



DONYI-POLOISM: AN ECO-SPIRITUAL WAY OF LIFE

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Abstract: The term ‘ecology’ has become one of the most debated topics of discussion and research in many circles precisely because of the increased concern and awareness about the irreparable damages that are being done to the environment leading to the annihilation of our *oikos* (mother earth). Viewed from the sociological perspective, the ecological crisis is a crisis of culture, a crisis that has to do with the substantial loss of the sacrality of nature¹ in various cultures which once considered as something very divine and core to the individual existence. The ecological crisis looming over the universe can be overcome by considering the world as sacred (tribal way) and God as the author of creation (Pergamon, 1992). Researches carried out among various cultures and their relationship with the nature underlines this fact. This article presents the *Adi* tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, north-eastern part of India which symbolizes in their culture the various important aspects of eco-spirituality (stewardship) and mystery of nature. This paper provides insights into the notion of eco-spirituality from *Adi* perspective, in particular how their beliefs and practices assist them to live a life of harmony with God and nature. The data is collected from the existing literature on the theme and the author’s personal interview with senior members of the *Adi* tribe.

Index Terms - Eco-Spirituality, Ecology, Tribe, Donyi-Poloism, Adi, Eco-Theology.

DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

Spirituality: The word spirituality has its root in Latin word ‘*spiritualis*’ which means the state of being spiritual. In the literal sense it is all about what moves and animates a person. Some view spirituality from the angle of life and the world, few explain it as an encounter with personal God and others hold it as a way of life in which the transcendent being becomes part and parcel of one’s life. Spirituality is an endeavour not purely a set of concepts or beliefs to be investigated or conjectured but it is a vision of life and a way of living which calls for personal choice and action-oriented approach.

Ecology: Ecology is an integrated science; its laws are compatible with the integrity of the creation in which one believes; it basically addresses the inseparable interrelationship and interaction between the biotic and abiotic environment. The term ecology has its origin in the Greek word, *oikos* which means house. The term was first used by Ernst Haeckel in 1873, refers to that branch of biology which deals with the interrelationships between organisms and their environment (Chakkavarackal, 2004). The in-depth study of ecological interactions offers valuable information on nature and its evolutionary transformation. The main crest here is the eternal existence of a harmony between *Homo sapiens* and the natural environment in which they reside (Sarkar, 2000). This harmony is preserved and promoted when human organisms, the pinnacle of God’s creation with all their competencies, respect and love unconditionally the environment in which they live. Thus, ecology is a major concern for everyone whether believers or atheists because it is in this harmonious existence, the earth and all its organisms are preserved.

Eco-Theology: Though spirituality and theology are not the same in literal sense, but both are complementary. Eco-theology means the theories on God originated from authentic experiences of men and women in the mystery of the nature.

Eco-Spirituality: The term eco-spirituality directs one’s focus to the cosmos which is considered as the place of God’s theophany. This discipline studies one’s relationship to God as it develops in the context of the relationships with the cosmos in its totality. The major challenge of eco-spirituality is to discover the Almighty from within not considering as far away entity. Eco-spirituality becomes very much significant for us because, in nature, the unfolding of the personal God is visible and one is able to encounter and experience it in a tangible manner. In this sense, eco-spirituality is a way of life and foundation and perceives the universe as a sacrament and incarnation of God.

The basic understanding of the key terms challenges one’s behaviour and attitudes because down through the centuries human beings lived as if they are the sole authority over the universe and felt that they are not the part of the nature or the universe. But an eco-spiritual view surely perturbs our traditional notion as masters of the earth with the idea that creation as community of interconnectedness with each other and with the supreme. This understanding of interconnectedness drives one to experience the

¹ Attributing sacredness to the nature

Supreme in the nature, enables man/woman to conceive the profound meaning of ecology and eco-theology and facilitates eco-spirituality centric life.

ADIS: THE FOCUS GROUP

Arunachal Pradesh, popularly known as the ‘land of the rising sun’, positioned in the north eastern part of India. Arunachal, the largest state (area-wise) in the north-eastern region, is the homeland of about 110 tribes and sub-tribes, and this anthropologically rich region has about 25 major ethnic groups. Each tribe has its own unique culture, customs, tradition and dialect (Deepak Pandey & Byomakesh, 1997). Some of the tribes are *Adi*, *Aka*, *Apaphani*, *Mishmi*, *Nishi*, *Manas*, *Panggi*, *Karko*, etc. The *Adis* are the people who predominantly inhabit the Siyang, Siyap, Siyom, Siyik and lower region of Dibang valley of Arunachal Pradesh. This tribe is subdivided into many sub-tribes some of them are *Minyong*, *Galonong*, *Padam*, *Pasi*, *Simong*, *Bori* and *Bokar*.

The name *Adi* means ‘hill man’. They are paleo-mangloid who are extremely close to the nature. They speak *Tanii Agom* with dialectical variations from region to region (Ering, 2011). Though there are dialectical differences yet the language and culture of *Adis* have many commonalities. They follow indigenous religion known as *Donyi-Poloism*, the cult of dual-deities, sun and moon. The nature forms the integral part of *Adis’* life. They have direct association with all the natural objects. Their proximity to the nature is portrayed aesthetically in songs, dances and crafts and their buildings are beautiful testimony of their ethos.

Adis and their Socio-Cultural Life

The *Adi* tribe is organized on the basis of clan or village and the social relations are determined by kinship and locality. The social organization of the *Adis* is patrilineal. The smallest unit of society is the family consists of father, mother and children. Marriage is legitimate within the tribe, but not within the clan. Clan is very important in the organization of the *Adi* society, and breach of clan rule is considered as a serious offence. They lead an open life, the entire house consists of a big hall, and all share the same. There is no reservation while eating even between the master and the slave. The dances are very popular among the *Adis*. Their traditional dance is *Ponung*, which is religious in nature. There are also other social institutions like *Kebang* (village council) *Bango* and *Rasheng*- boys’ and girls’ dormitory respectively.²

Festivals, dances, songs and ceremonies are integral part of the socio-cultural life of the people of Arunachal Pradesh. The festivals mirror the people’s culture and their life. Being agriculturalists, *Adis’* economic, social, and cultural life totally depend on the nature. Agriculture being the basic means of livelihood the festivals related to agriculture is celebrated in a very flamboyant manner with the objectives of acknowledging God’s providence or of invoking His blessings for a rich harvest. Community sees to the detailed arrangement of the festivals and the ritual part is performed by the priest (Paul, 2003). In addition to routine festivals, there are also few well planned and articulated schedules of rites where animal sacrifice is carried out (Deepak Pandey & Byomakesh, 1997). During these festivals, every member of the village without any distinction comes together and shares their joy and excitement and expresses concretely their oneness and solidarity. Some of the most important festivals are: *Solung*, *Mopin*, *Etor*, *Uning*, and *Dongen* (Paul, 2003; Kumar, 1973)

Religion

The origin of the religion of the *Adis* is blanketed in the web of numerous beliefs, myths and traditions. Beliefs in benevolent and malevolent spirits play an important role in strengthening their faith in religion. They consider that every object whether animate or inanimate has its own spirit and believe in an unseen world, where gods and people live as a huge family. They believe that a supernatural power called *Sedi*³ has created all beings of the universe. Their religion is popularly known as *Donyi-Polyism* or *Donyi-Polo* religion. The practice of magic and witchcraft are prevalent among the *Adis* (Daniel, 2002). Their religion promotes an eco-friendly life because they are certain of the fact that everything that exists in the world in one way or the other related to God and man.

BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

Adis’ faith and beliefs are evolved through their age-old experience of nature. Through their close relationship with the nature, they developed an eco-spirituality, a holistic relationship with God, man and nature. Therefore, their beliefs are the basis of their eco-spiritual way of life. A detailed study of beliefs and concepts helps us to understand better their eco-spiritual way of life.

Concept of God

Adis follow a complex system of beliefs in their spiritual practices. They believe that the entire universe and all its organisms are created by a supreme God called *Sedi*. This supreme God has created a number of gods and goddesses who in turn have given birth to so many invisible spirits to control the various spheres of human life. In fact, they consider that the entire universe is the physical embodiment of *sedi*. The *Adi abangs* (folksongs) narrate that in the process of creation, *Sedi*, the creator himself transformed parts of his body into rivers, valleys, air, water, stones, rocks, flora and fauna, the sun, the moon and the stars. After the creation, *Sedi* has become silent observer. However, he continues to keep vigil over the universe and humanity through the pair of searching eyes- ‘*Donyi*’, the sun and ‘*Polo*’, the moon. *Donyi-Polo*, the manifestation of the two eyes of *Sedi*, is regarded as the symbol of creator and protector of mankind (Rikam, 1989). The analysis of the folk tales and myths shows that the *Donyi-Polo* comes next to *sedi-melo*. No sacrifice is made to *sedi* because they believe that the creator God *sedi* (*Sedi-melo*) is beyond and does not require any sacrifices. But *Adis* offer sacrifices and invoke *Donyi-Polo*. This concept of *Adis* is the basis of their concept of sacredness of nature and creation. As God himself is part of the nature they consider themselves also as part of nature, not apart from. This is in fact the foundation for the eco-spiritual way of life.

²Boys’ and girls’ dormitory are known as *bango* and *rasheng* respectively but the names differ according to the dialectical differences.

³ *sedi* or *keym*, or *Jimi* or *sedi-melo* by the *minyongs*, *Galos* and *Boris* respectively

The Material Aspect of *Donyi-Polo*

Out of all the natural objects *Donyi*, the sun and *Polo*, the moon, attract them the most. The physical existence of the sun and the moon are the truth beyond dispute. The basic belief is that they exist in the distant sky like two large beaming eyes and stand eternally for the welfare of the creation. The *Donyi* rises at the day break to enable the humanity to see objects around them and *Polo* appears at night with dim light to soften human mind and heart. *Donyi-Polo* renders great material services to humanity and to the creation at large without any return from human beings (Ering, 2011). The *Adis* express supreme respect to *Donyi-polo*.

Mythical Aspects of *Donyi-Polo*

The *Adis* are very fond of narrating fabulous myths and stories. The most important source of Adi myths is *Abangs*.⁴ These tales have same theme but narration may differ from village to village. *Solung abang* is one of the most important *abangs* performed by *Miri* on the occasion of *solung* festival in the form of *ponung* (traditional song). It is a cosmogonic-centric and deals elaborately about creation, evolution of universe and birth of divine, all living and non-living things (Tayeng, 2003). A short analysis of these traditional myths and stories help to grasp the concept of *Donyi-Polo*.

In the initial stages, emptiness pervaded the space; there was neither light, nor matter and sound in the space. This state of emptiness was known as *keym (Kero)*.⁵ During the course of time a spontaneous *Yumkang* (vibration) unfolded within the vacuum and the continuous vibration led to the formation of *kasi* (a great vibration) which gradually engulfed the entire *keyum-kero*, and after a period of time, *Mukseng* a tiny star like object in the center of the vibration in seen and unseen form appeared. In due course of time, it consolidated into *Sedi*.⁶ From *Sedi*, *Melo* was originated. *Sedi* and *Melo* are the first physical manifestations emerging from the incomprehensible *keyum* or *kero*. *Sedi* a female being turned into the earth while *melo* a male being became the sky. In order to continue the process of creation they married each other and began to produce various offspring in the world (Tayeng, 2003). During this process *Sedi-Melo* merged and the two eyes of the creator became sun and moon. Through *Donyi-Polo* the creator God (*Sedi-Melo*) keeps vigil on the universe (Ering, 1998).

The myths show that the nature in its varied manifestations is the object of religious inspiration, reverence and often of owes, fear, worship and supplication. Since elements of nature such as the sun and the moon have awesome power and implications for individual's existence *Adis* have evolved an extraordinary faith based on *Donyi* and *Polo*. Though they worship *Donyi-polo* yet they are not the objects of worship but the symbols of divine life, truth and beauty (Bhagabati, 1998).

DONYI-POLO: A WAY OF LIFE

Donyi-Polo is considered as a religion and is an associate member of the world movement for religious freedom. Ering (1998) rightly puts it using his own experiences how the trust in *Donyi-Polo* made him to form a concept of religion and God and prompted him to cultivate the spirit of truthfulness, wisdom, blissfulness, compassion, love, friendliness etc. in his life. Though the tag of religion is there, yet I personally find that it is not a religion as such that guides, but a tribal aspiration that motivates the people to live an eco-spiritual way of life.

Donyi-Polo is a philosophy of life with myths and superstitions which give colour of a religion. According to *Adis*, the light of the sun and moon constitutes the established channel of traditional aspiration of the people. They call it *Donyi bene and Polo Gon*, the great path and bridge that lead the tribe to their ideological peak of glory. The essence of *Donyi-Polo* can be traced out by analyzing the behaviour, conduct, expression, and traditional myths of the tribe. *Donyi-polo* means differently on different occasion 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 that truth is the essence of *Donyi-Polo*'s faith and culture (Ering 1998). They ascribe everything from life to death, to *Donyi-Polo*.

Traditionally *Adis* consider *Donyi-Polo* as the eyes of human consciousness. *Donyi mikmie seri ne, polo migore serone* i.e., the searching and piercing eternal eyes that watch the humanity ceaselessly. As the two objects in the sky focus light to enable us to see what is what, so the eyes of conscience, i.e., *Donyi-polo* illuminate our mind to take ethically correct decisions (Ering, 2011). They swear in the name of *Donyi-Polo*, and respect people who are outstanding in morality and address them with respect as, *Donyi-Polo omneo-* children of truthfulness, *Donyi-Polo Abu-* representative of *Donyi-Polo*, *Donyi-Polo Ami-* a man after *Donyi-Polo* etc.

As *Donyi-polo* becomes the highest aspiration, the *Adis* live in conformity with the light. The faith and belief find strong foundation in nature. Nature is mother, teacher, and educator. They consider all beings emerge out of nature, live in nature, and melt into nature and have all objects of nature as their relations.

In order to safeguard the ecological balance *Adis* try to protect the nature through different practices emerges from the belief that the whole nature and human beings are interrelated and interdependent. For example, *Rinyo* (tiger) is considered to be a brother in direct line therefore killing of tiger is equal to a murder, and so on...is one of the beliefs which help them to protect the endangered species. By the very concept of brother in direct line shows the blood relationship and expresses itself in deep rooted solidarity. Their faith and belief enable them to lead an eco-spiritual life. They consider destruction of nature as destruction of themselves. The interrelatedness and interconnectedness of God – Human being – nature basically form foundation of their life.

The *abangs* celebrates the divinity of the nature and the universe along with the necessity of human beings to be one with the nature. Being very close to the nature, the experiences gained through the generations evolved into a philosophy of life which is deeply rooted in their way of life. Therefore, one cannot distinguish their way of life from religious or secular rather one can conclude that their belief in *Donyi-Polo* enables them to be one with nature and the universe leading them to an eco-spiritual way of life.

⁴ Ceremonial song, sung by the *miri* or priest on festival and other social occasions

⁵ Name changes as the dialectical variations. Some call it *Keyumkero* and consider it as the great mother

⁶ It is known as *sedi dimyong mayne*, i.e., the embodiment of the universe.

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS: ECO-SPIRITUALITY - A WAY OF LIFE

Religion without reason is blind in the same way experience without reflection is void of its value. *Adi* tribal eco-spiritual way of life can be a source and inspiration for the rediscovery (retrieval) of the eco-spirituality.

Eco-spirituality is a manifestation of the spiritual bond between individual human persons and the environment and is grounded on a basic faith in the sacredness of nature, earth and universe. From an eco-spiritual perspective, God, spirit, or the divine is very much a part of creation, a part with which one constantly interact using one's senses and intuitions and from such interactions and experiences acquire deeper insight into the wonder of reality. The challenge of eco-spirituality is to discover God within – not apart from – this totality, and to view the totality as dynamic and interdependent that is, to find our relationship with the entire cosmos, with God as the center and creator of this master piece.

The nature looks after the basic necessities of a tribal man/woman. He/she develops an interdependent culture from the use of materials taken directly from the nature. The religion may be in its primitive form but is in fact, the vital essence of faith, not a mere idea. The essence of faith is a matter of pleasure which the nature only can offer. Even though the tribal faith lacks a kind of metaphysical approach like that of the developed religions it has a pragmatic approach from the very life situation rooted in the nature. *Adis* does not express directly any concepts like transcendence and immanence but their experience of supernatural makes them to see the transcendence in this immanent world. In this sense, the love, care and respect for the natural environment and ecosystem shown by the *Adis* shows that it springs from their age-old experience and relationship of the transcendent in the immanent surroundings. The experience of natural phenomena of *Donyi-Polo* helps the *Adis* to perceive the unseen divine power (God).

Adis experience the transcendent God in the wonder of the nature. They respect the nature. Their holistic vision of life runs through each and every interaction with nature. Their myths describe powerfully the vital relationship between human beings and cosmic forces. They have keen insights on the healing power of the natural herbs. Through their rituals they wake up holistically to the divine dimension of nature. In their festivals they celebrate with great joy their belonging to the cosmic home (Painadath, 1998). The close and intimate relationship of the *Adis* to natural environment has evolved through several stages of experimentation, trials and errors. The different elements of their culture are interwoven and well configured with the existing ecological conditions and challenges. Their world-view, socio-political systems, religious endeavour, food, dress, habitat, music, and dance all are attuned to their immediate nature. And above all the concept of *Donyi-Polo* as a deity and as ideological perfection helps them to live a life of harmony with nature and cosmos. Thus, the *Adi* way of life is very much eco-spiritual. The beauty of the association of *adis* with the nature calls the entire universe to relook and reorient one's attitude towards God and His creation. A caring relationship and commitment to creation by *Adis* definitely paves the way to understand the real author of creation.

The realization of the mysterious aspect of the nature is a concept that helps us to rely on the providence of God. It can be called as the mystery of the ecology. In this 21st century, science and technology claim superiority over nature and eco-system but when calamities and problems arise, we realize that science and technology is not superior to nature and eco-system but the age-old customs and practices of the tribals show that their reliance on the nature is absolute and in full faith not mere dependency because as part of the nature they don't presume anything worst other than those created by man.

Harmony of God, Man and Nature

Life is the stream where God, Man and Nature flow together. The tribals go further and identify God to nature i.e., they do not differentiate God from the nature. For E.g., *Adis* consider *Sedi* (God) in the process of creation merged into the creation and became land, water, trees, etc. they look at God, Man and Nature from an interrelated perspective. The nature is understood as the symbol of unity of all living creatures, the spirits and the creator. This harmonious world view can be called as *Theo-Anthropo-Cosmic* world view. It can be called even a life-centered world view, life, not in a univocal term but in its diversity and complexity. It gives a place of excellence to human beings as loving care takers but not as dominators. This harmonious world-view of the tribals leads them to a life in oneness with the nature. Therefore, their practices and beliefs are eye opener for us to see the divinity of nature and to give due respect.

CONCLUSION

If we try to solve the ecological problems by introducing new ethical values or rearranging the importance of the traditional ones, it is clear from the history that we will not go very far in reaching a solution that lasts. In my opinion theology must try to adjust the past to the present by creatively combining it with whatever is best in philosophy, art, science, age-old wisdom, and other areas of thought. *Adis* look at God, Man and Nature from an interrelated perspective. This harmonious world-view can be called as *Theo-Anthropo-Cosmic* world view. It can be called even a life centered world view because life is the stream where God, Man and Nature flow together. In Thomas Merton's words- 'you have to take God and creatures all together and see God in creation and creation in God and don't ever separate them. Thus, everything manifests God instead of hiding God or being in the way of God as obsolete.' A tribal eco-spiritual way of life can be considered as one of the solutions to the contemporary ecological crisis.

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