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Why 1978 'anti-conversion' law in Arunachal could now be enforced

Arunachal Pradesh is home to a number of different small ethnic communities with an array of different beliefs and practices.

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The Act also requires that every act of conversion be reported to the Deputy Commissioner of the district concerned, and punishes the person conducting the conversion for failure to do so.

The Arunachal Pradesh government is working to bring a 1978 law against "forceful" conversion out of cold storage by framing rules for its implementation, 46

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What is the Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act?

The law, **enacted by the then Union Territory of Arunachal Pradesh's first Legislative Assembly**, prohibits religious conversion "by use of force or inducement or by fraudulent means". It entails punishment of imprisonment for up to two years and a fine of up to Rs 10,000 for the offence of "converting or attempting to convert" forcefully "from one religious faith to another faith."

The Act also requires that every act of conversion be reported to the Deputy Commissioner of the district concerned, and punishes the person **conducting the conversion** for failure to do so. Since it was enacted in 1978, successive governments have not framed the rules for its implementation, because of which it lay dormant for nearly five decades.

Why was the Act introduced?

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Arunachal Pradesh is home to a number of different small ethnic communities with an array of different beliefs and practices. The Monpas and Sherdukpens of West Arunachal Pradesh bordering Tibet and Bhutan practise Mahayana Buddhism, while the Khamptis and Singphos in Eastern Arunachal practise Theravada Buddhism.

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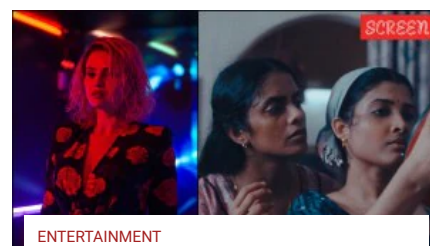
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Many other tribes engage in polytheistic nature and ancestor worship. Of these, the worship of Donyi Polo in particular — practised by the Tani group of tribes comprising the Nyishis, Adis, Apatanis, Galos, Misings and Tagins — has taken an institutionalised form over the years.

Unlike other hilly North Eastern states like Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya, Christianity entered Arunachal only in the 1950s.

This was not just due to the difficult terrain, but also the colonial policy of isolating the “frontier regions”, which included restrictions on the entry of missionaries. These restrictions continued after Independence via the Inner Line system.

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Missionary efforts in the foothill areas of Assam led to inroads in the 1950s. The first church in Arunachal was set up in 1957 at Rayang village in the present-day district of East Siang, close to Assam’s Dhemaji district. In the coming decades, census data indicated a steady growth in the number of people identifying as Christians — from 0.79% of the population in 1971 to 4.32% in 1981.

Communities such as the Padam, Adi, Nocte and Nyishi, located near the foothill missions, in particular witnessed massive change, which triggered “debates about the various ways in which missionaries proselytise, the socio-cultural changes that conversion brought to the respective tribes, and what level of threat conversion poses to indigenous religions” in the state Assembly, sociologists Bhaswati Borgohain and Mekory Dodum wrote in ‘Religious Nationalism, Christianisation and Institutionalization of Indigenous Faiths in Contemporary Arunachal Pradesh, India’ (2023). MLAs demanded “protection of their indigenous religions and cultures”.

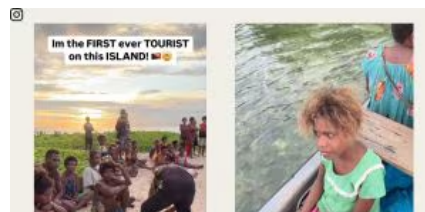
Why has the Act remained dormant?

The Act was contested in Arunachal and beyond even before it received Presidential assent. The Arunachal Christian Forum was formed the year after it was enacted, its current president Tarh Miri says, to push for the repeal of the Act. It continues to lead the push against the Act, which Miri called an “anti-Christian law” that can be “misused by the district administration or police”.

The number of Christians in Arunachal has grown rapidly over the years. Christians constituted 30.26% of the population in the last census of 2011, making



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implement [the Act] so far," Miri said.

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He added, however, that there are now chances of "interference by external forces", referring to the [BJP government](#) in the state, and the RSS and its affiliates, who view the state's "indigenous faiths" as part of "Sanatana Dharma".

Why is the Act back now?

In 2022, advocate Tambo Tamin, who is a former general secretary of the Indigenous Faiths and Cultural Society of Arunachal Pradesh (IFCSAP), had [filed a PIL in the Itanagar Bench of the Gauhati High Court](#) appealing for the court to [intervene over the "failure" of the state government to frame rules for the Act.](#)

On September 30 this year, after the Advocate General of Arunachal Pradesh told the court that the finalisation of the draft rules would take another six months, the court closed the petition stating that "we expect the concerned authorities to be mindful of their obligations and the draft rules would be finalised within a period of six months from today."

Maya Murtem, General Secretary of the IFCSAP, said that the implementation of the Act would be an "armour... with the rate at which conversions are happening" in the state. "Many of the people who have converted are moving away from their traditional practices, calling them 'alien' and 'evil. So this Act is urgent to preserve our culture," she said.

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Murtem said that the activities of the RSS and its affiliates in the state are not seen with similar concern. "The RSS doesn't convert us but they have guided us in institutionalising and documenting our faith," she said.

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