movement was not so focused on reviving religious practices but was more of a cultural revival.³³

During that era, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru worked with British anthropologist and former missionary Verrier Elwin (1902–64) to figure out how to integrate Tribal peoples into the Indian mainstream. Elwin had spent years studying Tribal peoples in Northeast India; and his main concern was preservation of Tribal culture in the face of massive social change. He realized that Hinduism and Christianity were eager to come in, and the indigenous religions had little hope for survival when faced with the larger religions. He knew that Tribal peoples ate meat, especially beef, so he had misgivings about them joining up with Hinduism. Christianity, he thought, could be more preferable because it was flexible on issues of food consumption.³⁴

Elwin also favored Christianity because it had already spread extensively in several surrounding states, especially Nagaland and Mizoram. Thus, his conclusion was that tribes

should adopt Christianity but maintain their Tribal identities. He was careful to press for a liberal, nationalistic Tribal identity rather than a sectarian one. Elwin saw the handwriting on the wall: the indigenous religions would soon become absorbed into larger belief systems. So the real question was what would come next? Elwin saw three options: Christianity, Hinduism, and irreligion. He chose Christianity because of the connections that could naturally be made with surrounding states, combined with the fact that Christianity had worked seemingly well in those other contexts.³⁵

Conclusion

Christianity's results in Northeast India have been a mixed bag. Tribal culture erodes as Christianity gets adopted. Many indigenous traditions are now forgotten. Tribal dances, festivals, and music are often called into question. New divisions now exist between the converted and the unconverted. On the positive side, however, some unity among tribes is beginning to take root because of a shared religion. A common fund has been created to help the poor in all tribes. Christian leaders condemn social practices that they deem harmful. Free education and financial aid schemes have been developed.³⁶

Between 1970 and 2010, twelve churches were established among the Adi people in the East Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh. Ten of those churches are Baptist. At the same time, ten Hindu temples were established in the region, showing a fairly even race for influence in the region.³⁷ In an interview, I was told "There is a real contest going on here. . . . Hindu schools have had some real success with using their schools to evangelize."³⁸

Arunachal Pradesh's religious tapestry is experiencing intense pressure and seismic change. The complex array of traditional religions that were linked to Tribal identities are receding as Hinduism, Donyi-Polo, and Christianity gain new converts. Hindu missions are particularly fervent because of a very favorable government context. The ruling BJP party is one tentacle of the Hindutva-oriented RSS movement that has taken the nation by storm over the last decade or so.

Ever since the Sino-Indian War in 1962 over the issue of the precise border between China and India, there has been a major presence of military in Arunachal Pradesh. The military bases typically host a small Hindu temple, which is open to townspeople. This presence gives Hinduism a great advantage in the region as Hindu teachers, businesspeople, and supporting casts for the military continue to expand their influence in Arunachal Pradesh. Thus, Hinduism is gaining a foothold in an area that has previously had little connection with Hinduism. One scholar writes, "These Hinduized celebrations or sacred domains have successfully created some space in the psyche of the local tribes, specifically those who are living in urban or semi-urban areas or even on the fringes of urban villages."³⁹

Additionally, several Hindu charity organizations have entered Northeast India, offering health care and education, leading to very positive improvements in the lives of the people. Some of those organizations are the Ramakrishna Mission, the Vivekananda Mission, and the Vivekananda Kendra Vidyalaya. These organizations have produced influential leaders among the Arunachal tribes, and have established a good rapport with local tribes.

Christianity, too, has done much to connect with Arunachal's indigenous population. There were moments of resistance and even violence, but the persistence of the Western missionaries paid dividends, and Christianity is now pervasive in Arunachal Pradesh, with an impressive growth rate. The current generation, however, wonders whether they have sacrificed their identity on the altar of new religions. There are numerous initiatives happening that are

aimed at reintegrating traditional ideas, songs, dances, and celebrations into the Christian worldview, but these changes are often controversial. Many Arunachal Christians agree with the early Western missionaries that their formerly violent and superstitious ways are not worth preserving.

Meanwhile, Donyi-Polo was supposed to be a reasserting of indigenous identity but seems to be morphing into a disguised bridgehead for Hindu missionaries to integrate their beliefs into the local population. This approach is working very well for those who are nervous about the recent and rapid growth of Christianity, especially Hindus who are doing whatever they can to curb Christianity's recent proliferation.

Appendix: India's Christian population by state/territory

All numbers are percentages.⁴⁰

Christian *majority* (over 50 percent): Nagaland (88), Mizoram (87), Meghalaya (75)

Christianity is a *significant minority* (11–50 percent): Manipur (41), Arunachal Pradesh (30), Goa (25), Andaman and Nicobar (21), Kerala (18)

Christianity is an *appreciable minority* (2–10 percent): Sikkim (10), Puducherry (6), Tamil Nadu (6), Assam (4), Jharkhand (4), Tripura (4), Odisha (3), Karnataka (2)

Christianity is *tiny* (less than 2 percent): Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chandigarh, Chhattisgarh, Dadra and Nagar Haveli, Daman and Diu, Delhi, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Lakshadweep, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Punjab, Rajasthan, Telangana, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal

Notes

Author bio

Dyron B. Daughrity, professor of religion at Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA, writes on church history and global Christianity, including *The History of Christianity: Facts and Fictions* (ABC-CLIO, 2019) and *Martin Luther: A Biography for the People* (Abilene Christian University Press, 2017). He serves as general editor of a twenty-five-volume book series "Christians in the City: Studies in Contemporary Global Christianity" (Bloomsbury Academic). His most recent book, a full biography of Stephen Neill, is forthcoming with James Clarke / Lutterworth Press.

¹ See Dyron Daughrity and Jesudas Athyal, *Understanding World Christianity: India* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 65. See the end of this article for an appendix showing the percentage of Christians in each of India's states and territories according to the 2011 census (<https://www.census2011.co.in/religion.php>).

² Prerna Katiyar, "How Churches in Arunachal Pradesh Are Facing Resistance over Conversion of Tribals," *Economic Times*, November 19, 2017, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/how-churches-in-arunachal-pradesh-are-facing-resistance-over-conversion-of-tribals/articleshow/61703687.cms>.

³ Frederick Downs, *History of Christianity in India*, vol. 5, pt. 5: *North East India in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Bangalore: The Church History Association of India, 2003), 39, 15.

⁴ See Nadam Tadar Rikam, *Emerging Religious Identities of Arunachal Pradesh: A Study of Nyishi Tribe* (Arunachal Pradesh: Mittal, 2005), 83–86.

⁵ Daughrity and Athyal, *Understanding World Christianity*, 180.

⁶ Dyron Daughrity, interview with Nyishi Baptist Church Leadership Council, in Naharlagun, Arunachal Pradesh, June 25, 2018.

⁷ Rikam, *Emerging Religious Identities*, 87.

⁸ Ibid., 85.

⁹ Daughrity, interview with Nyishi Baptist Church Leadership Council.

¹⁰ See the 2011 Indian Religion Census (see n. 1).

¹¹ Dyron Daughrity, interview with Nyelam Taram, Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh, June 25, 2018.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Max Bearak, “A Competition for Converts in Arunachal Pradesh,” *New York Times*, February 4, 2014, <http://india.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/02/04/a-competition-for-converts-in-arunachal-pradesh/>.

¹⁴ See Daughrity, interview with Nyishi Baptist Church Leadership Council.

¹⁵ Jason Burke, “India Investigates Reports of Mass ‘Reconversion’ of Christians,” *The Guardian*, January 29, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/29/india-mass-reconversion-christians-hinduism>.

¹⁶ Frank Jack Daniel and Roberta Rampton, “In Parting Shot, Obama Prods India on Religious Freedom,” *Reuters*, January 27, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/01/27/us-india-obama-idUSKBN0L00FD20150127>.

¹⁷ John Allen Jr., *The Future Church* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 29, 351.

¹⁸ Rupam Jain Nair and Frank Jack Daniel, “‘Love Jihad’ and Religious Conversion Polarise in Modi’s India,” *Reuters*, September 5, 2014, <http://in.reuters.com/article/2014/09/04/india-religion-modi-idINKBN0GZ2OC20140904>. For the Supreme Court Case, see “India Supreme Court Restores ‘Love Jihad’ Marriage,” *BBC News*, March 8, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-43327380>.

¹⁹ Bijay Kumar Minj and Stephan Uttom, “Indian Hindus Call for Mother Teresa’s Award to Be Revoked,” *UCANews*, July 18, 2018, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/indian-hindus-call-for-mother-teresas-award-to-be-revoked/82851>.

²⁰ Data are from the 2011 India census (see n. 10). Of India’s twenty-nine states and seven union territories, Christianity is a majority in three: Nagaland (88 percent), Mizoram (87 percent), and Meghalaya (75 percent).

²¹ Sarit Kumar Chaudhuri, “The Institutionalization of Tribal Religion: Recasting the Donyi-Polo Movement in Arunachal Pradesh,” *Asian Ethnology* 72, no. 2 (2013): 259–77.

²² See Katiyar, “How Churches in Arunachal Pradesh Are Facing Resistance.”

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Dyron Daughrity, interview with the faculty of Arunachal Theological College, Moin Happa, Arunachal Pradesh, June 26, 2018.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ See Katiyar, “How Churches in Arunachal Pradesh Are Facing Resistance.”

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Chaudhuri, “The Institutionalization of Tribal Religion,” 264–65. For versions of the sun myths, see Aglaja Stirn and Peter van Ham, *The Seven Sisters of India* (New York: Prestel, 2000), ch. 4: “The Peoples of the Sun and Moon, United in Donyi-Polo.”

³⁰ Chaudhuri, “The Institutionalization of Tribal Religion,” 267–68.

³¹ See Ariel Sophia Bardi, “Between Gods and the Government,” in *Roads and Kingdoms*, June 25, 2018, <https://roadsandkingdoms.com/2018/between-gods-and-the-government/>.

³² See Katiyar, “How Churches in Arunachal Pradesh Are Facing Resistance.”

³³ Chaudhuri, “The Institutionalization of Tribal Religion,” 260.

³⁴ The two best sources for understanding Verrier Elwin are *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin: An Autobiography* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1964) and Ramachandra Guha, *Savaging the Civilized: Verrier Elwin, His Tribals, and India* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1999).

³⁵ See Chaudhuri, “The Institutionalization of Tribal Religion,” 261–62.

³⁶ Ibid., 263.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Daughrity, interview, NBCC, June 25, 2018.

³⁹ Chaudhuri, “The Institutionalization of Tribal Religion,” 273.

⁴⁰ Data are from the 2011 India census (see n. 10).