



Donyi-Polo As An “Indigenous Religion” in Arunachal Pradesh: A Facile Analysis¹

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Abstract: *Donyi-Polo* emerged as an indigenous religion amongst the Tani group of tribes in Arunachal Pradesh under Talom Rukbo, a committed religious leader of the State, in the late 1960s. This was essentially to combat the early British colonial activities against tribal advancement by promoting ethnic disaggregation and isolation. Things were no better even after Independence. With the realisation of losing their ethnic identity, traditional religious practices and inter-tribal solidarity, *Donyi-Poloism* began to revive the tribal cult of animism with innovations that suited the practitioners of this new faith. Like *Sarna* code in Jharkhand and adjoining tribal belts, *Donyi-Poloism* has emerged as a powerful religious faith in Arunachal Pradesh, primarily with Sun-Moon worship, in order to consolidate the typical tribal identity and unique practice of spiritualism. This is neither to consciously thwart the spread of Christianity nor to align its believers to Hinduism or to adhere to the ideology of Hindutva

Keywords: Indigenous Religion, *Donyi-Polo*, Tani group of tribes, Sun-Moon worship.

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In the Ranchi edition of *The Times of India* on February 22, 2021, there was a news item the headline of which was: “Hemant Soren at Harvard Conference: Tribals were never Hindus, need Sarna code”. The detailed news thus read: “Chief Minister Hemant Soren ... shared the pain of tribals, who he said are discriminated against in the country ... He also differentiated the religions tribals follow from Hinduism and said a separate code in the upcoming Census is the need of the hour”. On November 27, 2020, *The Wire* had written, “On November 11, during a one-day special session convened by the state assembly, a resolution was passed for the provision of a separate ‘Sarna

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Code' for members of tribal communities. The resolution was tabled by Chief Minister, Hemant Soren leading to its unanimous passage by a voice vote in the assembly. If approved by the Central government, the upcoming Census in 2021 will have a separate column for the community, allowing members of these communities to identify themselves as belonging to a distinct religious community. Currently, they are not classified as a separate religious category."

This concern of the State of Jharkhand had its approval then from the intelligentsia of the country, when Professor Jagannath Ambagudia, Dean of School of Social Sciences and Humanities, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Guwahati campus, told *The Wire* that "I think we need to understand the rationale behind the state's move. I feel that as the state (Jharkhand) was created to protect the interests of tribal communities, this move is to recognise the uniqueness of tribal communities' religious practices".

For similar reasons, many different indigenous religions have popped up in different parts of the globe at different times in history. When the tribal people realise the uniqueness of their ethnicity and past religious practices, they tend to free themselves from the local dominant religious faiths and revive their traditional religions. One such religion, like the *Sarna* code, is gaining popularity among the Tani group² of tribes of Arunachal Pradesh with the name of *Donyi-Polo* or literally, the Sun-Moon religion.

Surprisingly, despite realising the significance and uniqueness of indigenous religions, the Western tradition of Religious Studies is largely incarcerated by the study and research on world religions like Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, etc., indicating a capricious schism between world religions and indigenous religions. Eventually, many sacred spiritual traditions in pockets of Asia, Africa, the Americas and Australia are subverted by the scholars of religion. Many even place these religions under Redfield's category of "Little Tradition" tending to ignore the fact that indigenous religions also impact modern societies and cultures to a considerable extent. While their resurgence and consolidation could be because of diverse reasons usually the indigenous religions are inspired by, or in order to revitalise the tribal spiritual traditions of the past and their "glorious" identities.

Although the assertion by the tribal leaders of unique spiritual beliefs and religious practices of their communities in different parts of the world has caught the attention of the media, anthropological literature is still replete with references that tribes from time immemorial are primarily nature worshippers. They believe in various natural objects – animate and inanimate – as their totems, and worship them as a part of their faith. That is the reason why Émile

Durkheim, the French sociologist, examined totemism from a sociological and theological point of view and hoped to discover a pure religion in very ancient form. But what is a totem? As we know, totemism is a system of belief in which humans are said to have kinship or a mystical relationship with a spirit-being, such as an animal or a plant. The entity, or totem, is thought to interact with a given kin group or an individual and to serve as their emblem or symbol.

Among various forms of nature worship, sun worship is very ancient and has found its signature in many faiths – ancient as well as modern. As per the Encyclopedia Britannica, "Sun worship, veneration of the sun or a representation of the sun as a deity, as in Atonism in Egypt in the 14th century BCE. Although sun worship has been used frequently as a term for "pagan" religion, it is, in fact, relatively rare. Though almost every culture uses solar motifs, only a relatively few cultures (Egyptian, Indo-European, and Meso-American) developed solar religions. All of these groups had in common a well-developed urban civilisation with a strong ideology of sacred kingship. In all of them the imagery of the sun as the ruler of both the upper and the lower worlds that he majestically visits on his daily round is prominent. The sun is the bestower of light and life to the totality of the cosmos; with his unblinking, all-seeing eye, he is the stern guarantor of justice; with the almost universal connection of light with enlightenment or illumination, the sun is the source of wisdom".

Sun worship has prevailed in India from the most ancient times down to the present day. We know that the "Aryans" of the Vedic age worshipped Sun under two names: *Surya* and *Savitri* or *Savitar*. The French Orientalist, Auguste Barth in his book, *The Religions of India*, first published in 1882 in English, wrote, "Ever since Vedic times the Sun has not ceased to figure prominently in the pantheon as well as in the poetic and religious literature of India. A great part of the *Bhavishya Purâna* is specially consecrated to him. Traces of his worship are found on the coins of the satrap kings who ruled over Gujarat towards the Christian era, as well as on those of the Indo-Scythian princes... At a later date, in the same region, one at least of the kings of Valabhi is designated in the inscriptions, *Adityabhakta*, worshipper of the Sun" (Barth 1882). A little more towards the north, at Multan, in Punjab, a temple was erected in the honour of this god, the most celebrated in India, the splendours of which have been described by Hiouen-Thsang and the Mussulman writers, and which was finally destroyed only under Aurangzeb.

There were other sanctuaries of Sun worship at Gwalior in Madhya Pradesh, in Rajasthan, Kashmir, and Odisha also. Barth adds, "Perhaps Iranian influences had something to do with the organisation of this worship during

the middle age; at any rate, a great array of Indian proper names would by itself show how much this culture was in vogue throughout India. In fine, the Sun has always been in a way the professional and family god of astronomers and astrologers, who rarely fail to invoke him at the commencement of their writings" (*Ibid.*).

Sun God or *Surya* first appears in literature in the *Rigveda*, oldest of the Vedas, and composed between 1500 and 1000 BCE. The Sun or *Surya* was thought to ride his chariot across the sky and defeat the demons of darkness. *Surya* worship was especially popular in the Vedic period, the Sun God being considered at that time as one of the three most important gods. Later, *Surya* was replaced in importance by such deities as *Shiva* and *Vishnu*. Followers of the Sun-God are known as *Sauryas*. *Surya* appears in the important *Gayatri mantra* which is recited from the Vedas as a preliminary to its study. In Buddhism, *Surya* is considered to dwell in and protect shrines.

In the early mediaeval times, Sun worship in India had gained prominence. There are evidences of an eighth century Sun temple at Martand near Islamabad in Pakistan. Another shrine of the Sun God is also found in Varanasi near the Annapurna temple. Odisha was an acclaimed seat of Sun worship in the thirteenth century AD. King Langula Narasingha Dev of the Eastern Ganga Dynasty or *Suryavansha* (1238-1264 AD), as historians call it, was a great worshipper of the Sun God and built the famous Sun temple at Konark, which is now a world heritage site. It is described as one of the most exquisite memorials of Sun-worship in existence; its luscious ornamentation is at once the glory of the Odishan temple artwork, architecture, and sculpture.

During the Middle Ages, Sun worship was even practiced by Adi Shankaracharya in the eighth century AD and by the Mughal emperor Akbar (1556-1605 AD). It seems Akbar endeavoured to introduce a special form of Sun-worship. He commanded that the Sun should be adored four times a day, namely at morning and evening, at noon and midnight. His son Jahangir was also a worshipper of the Sun, evidenced by the Mithraic symbolism on his tomb at Lahore.

Temple or no temple the Indian subcontinent has remained a land of Sun worship from the long past that was ingrained in local cultures as well. It is noticed that the Sun cult was very popular in several pockets of India, where Sun was worshipped by its devotees. This cult is still found among the people of Punjab, Rajasthan, Karnataka, Konkan, Gujarat, etc. Sun worship has deeply penetrated into many cultures, where it is believed to facilitate reproduction, and hence, Sun worship among the women in India is very

common. I remember that when I was a child, my mother had taken a vow which obliged her to abstain from eating on days when the Sun was invisible during monsoons. It was common among the women of her generation that if the luminary happened to be hidden by clouds for days together, the devout votary observed their fast till the Sun re-appeared. Even today a great festival in its honour, known as the *Chhat Pujá*, is celebrated in the States of Bihar, Jharkhand, UP and Madhesi region of Nepal. On the sixth day of the bright half of the month of Kártik (October-November), people gather at a river or a pool and offer libations to the Sun God for the prosperity of their respective families.

Alongside Sun worship, Moon is also considered divine by many ancient and contemporary religions of the world. For the ancient Greeks, the moon was the Goddess Selene, and subsequently Goddess Artemis. Ancient Romans also worshipped Moon as Luna and Diana. In Indian tradition, the Rajputs, Marathas, and other warrior castes in mediaeval times usually traced their descent from the Sun or Moon. The descendants of the two luminaries were known as the Sun-family (*Surya vamshi*) and the Moon-family (*Chandra vamshi* or *Soma vamshi*) respectively. The Hindus follow a lunar calendar and celebrate religious festivals as per this calendar. Ctesias or Ktesias³ mentions that as early as 400 B. C. there was a place fifteen days' journey from mount Abu, where the people worshipped the sun and the moon.

In contemporary times, many tribal communities of India worshipped Sun God as their principal deity and their faith revolved around it. The Baiga living in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh worship Sun God in the form of Narayan Deo. Even the Gond of Central India worship Sun God as Narayan Deo, who is offered a pig by them as an appeasement by saying, “Eat, Narayan Deo, eat this rice and meat, and protect us from all tigers, snakes, and bears in our houses; protect us from all illnesses and troubles” (<https://www.giffordlectures.org/books/worship-nature/chapter-14-worship-sun-modern-india>). The Bhunjia, the Gadaba, the Kol, the Munda and other tribes of Central India also believe in Sun God and worship it. The Munda of Jharkhand and Odisha worship Sun God or *Sing Bonga* or *Dharam Debta* as their supreme god. The Korku of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra worship Sun God or *Dinai* and Moon God or *Chandama*. Tribes speaking Austro-Asiatic languages, such as the Ho, the Munda, the Santal, the Bhumij, the Remo (the Bondo) and others believe in *Sing Bonga* or Sun God as their supreme deity and offer their salutations to Sun every morning. The Mal Paharia is a Dravidian tribe which inhabits the Ramgarh hills in the Santal Parganas. Its chief divinity

is the Sun, to whom the people pay reverential obeisance in both morning and evening.

Let us now turn our attention to the contemporary North East India. In recent times there has been a spiritual revolution of a sort in this region with new faiths replacing the old ones. It is observed, "With the emergence of these new faiths and practices, reformist movements have been gradually gaining ground among the tribes in order to protect and preserve their indigenous religious beliefs and practices. Such reformist movements have generated new taxonomies, such as "Donyi-Poloism," "Intyaism," "Rangfraism," and so on. These movements have tried to institutionalize tribal religion by inventing images of gods and goddesses, constructing temples, and textualizing religious chants or oral traditions in a manner very similar to that of Hinduism" (Chaudhury 2013).

With regard to *Donyi-Poloism*, Chaudhury, following Dawar (2004) suggests that "Donyi and polo literally mean "sun" and "moon," which the Tani group of tribes in Arunachal Pradesh, such as the Adi, Nyishi, Apatani, Tagin, and the Galo, worship for prosperity, fertility, and protection from calamities. The Donyi-Polo movement, which was an attempt by the Adis to institutionalise their indigenous religion, started on 28 August 1968 ..." (*Ibid.*). Further, taking cue from Rukbo (1998, 2004) Chaudhuri notes that "... with the aim of restoring the decaying rituals, prayers, and hymns, the people of the Abotani group, mainly the Adi, the Nyishi, and the Apatani have organised cultural societies in the name of the Tani Jagriti Foundation, the Donyi-Polo Youth Federation, and the Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang at Pasighat ..." (*Ibid.*).

It is observed by *Arunachal Observer* on its June 19, 2017 edition that "The gradual erosion of state's indigenous identity and traditions was attributed to the impacts of foreign cultures since 1950s threatening the time tested rich cultural mosaic for which Rukbo was instrumental in conceiving the idea of an umbrella to bring all Tibeto-Burman folks to have a common identity with values for a meaningful life". It further adds: "Justifying the adage –*Loss of culture is loss of identity* – the indigenous people, being nature worshipers, have given different names to their religions and places of worships, like Donyi-Polo (Dere) by the Galos since 2000s; *nyedar namlo* (pure place) by the Nyishis since early 2000s; *Danyi-Piilo* (*meder nello*) by the Apatanis since 2004, Rangfraism by Tangsas, and Intayaism by Mishmis of Changlang and Dibang Valley districts. Other names are *Kine Nane*, *Doying Bote*, *Pedong Nane* and *Guumin Soyin*. The institutionalisation resulted in conduct of prayers at the sacred places every Sundays with chanting of hymns by the priests (*nyibus*)" (<https://>

arunachalobserver.org/2017/06/19/donyi-poloism-taking-roots-arunachal-pradesh/).

It is not only the resurgence of the traditional nature worship, as it is common among all the indigenous communities of the globe, but also to claim its legitimacy across the country, we find a parallel between the *Sarna* code of Jharkhand and the *Donyi-Poloism* of Arunachal Pradesh. What Hemant Soren has recently claimed for the *Sarna* Code, was forcefully raised by Talom Rukbo at the 1984 Congress of the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF) held at Tokyo (Japan), and subsequently at a Bengaluru (then Bangalore) meeting in 1986 for recognition of *Donyi-Poloism* as a full-fledged religion (*Ibid.*). Rukbo's Bengaluru visit in 1986 has been authenticated in a paper written by Claire S. Scheid in the *Handbook of Indigenous Religion(s)* edited by Greg Johnson and Siv Ellen Kraft that "In 1986, Adi activist Talom Rukbo, a prominent indigenous religious leader from the Northeast Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, attended a world conference on interfaith religions in Bangalore... He was speaking about the Adi tradition of Donyipolo (Sun-moon)..." (https://brill.com/display/book/edcoll/9789004346710/B9789004346710_017.xml).

What is of significance here is what Scheid observes about Rukbo's claims. Scheid emphasises, "It is necessary to note that the Adi now use the term 'indigenous' to refer to themselves and their 'historical' way of life, and they extend the definition to Donyipolo, which they identify as their 'indigenous religion'" (*Ibid.*).

Claire S. Scheid has further elaborated on the claims of Rukbo that multitude of changes were brought about in the formalisation of *Donyi-Polo* as an indigenous religion by amending the vernacular religious life in many different ways. For example, efforts were made to prepare prayer books, improve the oral culture, establish prayer halls, introduce iconography representing the divine image, identify holy days, assign new roles to the traditional priests, etc. Further Scheid adds, "These deliberate changes have been enacted by cultural elites as a conscious response to a perceived need for preservation and deliberately designed to fill the cultural void that the introduction of more 'conventionally' organised religions had created in the Arunachali social sphere" (*Ibid.*). Scholars, however, have interpreted the emergence of this new religion in many different ways, although Rukbo's efforts were towards elevating the tribal traditional animistic faith to the pedestal of an indigenous religion by reforming the old religious practices wherever they were needed.

Soihiamlung Dangmei (2019) in one of his recent papers tries to articulate that *Donyi-Poloism* among the Adi of Arunachal Pradesh is an attempt to construct indigenous identity through a reform movement. He also categorically underlines that it is precisely influenced by the Hindutva ideology to counter the spread of Christianity among the tribes of North East India.

In yet another interesting publication Rikam suggests that the Adi of Arunachal Pradesh, one of the tribes belonging to the Tani group, believe that *Donyi-Polo* is the manifestation of the two eyes of *Sedi*, which is a supernatural force and is regarded as the symbol of creator and protector of all beings of the universe, including the humankind (Rikam 1989 in Kurian 2022).

In several of his publications, Ering interprets *Donyi-Polo* as a philosophy of life for the Adi with myths and superstitions which give the colour of a religion. He writes, "The essence of *Donyi-Polo* can be traced out by analysing the behaviour, conduct, expression, and traditional myths of the tribe. *Donyi-Polo* means differently on different occasions like truthfulness, wisdom, enlightenment, blissfulness, right conscience, compassion, love, selflessness, friendliness, human excellence etc. that lead man to attain perfection. In short, it can be easily ascertaining [*sic.*] that truth is the essence of *Donyi-Polo's* faith and culture. They ascribe everything from life to death, to *Donyi-Polo*" (Ering 1998 in Kurian 2022).

In yet another paper, Riddi and Mize draw our attention to the much wider religious as well as moral connotations of *Donyi-Poloism*. They opine, "As a matter of fact, the term *Donyi-Polo* has a wider connotation. It has three meaning [*sic.*]; it is used to refer to the Almighty God. It also used to denote the "sun" and "moon". Further, it is the name given to the traditional belief system of the people. So, [in] the present context, *Donyi-Polo* is neither a God nor the two celestial objects nor an object of worship but the spiritual, ideological and philosophical aspiration to lead the peaceful and meaningful life on earth" (Riddi & Mize 2020).

In a recent publication Daughrity has provided a theological explanation to the emergence and consolidation of *Donyi-Polo* as an indigenous religion in Arunachal Pradesh. He is of the opinion that "*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 1968 as an indigenous faith preservation movement... *Donyi-Poloism* was first established to restore some of the traditional rituals, prayers, and practices that were slipping away from [the] tribal memory. Thus, Talom Rukbo attempted an institutionalisation process to keep the traditional heritage alive" (Daughrity 2022).

In my opinion, however, *Donyi-Polo* should not be construed as a mere religious movement either for thwarting the rapid spread of Christianity among the tribes of Arunachal or for attracting tribes towards the Hindutva ideology. One can easily sense their anxiety to re-establish their strong sense of ethnicity and traditional spiritual belief. Tribes are always proud of their cultural, literary, ethnic and historical heritages. In 1986 K.S. Singh had underlined that most of the tribal movements in India were the culmination of "Community Consciousness", which is very strong among the tribes. There is a distinct smell of ethnic resurgence in *Donyi-Poloism* at a time when the whole of tribal India, including Arunachal Pradesh, is in the grip of rapid socio-economic-religious transformation.

I may submit here that *Donyi-Poloism* fits well into L.K.Mahapatra's category of "reactionary movements" precisely to bring back the "good old days". Mahapatra has classified tribal movements in three groups: reactionary, conservative and revolutionary. The reactionary movement tries to bring back 'the good old days', whereas the conservative movement tries to maintain the status quo. The revolutionary or the revisionary movements are those which are organised for 'improvement' or 'purification' of the cultural or social order by eliminating evil customs, beliefs or institutions (Mahapatra 1972). This classification almost confirms to Surajit Sinha's type of "reform movements" to organise themselves (Sinha 1968). S.M. Dube while analysing the situation in North East India also endorses that these kinds of movements should be categorised under "religious and social reform movements" in order to foster an integrated identity among the tribes of the region (Dube 1982). Since Independence, North East India is reeling under a process of mega transformation, and the following observations of K.S. Singh seem pertinent here. He observes, "In recent years, with the rise of the international movement of indigenous people in the post-modernist phase, the focus has shifted to self-determination or self-management of the resources, identity, and ethnicity. The environmental movement has focused on communities in situ, their relationship to resources, their rapport with nature, their world-view. Therefore, with the growing concern for environment, particularly biodiversity, pluralism, ethnicity, and identity- all are now interrelated - the tribal movements are assuming a new character. They are all now becoming more and more identity-based movements, with various issues concerning control over resources etc. being considered as ramifications of this central issue" (Singh 1998). While analysing tribal movements K.K. Misra demonstrates how the tribal movements in the erstwhile Chotanagpur have changed their means of asserting ethnic identity

from millenarianism to religious to political over a period of time without compromising with the primary objective (Misra 1986).

Let me conclude by suggesting that *Donyi-Poloism* as yet another indigenous animistic practice of Sun-Moon worship by the Tani group of tribes in order to consolidate their ethnic identity and unique spirituality. Affiliating this indigenous faith to any world religion whatsoever would be premature, in my view. In fact, the Hon'ble Supreme Court of India in their Vedanta Order on April 18, 2013 have said "Religious freedom guaranteed to scheduled tribes and the forest dwellers under Articles 25 and 26 of the Constitution is intended to be a guide to a community of life and social demands. The above-mentioned Articles guarantee them the right to practice and propagate not only matters of faith or belief, but all those rituals and observations which are regarded as integral part of their religion. Their right to worship the deity Niyam-Raja [in the case of the Dongria Kondh of Odisha] has, therefore, to be protected and preserved." It is well within the constitutional right of an Indian citizen.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper with a different title was presented as an on-line Special Lecture at the Central University of Himachal Pradesh, Dharamshala on February 27, 2021.
2. This is a group of tribes of Arunachal that comprises Nyishi, Adi, Apatani, Galo, Tagin and Mising tribes.
3. According to *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Ctesias or Ktésias (fourth century BCE) was a Greek physician at the Achaemenid court and the author of *Persiká*, belonging to the Cnidian school of physicians, which claimed to originate with the god Asclepius himself.

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