Followers of indigenous faiths in Arunachal Pradesh have resented Chief Minister Pema Khandu's move to repeal an anti-conversion law that they say is necessary to save traditional belief systems and local cultures.

Mr. Khandu, who heads the BJP government in the frontier State, had on Thursday said the Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act framed in 1978 would be repealed in the next Assembly session.

The law undermines secularism and is probably targeted at Christians, Mr. Khandu said at a function organised by the Arunachal Pradesh Catholic Association (APCA).

In statements issued on Friday evening, the Indigenous Faith and Cultural Society of Arunachal Pradesh (IFCSAP) and the Nyishi Indigenous Faiths and Cultural Society (NIFCS) slammed the move as “minority appeasement and detrimental to the growth of indigenous people of the State”.

**Fight for preservation**

The Nyishi, belonging to the Tani group, is the largest ethnic community in Arunachal Pradesh. The IFCSAP and the NIFCS are major organisations that fight for preservation of indigenous faiths such as Donyi-Polo and Rangfra.

These organisations believe the growth of Christianity in the State – from none in 1951 to being the largest religious group at 30.26% in 2011 – has been at the expense of the followers of indigenous faiths.

“We condemn the statement of the Chief Minister as the anti-conversion law, if repealed, would threaten the indigenous culture of the State. There is also the apprehension among the people that the Chief Minister is bringing the denizens of Arunachal Pradesh under the minority or general category and stripping the special privileges which we have been enjoying as Scheduled Tribes,” Bai Taba, IFCSAP general secretary, said.

Repealing the law that safeguards the indigenous people would open the floodgates of poaching and it would lead to marginalisation of the indigenous people, he said, urging Mr. Khandu to withdraw the move.

The NIFCS said scrapping the anti-conversion law would extensively damage the basic structure of indigenous faiths and cultures that are still languishing from the persistent and aggressive influence of foreign cultures.

“The Chief Minister is undermining the sentiments and emotions of the indigenous faith believers of the State by making such a statement,” Pai Dawe, president of NIFCS, said.

The Arunachal Christian Forum and APCA welcomed Mr. Khandu’s announcement.