

THE RELIGIOUS COMPOSITION OF INDIA'S POPULATION

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Abstract

Based on census data from the 2001 census, this paper attempts to understand the religious composition of India. The country's population comprises all the major religions of the world along with a wide range of tribal groups which practice animism to a considerable extent. Hindus accounted for more than four-fifths of the country's total population in 2001. Significantly, the religious minorities were mostly concentrated in the peripheral areas of the country. The emergence of four major religions in the Indian realm have been of crucial importance in structuring its religious composition. Besides, repeated invasions from across the northwest border for about seven centuries, trade linkages, and colonialism all have contributed to the religious diversity of the country.

Keywords: India, religious composition, conversions, census data, minorities, tribal people.

Religion has been a very important factor determining the socio-cultural and political pulse of the people for about two millennia. Even today both intra-national and international politics are shaped by religion in one way or other. Besides the fact that it is a part of a person's identity, it is also "a certain variety of communication" (Beyer, 1994, p. 5). At least in some parts of the world, religion's role would be long lasting in terms of certain food habits, and even with regard to cultivation of some crops and raising of some animals (Jordon and Rowntree, 1976, p. 250). For instance, reverence for the cow and prohibition on beef eating among Hindus, and prohibition on pork in the Muslim countries would continue to be there with its own implications for the lives of these animals. Similarly, religious negation on tobacco smoking among the Sikhs would not allow cultivation of tobacco in the Indian Punjab, the area of main concentration of this community in India, at least in the foreseeable future. Besides, the places of religious worship of various religions make their own characteristic impact on the physical as well as mental landscapes. The congregation of people at such places at various occasions in a year, religious pilgrimages, and religious rites and rituals at various stages of life from birth till death point toward a pervasive role of religion in human life.

Despite frequent assertions to the contrary, religion would continue to be an important part of human life until mystery concerning death, *karma*, and one's share of happiness and sorrow in life gets resolved, if ever, satisfactorily. But until such a time arrives, there is a strong need to understand the implications of social reproduction of religious "symbols, rites, beliefs and hopes in all their cultural

actuality” (Sopher, 1981, p. 519) for a proper comprehension of geography, history, politics, and sociology of different areas. The resurgence of religion among people who happen to come under extreme socio-economic and political stress further calls for in-depth studies in this direction. Apart from its significant effect on voting patterns, religious composition also carries its own implications for fertility levels, occupational structure, and migration patterns, particularly in the developing countries like India. Thus, the study of religious composition furnishes an important and fruitful area of research.

Hindus

Comprising hundreds of different endogamous ethnic groups, Hinduism has all through been numerically a major component of population in South Asia. Though it has a very long history spanning over three millenniums, it was mainly “under the Guptas in the North and Pallavas and Cholas in the South that Hinduism crystallized into a strong theistic movement” (Rizvi, 1983, p.127). Significantly, though different castes among Hindu work to ethnise the population vertically, they often tend to get themselves unified horizontally, and, hence, work to strengthening the unity of the country. This has been particularly the case in the post-independence period in the wake of the constitutional provisions regarding reservation in education and jobs for scheduled castes as well as the emergence of caste-based political parties in the country. Hinduism is a highly incorporative religion accommodaing both polytheists, monotheists and even atheists. Perhaps it would not be far from the truth to say that ‘a Hindu can assert that all religious human beings are in fact Hindus whether or not they know or desire it’ (Sopher, 1967, p. 3). Even if a Hindu worships a local deity, he/she holds a pantheistic dream (Risley, 1969, 252). It has a great capacity to accept as well as absorb a great range of difference. The innate flexibility and immense diversity of Hinduism has been the main reason for its survival, and continual revitalization despite centuries of religious conversions to other religions from amongst its adherents. For instance Jainism, which ‘rejected sacredness of the Vedas and the privileged position of the priests, the twice-born Brahmins’ (Murti, 1972, p.13) has now virtually become a sect of Hinduism. Similarly, though ‘the Buddha was scrupulously silent on the existence of God’ yet ironically he has been adopted as ‘a god in the Hindu pantheon’ (Murti, 1972, p. 13). But for its flexibility, it would have collapsed under the weight of its own ethnic diversity in such a long period of time. To what extent the trend toward increasing ‘standardisation’ of Hinduism under the influence of *Hindutava* forces in recent decades would cut into its well-known flexibility and its subtle incorporative spirit, calls for a separate study.

As per the 2001 census, Hindu population of the country stood at 827,578,868. In terms of absolute numbers, the Hindus constitute the third largest religious community in the world, after Christians and Muslims in that order. In 27 of the 35 states and union territories in the country, Hindus were in the majority. The highest proportion of Hindus was found in Himachal Pradesh (95.43%) followed by Chhattisgarh (94.70 %), Orissa (94.35 %), Dadra and Nagar Haveli (93.52%) and Madhya Pradesh (91.15 %). On the other hand, the lowest proportion of this community was recorded in Mizoram (3.55 %) followed by Lakshadweep (3.66 %),

Nagaland (7.70 %), Meghalaya (13.27 %), Jammu and Kashmir (29.63 %), and Arunachal Pradesh (34.60 %).

The Hindus constituted a very heavy majority of India's population, and their proportion of total population of the country was 80.46 % in 2001. In 192 or 32.38% of the total 593 districts in the country in 2001, their share was above 90%, and in another 32.38 % it was between 80 and 90%. In 84 of the districts this figure was 95% or more while in 28 districts it exceeded even 98 %. Significantly in only 14.33 % of the districts the proportion of Hindus to total population was less than 50%.

Brush (1949, p. 84) rightly distinguishes two major and politico-culturally vital concentrations of Hindus in India, i.e., the Gangetic plain and the southeastern coastal plain. Whereas the former has been the hub of the Hindu Indo-Aryan culture, the latter has been the core of the Dravidian culture. These two large areas, where Hinduism first got crystallized as an organized religious system, had stayed virtually separated for a long time by an east-west trending broad belt which remained largely forested with indifferent means of transport and communications till about the beginning of the twentieth century. This tract was mostly inhabited by quite a large number of tribes with their distinct religious belief systems; most of the tribes had been having their own languages. Until the advent of the British rule in these areas, various animistic religious beliefs of tribal people of this area remained more or less undisturbed except along the main transport routes running through their territories. The non-tribal rulers of these or the adjoining areas in the pre-British period neither found much economic attraction of tribal areas nor felt any political threat therefrom. However, with the beginning of British rule these areas became the focus of attention owing to their diverse and rich mineral and forest resources. Besides, higher religious conversions of tribal people furnished another attraction in this regard.

Figure 1 reveals that that in most parts of the country, proportion of Hindus to total population was more than 80%. This category of areas extends virtually across all the states of the country from the Gujarat coast in the west to West Bengal in the east and From Tamil Nadu in the south to Jammu area in the north. The Districts with very heavy preponderance (above 95%) of this community were mainly concentrated in Orissa, Chhattisgarh, northern Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh and Haryana. In other words, it included areas with concentrations of tribal people in central India, and the Western Himalayan region comprising Uttarakhand and most of Himachal Pradesh and the adjoining small strip of Jammu and Kashmir. All these tracts of very high proportion of Hindus to total population also furnish important clues to the process of religious conversions in the past.

Relatively low share of Hindu population was recorded in quite different areas indicating the operation of different sets factors. Even a cursory glance on figure 1 shows that such areas were mainly along the borders of the country. The largest area in this regard is northeast India including much of Assam and the adjoining states. This part of the country has been mostly outside the political boundaries of India before the coming of the British rule in the country. When the British took control of the area, it was marked by very thin scatter of population of different tribes who mostly practiced animism, and had their own distinct cultures. No doubt, Assam/Brahmaputra valley had long been attracting a trickle of land-hungry poor migrants, both Hindus and Muslims, from the densely populated adjoining province of Bengal. Later, consequent upon the development of means of transport, and the establishment

of several tea estates in the area, the tempo of immigration from Bengal, Bihar and Orissa picked up momentum which continued unabated till about mid-1960s. This immigration to Assam got notably reduced following the rise of a decade-long strong political movement against the inflow of 'outsiders' in the 1970s. The tribal majority areas of Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya experienced much greater incidence of proselytisation to Christianity. Relatively greater religious conversions to Islam, particularly from early 13th century until the independence of the country account for a low percentage Hindus in the Bengal tract. In the northern part of the country, the two adjoining states of Jammu and Kashmir, and Punjab also reported Hindus in minority in 2001. Whereas Muslims are in majority in the former, the Sikhs have numerical preponderance in the latter. Thus, apart from northeast India, the Bengal delta region as well as the Indus valley tract (Punjab), have relatively low percentage of Hindus. Another important area of relatively low percentage of Hindus is Kerala which has a notable proportion of Muslims and Christians in its population. Similarly, central Marathwara region, with notable share of Buddhists, southern part of Jharkhand and its adjoining parts in other states, with preponderance of Christians, are the other prominent areas with relatively low share of Hindus in total population. In short, it could be said that the proportion of Hindus show strong inverse correlation with increasing distance from the middle Gangetic Plain, which in Sopher's (1967, p. 48) words, was 'the ritually pure Brahman homeland' while both the Bengal delta tract and the Indus Valley area were considered as 'polluting alien territories' in around 500 B.C.

Muslims

The diffusion of Islam in India started simultaneous with its emergence in the seventh century A.D. Arabia. It occurred in different ways in various parts of the country, i.e., consequent upon trade-links with the Middle East, invasions from different parts of central Asia, migrations, emergence of Muslim rule in many parts, and religious conversions. Expectedly, growth of Muslim population has been considerably more in areas with longer duration of Muslim rule, and also in those having longer trading contacts with Arab countries.

Numbering 138,188,240, Muslims constituted 13.43 per cent of the total population of India in 2001. Significantly, India ranks second, after Indonesia, in the world in terms of the size of the Muslim population. About three-fourths of India's total Muslim population was concentrated in the following eight states: Uttar Pradesh (22.25%), West Bengal (14.65%), Bihar (9.93%), Maharashtra (7.43%), Kerala (5.69%), Andhra Pradesh (5.06%), Jammu and Kashmir (4.92%), and Karnataka (4.68%). In other words, the remaining 27 states and union territories had only one-fourth population of the Muslims indicating marked spatial variations in their relative concentration. Accordingly, there were equally large variations in their proportion to total population of various states. The highest proportion of Muslims to total population was found in Lakshadweep (95.47%) followed by Jammu and Kashmir (66.97%), Assam (30.92%), West Bengal (25.25%), and Kerala (24.70%). In all the remaining thirty states and union territories of the country, their proportion was less than 20 per cent. In eleven of them, it was below 5 per cent (Table 1).

The census data from 1881 onward reveals that India's Muslim population has been growing more rapidly as compared to other religious communities. Accordingly, their proportion to total population of the country had gone up from 19.97% to 24.28% during 1881-1941. Davis (1951, p. 192-93) attributed to religious conversions, well accepted practice of widow remarriage, and relatively high fertility. However, despite the fact that religious conversions to this faith have been just nominal, if at all, in the post-independence period, the share of this community has increased further from 10.69% in 1961 to 13.43% in 2001. It mainly stemmed from greater incidence of poverty among the Muslims, their higher level, of socio-economic insecurity, whether actual or perceived, and which together has contributed toward lesser adoption of family limitation measures among them (Bhagat, 2005, p. 414). Whether or not the notably higher growth rate of this community vis-vis Hindus has also something to do with accuracy of census returns deserves a separate study (Gill, 2007, p. 245).

In 88 (14.84%) of the 593 districts of the country, the Muslim proportion to total population was above 25%; in 20 of them, it was over 50%. Only eight districts had recorded it above 90%; in addition to the union territory of Lakshadweep (95.47%), these included seven districts from the state of Jammu and Kashmir, i.e., Anantnag (98.49%), Badgam (98.08%), Pulwama (97.61%), Baramula (97.55%), Kupwara (97.37%), Srinagar (94.65%), and Punch (91.92%). On the other hand, in more than 76 (12.82%) of the total districts this figure was even below one per cent.

Even a simple glance at figure 2 reveals that quite high variations in the proportion of Muslims across the country which stem from a combination of several factors. For instance, concentration of the Muslim population is found in diverse types of areas, i.e., Jammu and Kashmir, parts of Gangetic plain such as northwest Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal, some tracts of Assam Valley, and the Malabar coast. Interestingly, all these areas came to have greater share of Muslims due to quite different reasons. Whereas Muslim rule coupled with the influence of sufism had played a major role in religious conversions to Islam in the Kashmir region, it was the long duration of Muslim rule in parts of the Gangetic plain, such as Rohilkhand, that was primarily instrumental in this regard. As has been usually the case all over the world, it was the weaker social strata, particularly the 'untouchable' communities among the Hindus, which joined the new faith in large numbers. In Bengal tract, however, large scale conversions to Islam were also facilitated mainly by two factors: (i) This tract was considered as polluting alien territory by the top layer of Hindus, that is, Brahmans till about fifth century B.C. (Sopher, 1967, p. 48); (ii) A large population of the area had stayed in the Buddhist fold for a long time, that is, from about third century B.C. to the 12th century A.D. In about 1000 A.D. Hinduism was in resurgence and some Hindu rulers were making efforts to bring into the Hindu fold all those who had earlier adopted Buddhism. The newly emerged Muslim rulers at the beginning of 13th century were also strongly interested in the spread of Islam in their respective areas. In this backdrop, the erstwhile Buddhists opted *en masse* for egalitarian Islam rather than going back to their earlier lower status in the then rigid caste hierarchy of Hinduism. On the other hand, conversions to Islam in Kerala, which had about about one-fourth of its population from this faith in 2001, has been the chiefly the outcome of a long trading contacts with Arab countries, dating back to the beginning of the Christian era. Many of the Arab traders had also married in the area, and had quite good social ties with the wider society. After their home areas had adopted

Islam in the seventh century, this faith reached Kerala at around the same time via the traders. Other areas of notable share of Muslim population reflect the duration and effectiveness of Muslim rule, and also the “routes of Islamic military and commercial penetration” (Brush, 1949, p. 87).

On the other hand, Himachal Pradesh, Much of Utrakhand, Orissa, Chhattisgarh, large parts of Tamil Nadu, northeast India, and Punjab have only a thin scatter of Muslim population. All these areas, except Punjab, had attracted little attention of Muslim rulers as these neither posed any political challenge nor offered any tangible economic attraction for them. On the other hand, being on the main route of entry from central Asia, Punjab had come to have a considerable proportion of Muslim population. However, a very heavy percentage of Muslims had migrated to Pakistan in the wake partition of the Indian sub-continent on communal lines in 1947, and the resultant mass exchange of population from two sides of the newly created border.

Christians

Christianity had reached India shortly after the death of Christ when when one of his twelve disciples, St. Thomas, came to the country sometime around the middle of first century A.D. He preached this faith in several parts of the country, i.e., the Malabar coast, the coromandel coast, and also in the then famous city Taxila and its surroundings in northwestern India (Singh, 1986, p. 83). However, the task of firmly establishing Christianity in the Malabar tract was accomplished by the Syrian Christians who had arrived there around the middle of the fourth century A.D. Subsequently also, the impact of Christianity first reached through the coastal areas, particularly in the wake of establishment and spread of colonial rule in the country. Accordingly, the first major outposts of colonialism - Portuguese, British and French - experienced greater incidence of conversions to this faith. Later on, however, other areas, particularly those with concentration of tribal people, also emerged prominently on the map of Christianity. The Portuguese were largely responsible for the conversion of lower caste Hindus in Kerala to the Christian faith.

With a total population of 24,080,016, the Christians constituted 2.34% of the population of the country in 2001. In three states of the country, i.e., in Nagaland (89.97 %), Mizoram (86.97%), and Meghalaya (70.25%), Christians were in heavy majority (Table 1). The other states with notable share of Christian population included Manipur (34.04%), Goa (26.68%), Andaman and Nicobar Islands (21.67%), and Kerala (19.02%). In 13 of the states and union territories this figure was less than 1%.

In terms of share of each state or union territory in the total Christian population of the country, Kerala alone accounted for than 25.15% of the total population of this community in the country, followed by Tamil Nadu (15.72%), Nagaland (7.43%), Meghalaya (6.76%), Andhra Pradesh (4.91%), Andhra Pradesh (4.91%), Karnataka (4.19%), and Assam (4.10%). In other words, half of the total population of this community resided in the four southern states - Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, while about 26% was in northeast part, beyond West Bengal, of the country.

As per the 2001 census data, the Christian population population constituted more than 50% in 29 districts of the country. In 20 of these districts, its share was even more than 80%; these included seven districts from Nagaland, six from Mizoram,

four from Manipur, and three from Meghalaya. In 17 districts each their percentage was between 20-30 and 10-20. But in two-thirds of the total districts in the country, it was below even 1%.

Though Christianity came to India about two thousands years ago its rapid growth mainly took place after the establishment of colonial rules by the Portuguese, and the British in the country. Religious conversions to Christian faith were mainly successful in the following types of areas: (i) Coastal areas, particularly Kerala, Karnataka, Goa, and Tamil Nadu which had had very long contact with Europe; (ii) Northeast India which had been marked by quite indifferent connectivity with the rest of the country till the independence of the country in 1947; and (iii) Central India's tribal belt comprising parts of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Orissa which has been through a long period of neglect and isolation for various reasons. It is significant to point out that the spread of Christianity has been much greater in two types of tribal areas: One, areas marked by heavy preponderance of tribal populations; and Two, which had having greater physical isolation from the rest of India's population. The expansion of Christianity in remote tribal areas, particularly in northeastern India, occurred quite rapidly as these areas had no significant contact with other religious systems at that time. Besides, in a tribal society if the tribal chief gets converted, the whole tribe would necessarily follow suit.

Sikhs

Founded by Guru Nanak at the end of the fifteenth century, Sikhism had spread largely in the Punjab tract of the pre-partition India. Guru Nanak and nine other Sikh Gurus nurtured this religion for a little more than two centuries. The how and why of establishment of Sikhism in Punjab, which had emerged as an active contact zone between two great religions, Hinduism and Islam, at that time, furnishes a fecund theme of research for social scientists.

Though it had got established much earlier, rapid proselytization to Sikhism started during the period of Sikh rule over Punjab and Kashmir that lasted about 50 years from 1798 to 1849. The conversions to this religion got further fillip from 1870s onward simultaneous with emergence of religious awakening movements by followers of various religions in north India. This process continued till about the independence of the country in 1947. The year 1947 stands as a watershed for the Sikhs as this community underwent a major redistribution in the wake of the partition of the country at the time of independence which resulted in a forced transfer of huge number of people from the two sides of the new border. Consequently, the Sikhs got concentrated primarily in the present-day Indian Punjab notwithstanding the fact that a few thousand others had also relocated themselves at Delhi and a few other main towns in north India. Later in the 1950s, a sizeable number of Sikhs, mostly peasants along with some agricultural labourers, had migrated to parts of Haryana and Rajasthan where large areas had come under irrigation from the then newly constructed Bhakra canals. The 1950s and early 1960s also witnessed notable outmigration of Sikh peasants, along with some agricultural labourers, to the thinly populated *Terai* belt of Uttar Pradesh. Subsequently, however, quite a large number of Sikh families had returned to Punjab following widespread violence against

the Sikhs in Delhi and many other cities of north India that took place following the assassination of the then prime minister of India on the last day of October 1984.

Of the total Sikhs in the country, 75.94% were recorded in Punjab; Other states having notable proportion of total sikhs in the country included Haryana (6.09%), Rajasthan (4.26%), Uttar Pradesh (3.53%), Delhi (2.89%), Maharashtra (1.12%), and Jammu and Kashmir (1.08%). Thus 94.91% of the Sikhs in the country were residing in these seven states only.

The Sikhs are found widely spread in all the states and union territories of the country. The highest proportion of the Sikh population was found in Punjab (59.91%), followed by Chandigarh (16.12%), Haryana (5.54%), Delhi (4.01%), Uttarakhand (2.50%), Jammu and Kashmir (2.04%), Rajasthan (1.45%), and Himachal Pradesh (1.19%). In the remaining 27 states and union territories their proportion was less than 1%. The district distribution of the proportion of Sikhs to total population shows that in 13 districts they held majority, while in six districts their proportion was between 20-50%. In about 88% of the districts of the country this figure was between 0-1%. The tiny Mahe district of Pondicherry was the only one that reported no Sikh population in 2001. It bears emphasis that proportion of Sikhs to total population and distance from Punjab bear a strong inverse correlation.

Buddhists

Founded by Gautam Buddha in the sixth century B.C., the basic tenets of Buddhism underline a non-hierarchical society. This was the main reason that this religion experienced a fast spread for several centuries in the caste-ridden Hindu society in India. The period of emperor Asoka (c. 269-c. 232), who himself had embraced Buddhism after his blood-bathed 'victory' in the battle of Kalinga that took place sometime during 265-263 B.C. proved to be of vital importance in this regard. He not only made strong efforts to spread this religion in his own huge empire, which covered most of south Asia, but had also sent missionaries for its propagation in east and southeast Asia. As there was no other competing universalizing religion at that time, Buddhism registered very rapid expansion in all these areas. By the 6th century A.D. it had 'permeated to most of southern Asia' and also to large parts of eastern, central and southeast Asia (Davis, 1951, p. 184). During the reign of King Harsha in the seventh century A.D., though Buddhism continued in acceptance by a large population of the country, yet Hinduism had begun to grow in popularity (Wolpert, 2004, p. 94). Later, it 'yielded to Brahmanism in India, and by the tenth century had disappeared as an active religion' (Davis, 1951, p. 184). The actual eclipse of the religion from India began in 1202 when the Bengal area was captured by Turko-Afghan power. They sacked the great university at Nalanda, where thousands of Buddhist monks were studying at that time, and forced 'thousands of Buddhists to flee toward Nepal and Tibet and killing unaccounted others who weren't swift enough to escape' (Wolpert, 2004, p. 109). This marked the end of Buddhism from the core regions of India. All through the period of Muslim as well as British rule in the country, Buddhism remained marginalised both socially and spatially.

However the 1950s and 1960s witnessed two events of major importance for Buddhism in the country. One, in 1956 tens of thousands of lower caste Hindus embraced Buddhism en masse at the instance of their prominent Indian leader at

that time, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who was, incidently, also one of the founders of the constitution of India. Consequently, the proportion of people professing this faith went up notably in some parts of the country, particularly in Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Madhya Pradesh. Two, migration of thousands of Tibetan Buddhist refugees in the wake of their spiritual leader Dalai Lama's forced exit from Tibet in 1959. A perceptible trickle of Tibetan refugees continued all through the 1960s, and even in the early 1970s. Most of these people were settled by the Indian government in Himachal Pradesh, Ladakh, Uttarakhand, Sikkim, Dandakaranya, and some in south India.

Having a total population of 7,955,207, Buddhists accounted for 0.77 % of the total population of the country in 2001. With the sole exception of the union territory of Lakshadweep, they were recorded in every state and union territory of the country in that year (Table 1). Their highest percentage to total population was found in Sikkim (28.11%) followed by Arunachal Pradesh (13.03%), Mizoram (7.93%), Maharashtra (6.03%), and Tripura (3.09%). In 28 states and union territories this proportion was less than 1%. Expectedly, the districtwise distribution was also very skewed. In only five districts of the country their proportion was more than 50% which included Ladakh (77.30%), Tawang (74.72%) Lahaul and Spiti (58.80%), North Sikkim (55.09%), and Lawangtlai district (52.17%) of Mizoram. Significantly, most of the pockets with above 20% proportion of Buddhists population were found either in the Himalayan belt or in northeast India. In the rest of the country, their percentage was very low. The only exception was Maharashtra and its adjoining tracts where people adopted this religion under the inspiration of Dr Ambedkar in and after 1956. The highest proportion of this religious community in Maharashtra was recorded in Akola district (17.98%) followed by the districts of Hingoli (14.99%), Washim (14.76%), Nagpur (14.49%), and Buldana (13.73%).

Jains

Jainism emerged in India in the sixth century B.C. Owing to its very high emphasis on respect for all forms of life, it did not get hold among people engaged in agriculture as it involves, in one way or the other, killing of a wide range of life in the process. Accordingly, it largely remained restricted to non-agricultural communities, and, hence was primarily limited to urban areas. It differs from Hinduism mainly in one way, i.e., it did not believe that the Vedas are the ultimate source of wisdom, and also preferred the Prakrit language over Sanskrit. However, regarding prohibition of widow remarriage, it has been even more stringent than Hinduism.

With a total population of 4,225,053, Jains constituted 0.41 % of India's population in 2001. In 33 of the states and union territories in India in 2001, their percentage to total population was less than 1% (Table 1). The highest figure was recorded in Maharashtra (1.34%) followed by Rajasthan (1.15%) and Delhi (1.12%). In terms of districts, their highest proportion was registered in Mumbai (4.76%) followed by Kolhapur (4.18%) in Maharashtra and Belgaum (4.02%) in Karnataka. In 58 of the districts their percentage was between one and five, and in another 528 or 89.04% of the districts, it was between 0 and 1. No Jain population was recorded in seven districts of the country.

Jains are far ahead of other main religious groups in terms of socio-economic development. Jains in the country are especially known for their hereditary expertise in business. As compared with the national average of 27.78%, their level of urbanisation was as high as 76.11%. In 20 of the 35 states and union territories, this figure was above 80%. It was less than 50% in only two states, i.e. in Mizoram (25.14%) and Karnataka (46.96%). Similarly, Jains recorded the highest literacy rate of 94.1% vis-a-vis the national average of 68.1%. No wonder, they also recorded the highest proportion of workers (81.7%) in activities other than cultivation, agricultural labour and household industry.

Unlike Buddhism, which experienced spread in large parts of India as well as in other parts of Asia, Jainism remained mostly limited to western India only comprising Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Madhya Pradesh, and also including Karnataka, and Delhi. All these six states housed about 85% of the total Jain population of the country in 2001. It seems that the following factors have contributed toward restricted spread of Jainism in the country: (i) Agricultural communities stood automatically excluded as this faith considered agriculture as 'polluting because it involves destruction of minute animal life' (Sopher, 1967, p.12); and (ii) Its distinction from Hinduism was quite hazy. Besides, the lack of direct and sustained support of rulers might also have made its own impact in this regard. The inter-decennial fluctuation in the growth rate of this community in the country over the past century or so need also to be viewed in the backdrop of hazy distinction line between Jainism and Hinduism. In the common perception of people, however, Jainism has increasingly come to be seen as a sect of Hinduism, particularly for the past a few decades (Sopher, 1967, p. 3)

Other Religions

The category of 'Other' religions is invariably ignored in discussion on religious composition due mainly to two reasons. One, owing to relatively small number of followers of these religions, these appear numerically unimportant in the context of such a populous country like India. Two, the very caption 'others' itself work to reduce their importance and shows them as of little consequence for the writer as well as the reader. However, when viewed in terms of absolute numbers contained in this category in 2001, one finds that the population of this group (6,639,626) was notably higher than the total population of Jains in the country (4,225,053). This group includes Parsis (Zoroastrians), Jews, Bahais, and quite a few tribal religions spread across different parts of the country. Some of these religious communities are almost entirely urban, like Jews and Parsis, while tribal religious groups are overwhelmingly rural. Parsis and Jews, mostly concentrated in Mumbai, have long been known as prominent business communities in the country. However, of the total persons in this category, 52.93% were found in Jharkhand which was followed by West Bengal (13.49%), Madhya Pradesh (6.16%) and Arunachal Pradesh (5.08%). Lakshadweep reported no person from this group.

In 18 of the 35 states and union territories of the country, the proportion of this category of religions was less than 0.05%, and in 12 it was between 0.05 and 0.01%. However, in four states, this figure was more than 10 per cent. The highest percentage of population of 'other' religions was found in Arunachal Pradesh (30.73%) followed by Jharkhand (13.04%), Meghalaya (11.53%) and Manipur (10.86%). In other words,

relatively high proportion of these religions was recorded in the states having preponderance of tribal people. It underlines the fact that despite over fifty years of efforts by major religions, particularly the Hindus and the Christians, to incorporate them, tribal religions continue to maintain their own ground, especially in the peripheral parts of the country. It is another matter that these religions in tribal minority states have got succumbed to majoritarian socio-economic and religious pressures and discourses. It deserves a separate study to understand the significance as well as continual reproduction of all the religions grouped in category 'other religions'. Similarly, it would also be interesting to know, whether it is the, what Davis (1951, p. 177) calls, 'vitality' of tribal religions or simply their being in isolation from other religious systems that has kept them unabsorbed by other religions.

Significantly, the proportion of of this category of people to total population was even more than 50% in seven districts, six in Arunachal Pradesh and one in Bihar. In 27 other districts, this figure ranged between 10 and 50 %, in ten districts 5-10% , and in 24 districts 1 to 5%. However, the figure ranged between 0-1% in 88.87% of the 593 districts. This category of people recorded no presence in only eight districts of the country.

Religion Not Stated

Quite a few people in most of the communities, particularly in urban areas, may not like to mention their religious affiliations. This may partly be attributed to conviction and partly to alienation from religion due to one reason or the other. Similarly , there are many people in the tribal areas whose religious faiths either do not find any mention in the general list of religions used for census purposes at present or their religious faiths which they have been practicing generation after generation did not carry any precise names.

In nine of the 35 states and union territories, this category constituted more than 0.01 per cent of the total population, and in ten others its share was between 0.05 and 0.01 per cent in 2001. In the remaining sixteen states and union territories its proportion was below 0.05 per cent. The highest proportion of this category was found in Arunachal Pradesh (0.85%) followed by Goa (0.49 %), Meghalaya (0.30 %) and Andaman and Nicobar Islands (0.24%). In five of the states and union territories namely Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Chandigarh and Delhi the percentage of such people was only 0.01 per cent. Seen by individual districts, the highest percentage of this category of people was recorded in the Tirap district (6.88%) followed by districts of South Goa (1.04%) and Nicobar (1.04%). In only 11 districts, This figure was more than 0.50% in 11 districts which have been characterized by large share of tribal people and also quite indifferent accessibility till recent years. In 105 districts of the country it was between 0.10 and 0.01%, while in the remaining 477 districts of the the figure was even below 0.01%.

Though the share of population in this category was very small (0.07%), yet it was spread all over the country and was recorded in all the 593 districts. Notwithstanding its quite low proportion in the context of India's total population, this category of persons also deserves an in-depth study for a proper understanding of its socio-political implications. Tirap district of Nagaland, where it accounts for 6.88 % of the total population, furnishes an ideal case study material in this connection.

Conclusion

Hindus constitute a heavy majority (80.46%) in the country's total population, followed by Muslims (13.43%), Christians (2.34%), Sikhs (1.87%), Buddhists (0.77%), Jains (0.41%). The remaining religious communities, clubbed as 'others' in the census, accounted for 0.65% of the total population of the country. The religious composition of India's population has been the outcome of two main factors: patterns of religious conversions, and migrations. Apart from prestige and economic advantage connected with the religion of rulers, religious conversions to various faiths were also partly the result of the suffocating situation of the rigid caste system in Hinduism in the country during the pre-independence period. Thus, both the 'push', provided by the highly hierarchical caste system of Hinduism, and the 'pull' factors, furnished by the egalitarianism of the new religious faiths as well as economic advantages in some cases, contributed toward considerable proselytization to other religions. Expectedly, conversion to a particular faith was found to be more in areas: (i) where it enjoyed the support of political power; (ii) where the hold of Hinduism was originally weak or had gone weak owing to repeated invasions from outside the country, as in the northwestern part; (iii) which were on the margins of the core areas of Hinduism; and (iv) which had the high concentration of tribal people with their own distinct religious faiths, languages and cultural ethos.

All the minority religious communities are mainly concentrated in peripheral parts of the country – 'a fact which is of great political, social and economic significance' (Gosal and Mukerji, 1970, p. 100). In the country's peripheral areas, even smaller tribal religions have been able to withstand incorporative tendencies of other major religions. However, in other areas these stand undermined and stranded, and are being incorporated by Hinduism and, in some cases, by Christianity. It also reflects that conversions to other religions were not of much significance in the main core areas of Hinduism, i.e. the mid-gangetic plain, and that to the south of Narmada river, except in tracts which had been under effective Muslim rule for long periods. The spread of Islam in the country mainly took place in areas which had experienced of Muslim rule in the past. Generally speaking, the duration of Muslim rule and the proportion of Muslim population bear strong positive correlation. Religious conversions to Christianity took place mainly in three types of areas: (i) where contact of christian missionaries had had an early start; (ii) where the British or Portuguese rule had got established earlier and continued for a longer period; and (iii) remote tribal areas with indifferent contact with Hinduism or other main religious systems in the country. On the other hand Sikhism was more successful in the pre-partition Punjab which, for many centuries, had stayed as a transition zone between the core area of Hinduism to the east and that of Islam to the west.

Buddhism and Jainism, the two contemporary religions, which emerged in the sixth century B.C., have come out with entirely different trajectories. Whereas Buddhism, which once had attained strong presence for more than one thousand years, beginning in the third century B.C., in the whole of South Asia stands virtually wiped out from the country, the Jainism seems to have become a sect of Hinduism. The how and why of this phenomena deserves an independent study for its proper comprehension. Though the category "others" has attracted little academic

attention so far owing to its small numerical strength in the Indian context, its study could shed significant light on continual reproduction of smaller religious groups.

Though notable redistribution of religious communities has taken place in the country during the past six decades or so, yet the basic pattern of religious composition has remained, more or less, the same to date. Generally speaking, studies on the religious composition of India's population carry a common assumption that all minority religious communities in the country are the result of direct conversions from Hinduism. However, this assumption is not sustainable regarding some parts of the country. For instance, almost the whole of northeast India, and also about one-third of eastern Bangladesh, had remained outside the Indian political contours, even during the largest empires of India's Kings like Asoka (c. 269-232 B.C, and Aurangzeb (1658-1707 A.D.). When the British first established control over this tract, it was primarily inhabited by various tribal communities in their distinct areas with little influence of Hinduism. However, Brahmaputra/Assam valley did have some thin sprinkling of both Hindus and Muslims, who had migrated here from their densely populated home areas in Bengal. The same could be said about the tribal people residing in a broad east-west trending belt that stretched across the country from Gujarat in the west to West Bengal in the east. Tribal people's socio-cultural ethos did not permit caste system which has been all along a hall-mark of Hinduism. It is another matter, however, that during the British rule, particularly after the commencement of regular census enumerations in 1872, there had started a period of conscious construction of religious boundaries by all the religious communities as well as by the British administration for their respective politico-religious purposes. It was primarily in this backdrop that the tribal people, who had remained socio-economically invisible as well as distinctly separate, had come to be defined and claimed as "backward Hindus" (Ghurye, 1963, p.19). Similarly, until about 500 B.C., the Indus Valley was also considered a "polluting alien" territory, and consequently a Brahman "had to perform penance and purifying ceremonies on his return" from the area (Sopher, 1967, p.48). In other words all those areas which had negligible or lesser impact of Brahminism had registered much higher incidence of proselytization to non-Hindu religions till the early decades of the 20th century.

Table 1
India: Percentage of Different Religious Communities in Total Population, 2001

	Hindus	Muslims	Sikhs	Christians	Jains	Buddhists	Others
India	80.46	13.43	1.87	2.34	0.41	0.77	0.65
Jammu & Kashmir	29.63	66.97	2.04	0.20	0.02	1.12	0.00
Himachal Pradesh	95.43	1.97	1.19	0.13	0.02	1.25	0.01
Punjab	36.94	1.57	59.91	1.20	0.16	0.17	0.04
Chandigarh	78.61	3.95	16.12	0.85	0.29	0.15	0.03
Uttaranchal	84.96	11.92	2.50	0.32	0.11	0.15	0.01
Haryana	88.23	5.78	5.54	0.13	0.27	0.03	0.01
Delhi	82.00	11.72	4.01	0.94	1.12	0.17	0.02
Rajasthan	88.75	8.47	1.45	0.13	1.15	0.02	0.01
Uttar Pradesh	80.61	18.50	0.41	0.13	0.12	0.18	0.01
Bihar	83.23	16.53	0.03	0.06	0.02	0.02	0.06
Sikkim	60.93	1.42	0.22	6.68	0.03	28.11	2.39
Arunachal Pradesh	34.60	1.88	0.17	18.72	0.02	13.03	30.73
Nagaland	7.70	1.76	0.06	89.97	0.11	0.07	0.31
Manipur	46.01	8.81	0.08	34.04	0.07	0.09	10.86
Mizoram	3.55	1.14	0.04	86.97	0.02	7.93	0.27
Tripura	85.62	7.95	0.04	3.20	0.01	3.09	0.04
Meghalaya	13.27	4.28	0.13	70.25	0.03	0.20	11.53
Assam	64.89	30.92	0.08	3.70	0.09	0.19	0.09
West Bengal	72.47	25.25	0.08	0.64	0.07	0.30	1.12
Jharkhand	68.57	13.85	0.31	4.06	0.06	0.02	13.04
Orissa	94.35	2.07	0.05	2.44	0.02	0.03	0.98
Chhattisgarh	94.70	1.97	0.33	1.92	0.27	0.31	0.46
Madhya Pradesh	91.15	6.37	0.25	0.28	0.90	0.35	0.68
Gujarat	89.09	9.06	0.09	0.56	1.04	0.04	0.06
Daman & Diu	89.69	7.76	0.09	2.13	0.17	0.08	0.07
Dadra & Nagar Haveli	93.52	2.96	0.06	2.75	0.39	0.21	0.04
Maharashtra	80.37	10.60	0.22	1.09	1.34	6.03	0.24
Andhra Pradesh	89.01	9.17	0.04	1.55	0.05	0.04	0.01
Karnataka	83.86	12.23	0.03	1.91	0.78	0.74	0.22
Goa	65.78	6.84	0.07	26.68	0.06	0.05	0.03
Lakshadweep	3.66	95.47	0.01	0.84	0.00	0.00	0.00
Kerala	56.16	24.70	0.01	19.02	0.01	0.01	0.01
Tamil Nadu	88.11	5.56	0.02	6.07	0.13	0.01	0.01
Pondicherry	86.77	6.09	0.01	6.95	0.10	0.01	0.02
Andaman & Nicobar	69.24	8.22	0.45	21.67	0.01	0.12	0.07

Source of Data: Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India (2004): *The First Report on Religion Data*, Census of India, New Delhi

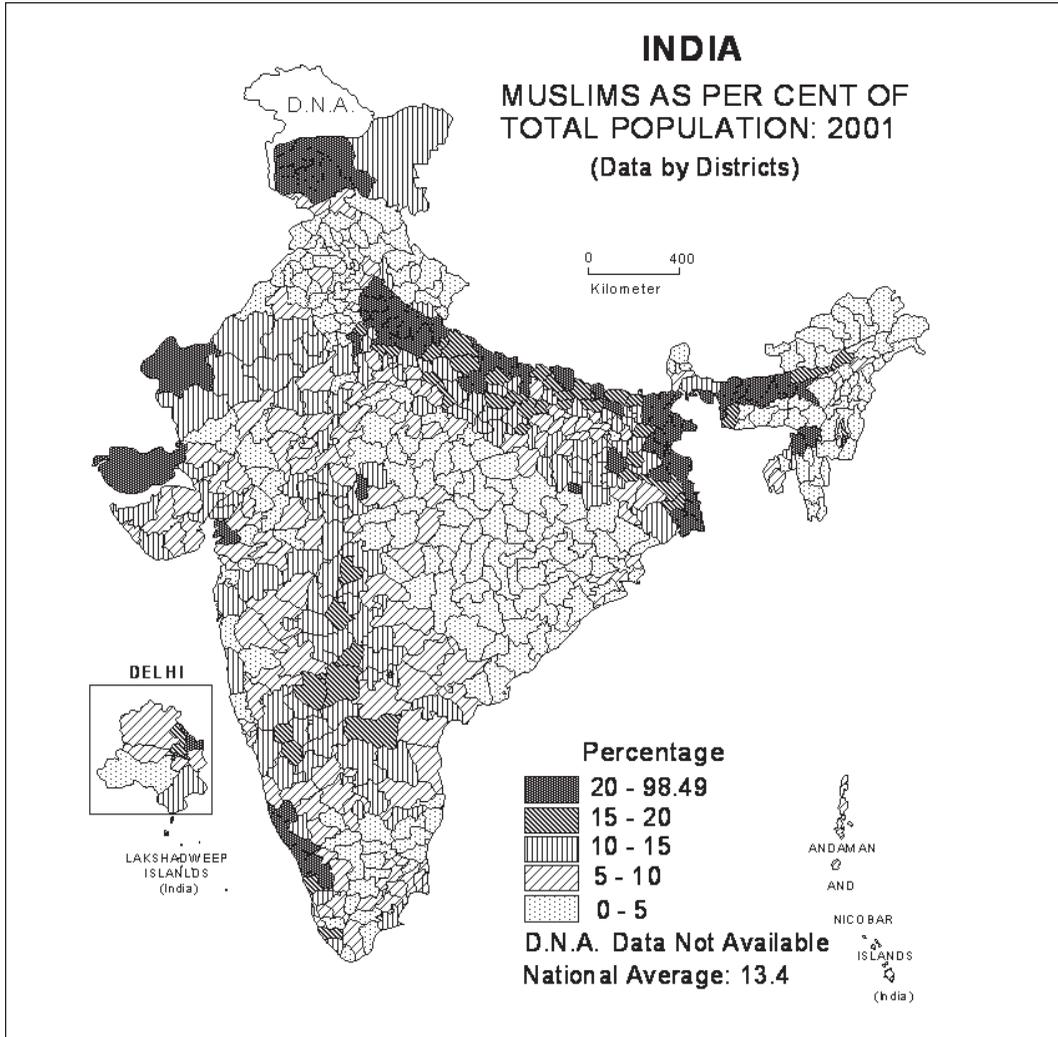


Figure 2

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