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## **Christianity and Tribal Women: A Case Study of Arunachal Christian Prayer Centre, Jipu, West Siang District, Arunachal Pradesh**

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### **Abstract**

*In his work on religions, Max Weber wrote extensively on the potential for religion to break and transform traditional social institutions. The increasing number of adherents to Christian faith in Arunachal Pradesh in the recent decades is bound to have its impact on the traditional social mores and culture. It will take some time to access the full import of these impacts as Christianity as a social force is a relatively new, post-colonial phenomenon. The women converts, mostly widows, taken up in this study are one agency as well as product of such processes. Recent critiques on the onslaught of Christianity on indigenous culture in Arunachal Pradesh have singularly emphasised on the “loss-and-preserve” aspect of traditional culture. In the process a very important aspect of socio-cultural change i.e. emotional dimensions of conversion is not properly analysed. In similar tribal societies in the northeast where the Church has a longer history, the role of Christianity in emancipating women from patriarchy is debated. Issues such as this can also be explored in Arunachal when we engage the question of religious conversion taking into consideration the emotional and psychological factors in a particular social set up rather than purely engaging in polemics.*

**Keywords: Christianity, Conversion, Faith Healing, Patriarchy, Women, Self, Culture, Arunachal Pradesh.**

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**I. Christianity in Arunachal Pradesh: A brief review:** Christianity is one of the most powerful social movements in contemporary Arunachal Pradesh. The Centre for Policy Studies has recently raised concerns about the alarming increase in the number of Christian believers in the state saying, “Arunachal Pradesh joins the Christian northeast.”<sup>1</sup> According to Census 2011, Christians constitute the single largest religious community in the state with a share of 30.26 % of the total population of the state. In 1971, the figure was only 3,864 constituting a mere 0.79% of the population. Missionaries were not allowed to preach

in the North Eastern Frontier Tracts (NEFT), the erstwhile name of Arunachal Pradesh unlike other hill areas of northeast. Before 1950s, Christian missionary activities were restricted to the foothill areas of the state. Some students from Siang area who attended various missionary schools in Sadiya and Jorhat were among the first from Arunachal Pradesh to have been exposed to Christianity. By 1950s some of the Adi, the Mishmi and the Nyishi youths were converted into Christianity (Sangma 1980:271). In the decades after 1950 also the then NEFA (North East Frontier Agency) administration imposed restrictions on the missionaries from building churches and carrying out proselytizing activities. From 1960s the Christian converts seem to have grown in noticeable numbers and it alarmed the then Agency Council (equivalent of Legislative Assembly in NEFA days) to urge the central government to take suitable steps to protect and promote the indigenous faiths of the various tribes (Bath 2008: 211-222). *The Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act, 1978* was therefore hurriedly enacted when a similar legislation was introduced by the central government. Thus, unlike other parts of the northeast- especially Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya- the growth and spread of Christianity in Arunachal is purely a post-independence phenomenon.

As the root of the propagation of the new faith does not go back to the colonial period, and when the local administration itself tried to check the conversion, reason for the spread of Christianity must be located in factors internal. Among many reasons, the complex and costly rituals of the indigenous religions has been cited as the main factor behind conversion to Christianity by many studies (Kach 2002; Rikam 2005; Bath 2006; Miso 2005:69-70; Naku 2006: 256, 264). Many denominations of the Christian faith prosper in Arunachal Pradesh today. The Christian faith is now part of the emerging cosmopolitan space in the state created by modernization and urbanization.

**II. Methodology:** All the data related to the Prayer Centre has been deduced from notes made during personal visit to the church and interviews taken with the inmates. We have avoided naming our sources and elaborating specific events of their life in order to maintain a safe degree of animosity. Tribal ethos in Arunachal Pradesh is highly sensitive to personal remarks and our citing of their names and specific events related to their life, however well intended, may not be taken in good spirit by them or their kin. We have therefore deduced only the general experiences of the interviewees which sufficiently offer us a pattern to track relevant to our study. The attempt of the paper is to make a study of women convert resident in a prayer cum healing church based on the conversion narratives of the women themselves. The data collected on religious experiences cover both externally observable traits (like widows' accounts) as well as the 'true' feelings of those interviewed. Since some of them were connected to us by family ties we have had the advantage of making our own independent assessment with respect to (qualitative) changes in their lives.

**III. The Prayer Centre:** The *Arunachal Christian Prayer Centre* is situated at Jipu village in Likabali sub-division of West Siang district. It was established in November 29, 1992. Lying in the intersection of the hills of Arunachal and expanding plains of the neighbouring state Assam, it can be approached either from the nearby sub-divisional headquarters at

Likabali or from the National Highway 52. Despite being located just a few kilometres from the national highway, the place where the church is located is poorly connected. In its 3 km radius there is no proper road connectivity. While in winters one can take a jarring drive by vehicle across the paddy fields, believers visiting it have to tread along grimy alleys through the scattered farming settlements for hours during the monsoon.

The Prayer Centre is affiliated to the Revival Church, one of the many Christian denominations in the state. The Church is led by a pastor and a hierarchy of functionaries who attend to the daily activities of the church. A local believer had donated the land for setting up the centre.

Following are some of the basic data about the centre:

**(1) Composition of members:**

- a. Church officials (about 10 in number);
- b. Regular “prayer warriors” (about 10 in number excluding the above; mostly consisting widows of elderly age);
- c. Believers who visit seeking spiritual, mental and physical wellbeing (numbers range from 10-50). Most of the visiting believers are from within the state, notably of the central region of the state where much of the conversion in the state is taking place; and
- d. Other residential members who help in the daily functioning of the Church as in maintaining a common mess etc. Most of the members of the church belong to one language group (speakers of *Galo* language, the predominant language of the area).

**(2) The physical infrastructure:**

- a. An RCC building housing the main Church complex; the arrangement of the hall is utilitarian and austere; Residential quarters of the Church officials are of RCC and SPT type;
- b. Residential quarters constructed voluntarily by believers and donors (about 20 in numbers; some RCC and mostly thatched);
- c. A common kitchen in which food is prepared by the members in shifts; and
- d. A farm on the nearby hill by the church side. It is a small replica of the traditional slash and burn cultivation which provides an ideal engagement for the women in the centre to cultivate at their leisure.

**(3) Finance/resource:**

- a. The regular church functionaries (excluding the “prayer warriors”) are given honorarium by their apex church council.
- b. Regular tithes: churches of the same denomination of the adjoining five villages namely Jipu, Kuntor, Dipa, Lichi Ete, Sili regularly contribute, mostly in kind; and
- c. Donations from believers (in cash and kind).

#### (4) A brief background of the members:

Church officials are mostly educated (usually graduates) and trained in the Christian faith, its basic tenets and healing methods. There is no gender specific designation of roles and performances. A special trait in them is the ability to have “vision” about a future happening, heal needy believers from spiritual and physical ailments through prayers and fasting. Their regular routine include undertaking fasting and prayer programmes for days together, some lasting for even forty days, and preaching the gospel in interior villages.

The *prayer warriors* are mostly elderly widows past sixty who also have the ability to receive “vision” and undertake similar fasting and prayer programmes at regular intervals. It is important to note that they are, almost without exception, illiterate (meaning, they cannot read the Bible) and have no formal ecclesiastical training. All of them joined the church voluntarily and expressed happiness in living there.

Believers who visit the church belong to the following types: those in need of spiritual recluse; those who come to ward off an impending crisis in personal life they had a strong premonition about or about which a fellow believer had a prior “vision”; and sick people either worn-out by unsuccessful medical treatments, seeking healing from diseases like identified medical conditions, lunacy, alcoholism etc. Many swear to have received beneficial results when they leave the church after performing prayers and fasting. A person who is not a Christian by faith might also visit the church for seeking cure from ailments and problems mentioned above and when benefited, willingly convert to Christianity thereafter.

**IV. The healing mechanism in the Centre:** The prayer centre primarily functions as a ‘healing centre’. Members both from the affiliating churches of the denomination and other churches (and in some cases even those of other faiths) visit it, generally after a specific “vision” for the same has been relayed to them. That is, a visit to the centre and the duration of stay for both the spiritual and healing purpose is usually not voluntary; it has to come through a “message” from God which is appropriately conveyed to the concerned person previously. Through “visions” the impending trouble on a person are foretold and the person undertakes the fasting and prayer programme to avert the same. Such believers, except for attending the daily church service, isolate themselves in the privacy of their rooms and continuously keep themselves engaged in prayer and fasting. The *prayer warriors* visit them at regular intervals and pray for them. During such prayers, they may experience intense mystical feeling and ecstasy. At the end of their stay, they share their experience with the congregation. Many testify to have been healed of their specific problems or disease. They leave contented and the news is shared in their respective churches and social circle. New batches of needy believers come and go throughout the year. The centre is usually frequented to its capacity.

We could meet many believers who *aspired* to visit the place for spiritual retreat and to receive cure from disease. From the discussions with the Church members it was found that the healing aspects appeal both to lay Christians and people of other faith.

**V. The widows: their conversion narratives:** The cognitive revolution in the 1970s steered research in the human sciences away from the objective behaviourist doctrine, causing a new way of understanding the world. Under this, the full range of peoples' inner experiences was considered to be a legitimate aspect for study. Thus the fundamental concepts of the human sciences became less atomistic, less mechanistic, more subjective, contextual, and humanistic, so that the role of religion in the healing of human suffering could be studied from the active viewpoint of the believer (Paden 1992:400). Andre Billette (Mossiere 2007:119) suggests that conversion narratives are built upon selected lived events that are interpreted in terms of the adopted religious ideology. Billette further argues that the path of the convert usually starts with repentance, which then acquires deeper implications through subsequent personal experiences full of strong emotions and, in the end, a sense of wholeness (Mossiere 2007:119). The conversion narratives of the widows we encountered conform to a general feeling of "new-birth" and renewal, marked by a sense of gratitude and unwavering belief in the faith they have embraced. They appeared to be contented, living a life with purpose (as a Christian in the prayer centre) than the one they had left behind (life before conversion).

All the women *prayer warriors* in the centre are widows. They have (temporarily) left their homes and children behind. They occasionally visit their home and children and the visit is similarly returned. Interestingly, despite their claim to have been healed of physical ailments after living in the prayer centre, they make sporadic visits to the nearby government health centres for ailments prone in elderly age. That said, they definitely enjoy a better state of health compared to their "pre-Christian" life. Like other members of their congregation, these widows *prayer warriors* also regularly pray for peace in the state (this reflects the consciousness of the Church about the ethnic heterogeneity of the state and its attempt to foster a harmonious environment), country and world (in pure Christian spirit of universal brotherhood). In a way, these illiterate widows from various villages with less exposure now relate to the world outside through the medium of Church and stake their rightful place in it by assuming the role of a *moral benefactor* by way of praying for its order and stability. Her role is now widened; she is no longer confined to her customary chores.

**VI. Widows and the tribal society and cosmology:** If the nature of the widows' engagement with the new faith is one of fullness, joy and hope our study will be incomplete without exploring the general socio-psychological atmosphere they left behind- the indigenous customary religion and cosmology. What drove, or attracted these widows away from their family, village and traditional social life? Was their stay in the prayer centre a reflection of a quest for a separate "self" as apart from their families where they had no similar space? According to Griffith (1997:337), religious converts from various religious traditions and historical periods have narrated their salvation experiences as the liberation or the recovery of the authentic self. Did social restrictions on these women in a traditionally patriarchal society motivate conversion (since studies shows that Christianity itself perpetuates patriarchy, notably by specifying and idealizing gendered roles within the

church) and their stay in the residential prayer centre? Does the cosmology of traditional rituals, apart from its complexity and economic burden, offer insights into the larger conversion process and the ease with which the converts get adopted to the practices of the new faith? In other words, can we establish a logical relationship between gendered customary roles and the apparent freedom of women in the church on one hand and the tribal cosmology and Christian healing method on the other hand? We cannot argue our study to have outlined a satisfactory answer to these questions but we offer some possible points of conjecture as might be relevant between these issues.

The women interviewed belong to the Galo tribe in which patriarchal values shape the approach and outlook towards women. Polygyny was common and polyandry was also practised (Srivastav 1962 and Nyori 1993) until recent times. Women's right to property is purely usufructuary. Forced and negotiated child marriages were common till recent past. Traditional village council is purely a man's domain; they value and set idealised roles for women. The 'power of interpretation' (Chen 2005:240) in formal customary set up is entirely invested on men. Most of the prayer warriors we interviewed come from polygynous marriages. Other aspects of Galo society which have bearing on women's position are: strict emphasis on kinship ties; patrilineal descent and its ritual narration during rituals, marriages and gathering; and the idealisation of joint family. Because kinship obligations figure so prominently in traditional Galo culture, the conflicting tensions between "secular" kinship commitments and the daily routine of life as a Christian become more heightened. Stay in the prayer centre offers them a window to meaningfully explore their new identity- the self.

Throughout her life these women were entrapped in the societal norms of the patriarchy. She served the role of an indulgent, protective and caring daughter, wife and mother. She was looked upon at times of distress and pain yet was taken for granted when it came to her emotional needs. The void in the lives of the widows was filled by the idea of a loving and caring God which the church made readily available for them. In place of the traditional "soul-journey" which one had to take after death under the indigenous belief system (Kamsi 2015: 164-170) came the assurance of the ever-living, compassionate God in heaven in whose loving embrace they will be going after they die.

**VII. Discussion and Conclusion:** While evaluating conversion narratives, the newly adopted beliefs and religious values have to be taken into consideration as argued by Andre Mary (as cited in Mossiere 2007:49). Andre Mary says that the quest for expressing the self and the desire for a life of philosophical contemplation and emotional quietude could only be fulfilled by conversion to Christianity (as cited in Mossiere 2007:49). The narratives of the widows in question reflect their growing sense of independence and autonomy by being in the new faith. They have social comfort in accepting the new faith in that the Christian practice of concept of prophesy and healing finds a customary parallel in the practice of ritual foretelling of impending disaster or ailment through divination of egg/chicken liver divination and propitiating the *uyu* (literally "spirits").

In his work on religions, Max Weber wrote extensively on the potential for religion to break and transform traditional social institutions (as cited in Chen 2005:341). The increasing number of adherents to Christian faith in the state in the recent decades is bound to have its impact on the traditional social mores and culture. It will take some time to access the full import of these impacts as Christianity as a social force is a relatively new, post-colonial phenomenon. That ways, the legacy of the church in Arunachal Pradesh may not take the trajectory of other hill societies in the northeast like that of Nagaland or Mizoram. The widows of our study are one agency as well as product of such processes. Recent critiques on the onslaught of Christianity on indigenous culture in Arunachal Pradesh have singularly emphasised on the “loss-and -preserve” aspect of traditional culture. In the process a very important aspect of socio-cultural change i.e. emotional dimensions of conversion is not properly analysed. In similar tribal societies in the northeast where the Church has a longer history, the role of Christianity in emancipating women from patriarchy is debated (Ao 2010: 100-107; Sawmveli and Tellis 2010: 130-131). Issues such as this can also be explored in Arunachal when we engage the question of religious conversion taking into consideration the emotional and psychological factors in a particular social set up rather than purely engaging in polemics. In non-industrialised and tribal societies the concept of old-age home is unknown. In utilitarian terms, the *Arunachal Christian Prayer Centre* in a way offers the same function as an old-age home.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://blog.cpsindia.org/2016/02/religion-data-of-census-2011-xiii.html> on 03-06-2017 02:00 pm.