

Christianity among the Scheduled Tribes of the Northeast: Assam, Tripura and Sikkim

Christianity in the Northeast has spread mainly through the conversion of the Scheduled Tribes (STs) of the region. There are numerous tribes that live here; specific tribes often dominate a specific district or even a sub-district. It is fascinating and instructive to look into how the religious demography of different tribes has changed over time; how and when they have moved away from their native religions—which in their doctrine and practice fall within the Hindu fold—to Christianity. In this and the following notes, we discuss the spread of Christianity among the specific individual tribes of the Northeast.

We begin with Assam, where the situation is very different from other States of the region. The spread of Christianity in Assam has been limited and, more surprisingly, less than 20 percent of the Christians in the State are from the Scheduled Tribes. This is very unusual. Elsewhere in the Northeast, the Christians are almost entirely tribal. The peculiar situation of Assam is because several essentially tribal communities of Assam have not been included in the ST list. Such communities include the tea-tribes, one-fifth of whom are said to have been converted. Estimates indicate that perhaps all of the non-ST Christians of Assam are from the tea-tribes.

There is a long-standing demand for the tea-tribes and five other communities—the Tai Ahom, Moran, Matak, Chutia and Koch-Rajbongshi—to be included in the ST list of the State. The current Government at the Centre seems to be serious about accepting this demand. If and when that happens, Assam shall become a tribal-majority State, and the non-tribal component of the population shall become largely Muslim. This is likely to drastically reorder the political and religious demographic profile of the State.

Christians form 12.8 percent of the current ST population of the State. Their share has risen to this level from 7.6 percent in 1991 and 8.8 percent in 2001. There are two separate ST lists for Assam, one for the autonomous hill districts and the other for the rest of Assam. The proportion of Christians among the hill STs is higher at 27.4 percent; among the STs of the plains, the share of Christians is lower at 9.7 percent.

Of 6.7 lakh STs of the hill districts, 4.3 lakh are Karbi and 1 lakh Dimasa-Kachari. Christianity has spread mainly in the Karbi, 17.6 percent of whom are now Christian; the proportion in 1991 was 11.7 percent. The Dimasa and Kachari are largely Hindu; there are only 1.1 percent Christians among them. Share of Christians among the smaller hill tribes is much larger; the Kuki, Khasi-Jaintia, Garo, Hmar, Lushai (Mizo) and Naga tribes in the hill districts are largely Christian.

Among 32 lakh STs of the plains, there are 13.6 lakh Boros or Borocacharis; of them, 10 percent are now Christian. There is little Christian presence in the other plains tribes,

which include the Miri, Rabha, Kachari Sonowal and Lalung. Garos have been included among the plains STs after 2003; 96 percent of 1.36 lakh plains Garos are Christians.

In Tripura, Christians now form 13 percent of the ST population; their share in 1991 was 5 percent. Of the ST population of 11.7 lakh in Tripura, 5.9 lakh are from the Tripuri group of tribes, 1.9 lakh are from the Riang and 0.83 lakh from the Jamatia. Christians have acquired a foothold in all three. But their share is the highest in the Riang at 17.3 percent; it has grown to this level from 8.5 percent in 1991. They have a share of near 9 percent in the Tripuri and Jamatia also; in 1991, their share in the Tripuri was less than 1 percent and less than 2 percent in the Jamatia.

Christian presence is much higher in some of the relatively smaller tribes. Nearly 90 percent of Kuki, two-thirds of the Garoo and half of the Halam are now Christian. The Christian share has been rising in all three tribal groups, but the rise is the most significant in the Halam. Christian presence among them was less than 20 percent in 1991 and has risen to 47 percent now.

Tripura also has significant presence of the Buddhist tribes of the Chakma and the Mag; the two together have a population of about 1.2 lakh and there are only 434 Christians among them. In general, the reach of Christianity among the Buddhist is rather limited.

There are also several relatively smaller and essentially Hindu tribes in Tripura; Christians seem to have begun acquiring some foothold in them, especially in the Orang, Santal, Lepcha and Munda.

There are only four tribes in the ST list of Sikkim, the Bhutia, Lepcha, Limboo and Tamang. The latter two have been added to the list only in 2003 and have been counted among the STs for the first time in 2011. The Bhutia, Lepcha and Tamang are predominantly Buddhist, the Limboo are mainly Hindu.

Christians have a presence of less than 3 percent in the Bhutia. But, they have acquired a significant share of 14.7 percent in the Lepcha. Their share in the Limboo and Tamang is around 9 percent. In the STs of Sikkim as a whole, the Christian presence has now reached 8.2 percent; it was 3.6 percent in 1991.

ASSAM

Religious demography of the Scheduled Tribes and others in Assam, 2011

	Total	Hindu	Muslim	Christian	%H	%M	%C
Total Population	3,12,05,576	1,91,80,759	1,06,79,345	11,65,867	61.47	34.22	3.74
ST Population	38,84,371	33,49,772	13,188	4,95,379	86.24	0.34	12.75
Non-ST Population	2,73,21,205	1,58,30,987	1,06,66,157	6,70,488	57.94	39.04	2.45
% STs in Total	12.45	17.46	0.12	42.49			
% non-STs in Total	87.55	82.54	99.88	57.51			

Only 42 percent of the Christians in Assam are from the Scheduled Tribes

Of 11.66 lakh Christians in Assam, only 4.95 lakh are from the Scheduled Tribes (ST). The ST Christians thus form 42.5 percent of all Christians in Assam; the remaining 57.5 percent of the Christians are from the non-ST communities. This is unusual. In other States of the Northeast, Christians are nearly exclusively from within the STs.

Non-ST Christians of Assam are mostly from the tea-tribes

This is because many tribal groups of Assam have not been granted the Scheduled Tribes status. The so-called tea-tribes are one such group. They are the descendants of the indentured labourers that the British brought from mainly the tribal regions of Central India and Telangana to work in the tea plantations of Assam. Many of them belong to communities that are counted as STs in their States of origin. In Assam, they are treated as Other Backward Castes. Estimates of their numbers range from 45 to 60 lakh; about one-fifth of them are said to have converted to Christianity. This would amount to around 10 lakh non-ST Christians among the tea-tribes alone. This cannot be correct, because the Census of 2011 counts only 6.7 lakh non-ST Christians in the State. However, it can be probably surmised that nearly all of the non-ST Christians are from the tea-tribes.

The large numbers of Christians counted from outside the Scheduled Tribes in Assam are thus not an indicator of Christianity making inroads in the non-tribal population of the State, but only of the fact that there has been considerable conversion among the tea-tribes, who remain outside the list of STs. There has been a persistent demand from the tea-tribes, as well from certain other communities, to be included among the STs. We discuss this issue later in this note.

The proportion of Christians among the recognised STs is much lower

As seen in the Table at the beginning, there are 4.95 lakh Christians in the total Scheduled Tribe population of 38.84 lakh. They form 12.75 percent of the Scheduled Tribes. This proportion is five times their share of 2.45 percent in the non-ST population; but it is far below their share in the STs of other States of the Northeast, except Tripura.

The Scheduled Tribes of Assam are largely Hindus

The Scheduled Tribes of Assam are predominantly Hindu. Of 38.84 lakh STs counted in Assam in 2011, 33.50 lakh are Hindus; they form 86.24 percent of the ST population of the State. This is much higher than their share of 57.94 percent in the non-ST population.

There are few Muslims or ORPs among the STs

The high proportion of Hindus is because there are few Muslims or ORPs among the STs of Assam. There are only 13.2 thousand Muslims counted in the total ST population of

38.84 lakh. Their share thus turns out to be 0.34 percent. The share of those counted under the category of ORPs among the STs is also small. Only about 12 thousand STs have been counted in this category in 2011; they form 0.31 percent of the ST population. This is unlike the situation in the other States of the Northeast, where those of the STs who have not been yet converted to Christianity are more likely to be counted as ORPs than Hindus.

Rising share of Christians in the STs of Assam

The share of Christians in the STs of Assam is low compared to other States of the Northeast; but it has been rising rapidly during the last couple of decades. The rise has been particularly spectacular during the last decade, when their share in the ST population rose from 8.78 to 12.75 percent.

	1991	2001	2011
Total ST	28,74,441	33,08,570	38,84,371
Christian	2,19,423	2,90,614	4,95,379
% C	7.63	8.78	12.75

Growth of ST Christians has been spectacular during 2001-11

During the last decade, the ST Christians in Assam have recorded decadal growth of more than 70 percent, while the total ST population has risen by 17.4 percent. Growth of Christians in the total population of Assam in this decade has been rather modest

	1991	2001
	-2001	-2011
Total ST	15.10	17.40
ST Christian	32.44	70.46

at 18.17 percent. Their growth in the non-ST population has been in fact negative, with the numbers declining from 6.96 lakh in 2001 to 6.70 lakh in 2011. We shall see below that this extraordinary growth of Christians among the STs and decline among the non-STs is mainly because of the addition of new tribal groups to the list of STs through the parliamentary Act 10 of 2003 that amended and added to the list of STs for many States.

Christianity among the individual tribes of Assam

The hill and plains tribes

Scheduled Tribes of Assam are divided into two groups, the STs of the autonomous districts of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills and those in the rest of the State including Bodoland Territorial Area districts (BTAD). Some of the tribes are in both lists, but there are many that may be recognised as STs in the Hills but do not get the same status in the plains districts, and the converse can also be true. This is another cause of concern among the tribal people.

Christianity among the larger hill tribes

Among the Scheduled Tribes of the autonomous hill districts, the largest two are the Karbi and Dimasa-Kachari. These two account for 5.33 lakh of the total 6.76 lakh STs of the hill districts. Of these, the latter

	Total	Christian	%C
Karbi	4,30,452	75,883	17.63
Dimasa, Kachari	1,02,961	1,144	1.11
Total Hill STs	6,76,489	1,85,518	27.42

are almost entirely Hindu, but Christianity has been spreading among the Karbi. In 2011, nearly 18 percent of the Karbi are converts to Christianity. The proportion of Christians in the hill STs as a whole is higher at 27.42 percent. This is because some of the smaller tribes in the autonomous hill district are largely Christian, as we see below. The Karbi contribute 41 percent of all Christians among the autonomous hill tribes.

Growth of Christianity among the Karbi

The number and share of Christians among the Karbi has risen rapidly during the last two decades. Their number went up from 33 thousand in 1991 to 53 thousand in 2001 and 76 thousand in 2011; and their share in the population rose from 11.70 in 1991 to 15.00 percent in 2001 and 17.63 percent in 2011. Of the accretion of about 46 thousand in the Christian population of the hill STs during the last decade, the Karbi have contributed almost exactly half. The growth of Christianity in the hill STs is to be attributed mainly to its continuing penetration in the Karbi tribe.

	Total	Christian	%C
1991	2,85,811	33,426	11.70
2001	3,53,513	53,028	15.00
2011	4,30,452	75,883	17.63

Christianity among the other hill tribes

Besides the Karbi and Dimasa-Kachari, the hill tribes comprise the Kuki group that includes 37 sub-tribes, the Khasi-Jaintia group that includes 7 sub-tribes, and the Lushai, Hmar and Garo tribes. The level of Christianisation in all these is very high; share of Christians in the Khasi-Jaintia tribes is near 88 percent and it is above 90 percent in all others. Total population of these tribes in 2011 is 91,275; of them, 85,619, forming 93.8 percent of the total, are Christian.

Christianity among other hills tribes, 2011

	Total	Christian	%C
Kuki, etc.	33,399	31,573	94.53
Khasi, Jaintia, etc.	15,936	13,956	87.58
Garo	25,315	23,672	93.51
Hmar	15,745	15,557	98.81
Lushai (Mizo)	880	861	97.84
Naga	29,767	19,924	66.93
Lalung	18,252	2,808	15.38
Chakma	2,032	74	3.64
Man Tai	1,269	11	0.87
Hajong, Lakher, etc.	481	55	11.43
Total of the above	1,43,076	1,08,491	75.83

Of Chakma 82% and 94.5% of the Man Tai are Buddhist.

Besides them, the Naga tribes have a population of about 30 thousand; of them, 67 percent are Christian and the remaining mainly Hindu. The Lalung of the hill districts have been counted as Scheduled Tribes for the first time in 2011; they have a population of more than 18 thousand, of whom 15.4 percent are Christian and the remaining mainly Hindu. Then there are the Buddhist tribes, the Chakma and Man Tai. The Chakma have a population of 2,032, of whom 82 percent are Buddhist and 14 percent Hindu, but there are also nearly 4 percent Christians among them. The Man Tai have a population of 1,269, of whom 94.5 percent are Buddhist and 3.7 percent Hindu; there are 11 Christians even among them. Finally, there are the much smaller tribes of Hajong, Lakher, Pawi and Syntheng. Total population of these three tribes is 481, of whom 420 are Hindu and 55 Christian. There has been some growth of Christianity among all of the hill tribes, but the major gain of Christianity has been among the Karbi.

Plains ST Christians are mostly Boro or Garo

Of 3.1 lakh ST Christians in the rest of Assam, 2.7 lakh are from the Boro and Garo tribes. There are another 24 thousand Christians among the Generic Tribes. These three groups together account for all but 18 thousand of Christians among the Scheduled Tribes of the plains districts.

Christianity among the Boro and Garo, 2011

	Total	Christian	%C
Boro, Borocachari	13,61,735	1,36,869	10.05
Garo	1,36,077	1,30,681	96.03
Generic Tribes	1,79,056	24,274	13.56
Total Plains STs	32,01,166	3,09,861	9.68

Garo of the plains have been recently added to the ST list

The Garo have been added to the ST list of the plains districts in 2003, though they were counted as ST in the hill districts even earlier. The sudden rise in the number and share of ST Christians in Assam that we have noted above is mainly because of the addition of this fairly large tribe, which has been mostly converted to Christianity. In 2011, 96

percent of the Garo in the plains are Christian; in the hill districts, 93.5 percent of them are Christian. The decline in the number of non-ST Christians noted earlier is also because the Garo of the plains are no longer counted among the non-ST communities.

Christians in the other larger plains tribes

Of the remaining ST Christians in the plains, about 16 thousand are from two of the largest tribes of Assam, Miri and Rabha. The share of Christians in the population of the Miri is less than 1 percent, but among the Rabha, their presence is higher at 3.32 percent. In 1991, their share in these two tribes was 0.18 and 2.15 percent, respectively. Besides these, Kachari Sonowal and Lalung are the other two larger tribes of the plains. The presence of Christians is rather low in these two; their share among the Sonowal has remained unchanged since 1991 and among the Lalung, it has declined from nearly 0.5 percent to the present level of 0.12 percent. The Miri, Rabha, Kachari Sonowal and Lalung are predominantly Hindu tribes; the share of Hindus among them is 97.8, 96.4, 99.1 and 99.6 percent, respectively.

Christianity among other major hills tribes, 2011

	Total	Christian	%C
Miri	6,80,424	5,984	0.88
Rabha	2,96,189	9,845	3.32
Kachari Sonowal	2,53,344	1,416	0.56
Lalung	1,82,663	218	0.12

The smaller plains tribes

Besides the above, the other significant plains tribes are Deori, Hajong and Dimasa; the share of Hindus in all three is above 99 percent. The Dimasa have been added to the plains ST list in 2003. That amendment also added Singpho and Khampti among the plains tribes. The numbers of these two are small, and they are predominantly Buddhist.

Many tribal communities of Assam are still not counted among STs

As we have mentioned earlier, many tribal communities of Assam are not counted as Scheduled Tribes. Six major communities of the State—Tai Ahom, Moran, Matak, Chutia, Koch-Rajbongshi and the so-called tea-tribes—have been long demanding to be included among the STs; as of now, they are counted among the Other Backward Castes (OBCs). As far back as in 2004, the Legislative Assembly of Assam had unanimously passed a resolution requesting the Centre to include these six communities in the list of STs of the State. The Prime Minister of India had promised to grant this request during his election campaign of 2014. The issue seems to be under active consideration of the Union Government; a Committee has been set-up in March this year to go into the modalities of granting ST status to these communities, and their report is expected soon.

These six communities are predominantly Hindu, and except for the tea-tribes, there has been little conversion to Christianity among them. All these communities have fairly large populations. It is claimed that the tea-tribes number about 4.5 million, Tai Ahoms about 2 million, Koch-Rajbongshis about 7 million and there are about 2 million Moran, Motak and Chutiyas. If and when these communities are included in the list of STs of Assam, the population of the Scheduled Tribes in the State shall rise well above 50 percent. This would make Assam a tribal-dominated State. It would also imply that the share of Muslims in the remaining non-ST population would rise to near or above 90 percent. Such a change in the ST composition is likely to drastically reorder the political and religious-demographic complexion of Assam.

TRIPURA: Religious Demography of the Scheduled Tribes

Religious Demography of the Scheduled Tribes and Others in Tripura, 2011

	Total	Hindu	Buddhist	Muslim	Christian	%H	%B	%M	%C
Total Pop	36,73,917	30,63,903	1,25,385	3,16,042	1,59,882	83.40	3.41	8.60	4.35
ST Pop	11,66,813	8,88,790	1,19,894	2,223	1,53,061	76.17	10.28	0.19	13.12
Non-ST Pop	25,07,104	21,75,113	5,491	3,13,819	6,821	86.76	0.22	12.52	0.27

Nearly all of the Christians in Tripura are from the Scheduled Tribes

Of 1.6 lakh Christians counted in the State in 2011, 1.53 lakh are from the Scheduled Tribes. They have a share of 13.12 percent in the ST population, compared to their share of 4.35 percent in the total population and merely 0.27 percent in the non-ST population of the State. Thus, unlike in Assam, and in conformity with the situation in other parts of the Northeast, nearly all of the Christians in Tripura are from the Scheduled Tribes. And, among the STs, the share of Christians has been rising rapidly during the last couple of decades; they formed 4.98 percent of the STs in 1991, 9.96 percent in 2001 and have reached the level of 13.12 percent in 2011.

A significant proportion of STs of Tripura are Buddhist

As we shall see below, there are fairly large communities of Buddhist tribes among the STs of Tripura. Buddhists have a share of 10.28 percent in the ST population. Their share has declined to this level from 14.86 percent in 1991; they seem to have suffered a large decline in their numbers between 1991 and 2001. The decline was preceded by a rapid rise during 1981-91. This was probably a consequence of the movement of Chakmas under the pact that was arrived at between India and Bangladesh in 1972 to grant Indian citizenship to the Chakmas forced to migrate from Bangladesh.

Buddhist STs in Tripura, 1991-2011

	Total	Buddhist	%B
1991	8,53,345	1,26,783	14.86
2001	9,93,426	94,980	9.56
2011	11,66,813	1,19,894	10.28

Religious demography of the individual tribes of Tripura

Christianity among the Tripuri, Riang and Jamatia

The Tripuri group, which includes Tripura, Tripuri and Tippera tribes, is the largest tribal group. The Riang constitute the second largest group, and the Jamatia the third largest. These three groups account for three-fourths of the STs of Tripura; 57 percent of the ST-Christians in 2011 belong to one of these three tribes. The share of Christians in the Tripuri group and in the Jamatia is relatively low at less than 9 percent; it is much higher in the Riang at 17.2 percent.

Christians in Tripuri, Riang and Jamatia, 2011

	Total	Christian	%C
Tripuri, etc.	5,92,255	51,753	8.74
Riang	1,88,220	32,509	17.27
Jamatia	83,347	7,465	8.96
Total STs	11,66,813	1,53,061	13.12

Rise in the share of Christians in the three larger tribes

There has been a sudden rise in the share of Christians in the Tripuri group; they formed less than one percent of the population of these tribes in 1981, their share has now risen to 8.74 percent. Among the Riang, Christianity seems to have gotten a foothold somewhat earlier. The share of Christians among them was 8.50 percent in 1991; it nearly doubled in the course of 1991-2001. But, the rise in their share during the last decade has been modest. There was a similarly sharp rise in the share of Christians among the Jamatia; and, the rise during the last decade has been modest among them also.

Percent Share of Christians, 1991-2011

	1991	2001	2011
Tripuri, etc.	0.95	4.94	8.74
Riang	8.50	16.89	17.27
Jamatia	1.85	7.04	8.96

Tribes with larger share of Christians

As we have seen above, the share of Christians among the larger indigenous tribes, the Tripuri, Riang and Jamatia, is increasing, but is still fairly low, except in the Riang to an extent. Their share is much higher in the relatively smaller Halam, Kuki and Garoo tribes. A number of sub-tribes, including Bengshel, Dub, Kaipeng, Kalai, Karbong, Lengui, Mussum, Rupini, Sukuchep and Thangchep, have been added to the Halam through the Act of 2003. The Kuki group of tribes includes 17 sub-tribes. Christians have a share of 47.24 percent in the Halam and of 89.23 percent in the Kuki group. The two groups are linguistically related. The share of Christians is high at 64.62 percent in the Garoo also. There are about 6.5 thousand Christians in the Generic Tribes. Besides the Halam, Kuki and Garoo, there are the smaller Lushai, Uchai and Khasia tribes with very high Christian presence.

Christians among Halam, Kuki, Garoo and Generic Tribes, 2011

	Total	Christian	%C
Halam, etc.	57,210	27,025	47.24
Kuki, etc.	10,965	9,784	89.23
Garoo	12,952	8,370	64.62
Generic	48,356	6,536	13.52
Lushai	5,384	5,253	97.57
Uchai	2,447	1,778	72.66
Khasia	366	115	67.49

Rising share of Christians among the Halam, Kuki, etc.

The share of Christians in these tribes has been rising over the last couple of decades and perhaps even earlier. The most spectacular rise has been in their share among the Halam, who are the largest group in this category. The share of Christians among the Halam was less than 20 percent in 1991; it rose 32 percent in 2001 and has risen to above 47 percent in 2011. Of all the major tribal groups in Tripura, Christianity seems to be spreading the fastest among the Halam.

Rise of Christian share among Halam, Kuki, Garoo, Lushai and Uchai, 2011

	1991	2001	2011
Halam, etc.	19.48	32.01	47.24
Kuki, etc.	76.17	78.11	89.23
Garoo	58.32	60.38	64.62
Lushai	95.13	97.72	97.57
Uchai	65.97	64.53	72.66
Khasia	32.68	13.17	67.49

Christian share is low in the Chakma and Mag

The Chakma and Mag are also considerably large tribes in Tripura; both are predominantly Buddhist and there are only 434 Christians in their total population of about 1.2 lakh. The share of Buddhists among the Chakma is nearly 98 percent and it is about 95 percent among the Mag; there are also about 4 percent Hindus in the latter. The Chaimal are another relatively small Buddhist tribe; there are only 3 Christians in their population of 549. In general, Christian penetration is low among the Buddhist tribes of the Northeast and also elsewhere.

Christians among the Chakma and Mag, 2011

	Total	Buddhist	Christian	%B	%C
Chakma	79,813	78,013	295	97.74	0.37
Mag	37,893	36,023	139	95.07	0.37
Chaimal	549	503	3	91.62	0.55

Religious demography of the smaller tribes

We are now left with several smaller and largely Hindu or Buddhist tribes. Among these, the most numerous are Munda-Kaur and Noatia-Murashing tribes. Both have a population of above 14 thousand and both are predominantly Hindu tribes. Christians have a share of 4.2 percent in the former and less than 1 percent in the latter; the share of Hindus in the Munda-Kaur is 95.37

Christians among the smaller tribes, 2011

	Total	%H	%C
Munda, Kaur	14,544	95.37	4.16
Noatia, Murashing	14,298	98.91	0.86
Orang	12,011	91.52	7.77
Bhil	3,105	97.58	2.19
Santal	2,913	94.03	5.60
Lepcha	157	86.62	7.01
Bhutia	28	67.86	3.57

percent and 98.91 percent in the Noatia-Murashing. The Orang have a population of above 12 thousand with Christian share of 7.8 percent; their share in 1991 was 2.56

percent. The Bhil have a population of 3.1 thousand and there are 68 Christians among them. The Santal number about 2.9 thousand with 163 Christians among them. The Chaimal are largely Buddhist; of their population of 549 as many as 503 are Buddhist and 33 Hindu; there are only 3 Christians among them. The Lepcha number 157 with 11 Christians among them. And, there are 28 Bhutias with 1 Christian among them.

SIKKIM: Religious demography of the Scheduled Tribes

	Total	Hindu	Buddhist	Christian	ORP	%H	%B	%C	%O
Total Pop	6,10,577	3,52,662	1,67,216	60,522	16,300	57.76	27.39	9.91	2.67
ST Pop	2,06,360	40,340	1,36,041	16,899	12,306	19.55	65.92	8.19	5.96
Non-ST Pop	4,04,217	3,12,322	31,175	43,623	3,994	77.27	7.71	10.79	0.99

Religious demography of the Scheduled Tribes

Sikkim is not generally considered to be a part of the Northeast, but it is geographically and culturally related to the region. The Scheduled Tribes form about one-third of the population of Sikkim. Of them, about 20 percent are Hindu, 66 percent Buddhist, 8 percent Christian and 6 percent ORPs. The proportion of Christians in the non-ST population is somewhat higher at 10.8 percent.

Rise of Christianity in Sikkim

There has been considerable rise in the Christian population in both the STs and non-ST communities of Sikkim during the last several decades. Total number of Christians in the State has risen sharply from 1.7 thousand in 1971 to 7.0 thousand in 1981, 13.4 thousand in 1991, 36.1 thousand in 2001 and to 60.5 thousand now. The rise in ST Christians has also been equally sharp. In 1991, there were only 3.3 thousand ST Christians; their number rose to 5.5 thousand in 2001 and has risen to 16.9 thousand now. Their number in the non-ST population has risen from 10.1 thousand in 1991 to 30.7 thousand in 2001 and 43.6 thousand in 2011.

	Total	Christian	%C
1971	2,09,843	1,663	0.79
1981	3,16,385	7,015	2.22
1991	4,06,457	13,413	3.30
2001	5,40,851	36,115	6.68
2011	6,10,577	60,522	9.91

	Total	Christian	%C
1991	90,901	3,282	3.61
2001	1,11,405	5,455	4.90
2011	2,06,360	16,899	8.19

Changes in the Religious Demography of the ST

Among the Scheduled Tribes of Sikkim, not only the share of Christians, but also of other communities has been changing. The share of Hindus among the STs has gone up from 2.30 percent in 1991 to 5.90 percent in 2001 and to 19.55 percent in 2011; this is largely because of the addition of the Limboo to the list of STs by the Act of 2003, as we shall discuss below. For the same reason, the share of ORPs has also increased from 0.09 percent in 2001 to 5.96 percent in 2011. The share of Buddhists among the STs of Sikkim has correspondingly declined from 93.9 percent in 1991 to 88.94 percent in 2001 and to 65.92 percent now in 2011.

Changes in the Religious Demography of the Scheduled Tribes, 2001-11

	%H	%B	%C	%O
1991	2.30	93.87	3.61	0.18
2001	5.90	88.94	4.90	0.09
2011	19.55	65.92	8.19	5.96

Religious demography of the individual tribes of Sikkim

There are only four tribes counted among the Scheduled Tribes in Sikkim: Bhutia, Lepcha, Limboo and Tamang, besides the generic tribes. The Limboo and Tamang have been counted among the ST of Sikkim for the first time in 2011 following the changes in the list effected by the Act 10 of 2003. The addition of these two tribes has considerably changed the religious demography of the Scheduled Tribes as a whole. Below, we look at the religious demography of each of these tribes separately.

Religious demography of the individual tribes of Sikkim, 2011

	Total	%H	%B	%C	%O
Bhutia, etc.	69,598	1.94	94.86	2.77	0.05
Lepcha	42,909	2.42	82.47	14.69	0.11
Limboo	53,703	65.65	2.55	8.93	22.50
Tamang	37,696	5.98	84.33	9.22	0.06
Generic Tribes	2,454	17.77	60.07	16.30	4.69
Total ST	2,06,360	19.55	65.92	8.19	5.96

Bhutia

The Bhutia group of tribes includes 8 sub-tribes. This is the largest tribal group of Sikkim. One-third of all STs in the State are from the Bhutia and nearly 95 percent of the Bhutia are Buddhist. Besides the Buddhists, there are about 1.9 percent Hindus and 2.8 percent Christians among the Bhutia. The share of Christians among them has been rising slowly; it has risen from 0.88 percent in 1991 to 1.75 percent in 2001 and to 2.77 percent now in 2011. The share of Hindus has declined from 6 percent in 2001 to less than 2 percent in 2011.

Lepcha

The Lepcha form about one-fifth of the ST population of Sikkim. They are also predominantly Buddhist; but the share of Buddhists in their population at 82.5 percent is much lower than in the Bhutia. This is because Christians have a much higher presence among the Lepcha. In 2011, Christians have a share of 14.69 percent in the Lepcha; their share was 8.56 percent in 1991 and 10.29 percent in 2001. There are not many Hindus among the Lepcha; the share of Hindus in their population is 2.42 percent. Their share was higher at 5.75 percent in 2001.

Limboo

The Limboo, as we have mentioned above, have been counted as a Scheduled Tribe for the first time in 2011. They now form the second largest tribe of Sikkim after the Bhutia and ahead of the Lepcha. Somewhat more than a quarter of the STs of Sikkim are Limboo. And unlike other tribes of Sikkim, the Limboo are predominantly Hindu; nearly two-thirds of them are Hindu. Of 40 thousand Hindu STs counted in Sikkim in 2011, 35 thousand are from the Limboo. There is also a considerable number of ORPs among them; 22.5 percent of the Limboo are followers of Other Religions and Persuasions, which in their case is mostly Yumasam; a few of the Limboo also mention their religion as Kirat. Almost all of the ORPs counted among the STs of Sikkim are from the Limboo.

Besides the Hindus and ORPs, there are 8.93 percent Christians and 2.55 percent Buddhist among the Limboo.

Tamang

The Tamang have also been counted among the STs of Sikkim for the first time in 2011. They form about 18 percent of all STs, and 84.33 percent of them are Buddhist. Besides the Buddhists, there are 9.22 percent Christians and 5.98 percent Hindus among them.

CONCLUSION

1. Christianity in the Northeast has spread largely through the conversion of the Scheduled Tribes of the region. Therefore, it is important to look at the religious demography of the individual tribes separately. In this note, we look at the religious demography of the Scheduled Tribes of Assam, Tripura and Sikkim.

ASSAM

2. Of 11.65 lakh Christians counted in Assam in 2011, only 4.95 lakh are from the Scheduled Tribes. This is unusual for the Northeast; in other States of the region, Christians are almost entirely from the Scheduled Tribes.

3. This peculiarity of Assam is because many of the essentially tribal communities of Assam have not been included in the list of Scheduled Tribes. One of these communities is the tea-tribes; it is estimated that about one-fifth of them have been converted to Christianity. If this is correct, then nearly all of the non-ST Christians of Assam are likely to be from the tea-tribes.

4. There has been a long-standing demand for the inclusion of the tea-tribes and five other major communities including the Tai Ahom, Moran, Matak, Chutia and Koch-Rajbongshi in the list of STs for Assam. The present Government at the Centre seems serious about granting the demand. If and when this happens, Assam shall become a tribal-majority State. And, Muslims shall acquire a pre-dominant presence in the non-ST population. This has the potential to fundamentally reorder the polity and religious demography of Assam.

5. Christians have a share of nearly 13 percent in the current ST population of Assam. Their share has risen to this level from 7.6 percent in 1991 and 8.8 percent in 2001.

6. Assam has two separate lists of the Scheduled Tribes, one for the STs of the autonomous hill districts and the other for the rest of Assam. Of the total 38.84 lakh STs in Assam, 6.76 lakh are hill STs and the remaining 32.02 lakh are from the plains. Of 4.95 lakh ST Christians in Assam, 1.86 lakh are from the hill districts and the remaining 3.10 lakh from the plains.

7. Share of Christians among the hill STs is thus much higher at 27.5 percent; their share among the plains STs is 9.8 percent.

8. The Karbi and Dimasa-Kachari are the largest tribal group among the hill tribes. Of the total of 6.76 lakh STs in the hill districts, 4.30 lakh are Karbis and 1.03 lakh Dimasa-Kacharis.

9. Among the Karbi, 17.6 percent are now Christian. Only 11.7 percent of the Karbi were Christian in 1991.

10. The Dimasa-Kachari remain largely Hindu; there are only 1.1 percent Christians among them.

11. Christians have a very high presence in many of the relatively smaller hill tribes including the Kuki, Khasi-Jaintia, Garo, Hmar, Lushai (Mizo) and Naga tribes. The share of Christians in these tribes is above 90 percent except in Khasi-Jaintia, who have a Christian share of 88 percent and the Naga among whom 67 percent are Christian.

12. The remaining smaller hill tribes of Assam are largely Hindu or Buddhist.

13. Among the plains STs of Assam, the largest group is that of the Boro and Borocachari. Of 32 lakh plains STs, 13.6 lakh are Boro or Borocachari. This largest tribal group of the plains has acquired a Christian share of above 10 percent. Of 3.1 lakh Christians among the plains STs, 1.4 lakh are Boro or Boracachari.

14. The Garo contribute another 1.3 lakh to the Christians among the plains STs. The Garo have been added to the list of plains STs during the last decade and have been counted among the STs for the first time in 2011. They have 96 percent Christians in their population. It is the addition of this tribe to the ST list of the plains districts that has led to the sharp rise in the number and share of ST Christians during the last decade.

15. The Miri, Rabha, Kachari Sonowal and Lalung are the other major ST communities of the plains. These important and large tribal communities are mainly Hindu; there are only a few Christians among them. There are also several smaller communities who are also largely Hindu or Buddhist.

TRIPURA

16. In Tripura, there are 11.7 lakh Scheduled Tribes in the total population of 36.7 lakh.

17. Christians in Tripura are mainly from the ST communities. Of 1.60 lakh Christians counted in 2011, 1.53 lakh are from the Scheduled Tribes.

18. Christians form 13 percent of the STs in Tripura; their share has risen to this level from less than 5 percent in 1991 and 10 percent in 2001.

19. The Tripuri (including Tripura and Tippera) are the largest tribe in Tripura. Of 11.7 lakh STs in 2011, 5.9 lakh are from the Tripuri group. Christians have a share of 8.7 percent in this main tribal group of Tripura. Their share in 1991 was less than 1 percent.

20. The Riang are the second largest tribe of the State. In 2011, the population of the Riang has been counted as 1.9 lakh. Christians have made deeper inroads into this tribe. Their share in the Riang is now 17.3 percent. It has risen to this level from 8.5 percent in 1991 and 16.9 percent in 2001. The rise in their share during 2001-11 has been modest.

21. The Jamatia have a population of 83 thousand, and nearly 9 percent of them are Christian. In 1991, less than 2 percent of the Jamatia were Christian.

22. Thus Christianity is making inroads into all of the three major tribes of Tripura, but the conversion has been the most intense among the Riang.

23. There are relatively smaller tribes in Tripura with much higher Christian presence. These include the Halam, Kuki and Garoo. The Kuki are 89 percent Christian and the Garoo about 64 percent. During the last two decades, there has been slow accretion to the share of Christians in these two tribes.

24. The Halam are more numerous than the Kuki or Garoo. They have a population of 57 thousand in 2011 with a Christian share of 47.2 percent. Unlike the Kuki and Garoo, the rise of Christianity among the Halam is a recent phenomena. The share of Christians among the Halam has risen to this level from 19.5 percent in 1991 and 32.0 percent in 2001.

25. There are also considerable numbers of the Chakma and Mag in Tripura. Both these are Buddhist tribes, and there are few Christians among them. There are only 434 Christians in their total population of 1.2 lakh.

26. There are also several other smaller tribes in Tripura, most of whom are either Hindu or Buddhist.

SIKKIM

27. In Sikkim, there are 2.1 lakh STs in the total population of 6.1 lakh.

28. As in Assam, Christians in Sikkim are more numerous in the non-ST population than in the ST. there are 16.9 thousand ST Christians in the total Christian population of 60.5 thousand. The remaining 43.6 thousand Christians are from the non-tribal communities.

29. There has been considerable rise in the Christian population in both the STs and non-ST communities. The total number of Christians in Sikkim has risen sharply from 1.7

thousand in 1971 to 7.0 thousand in 1981, 13.4 thousand in 1991, 36.1 thousand in 2001 and to 60.5 thousand now.

30. In 1991, there were only 3.3 thousand ST Christians; their number rose to 5.5 thousand in 2001 and has risen to 16.9 thousand now. More surprisingly, their number in the non-ST population has risen from 10.1 thousand in 1991 to 30.7 thousand in 2001 and 43.6 thousand in 2011.

31. Among the Scheduled Tribes of Sikkim, there are 4 major communities, the Bhutia, Lepcha, Limboo and Tamang. The last two have been added to the list of Scheduled Tribes only in the last decade.

32. Among the Bhutia, there are 95 percent Buddhists, 1.9 percent Hindus and 2.8 percent Christians. The share of Christians has been slowly rising and that of the Hindus has been declining. The latter had a share of 6 percent in 2001.

34. The Lepcha are 82.5 percent Buddhist; they have a relatively larger Christian share of 14.7 percent. The share of Christians among them has been rising and that of Hindus has been declining.

35. The Limboo have been included among the STs of Sikkim in the last decade. They are largely Hindu; but a considerable number of them are followers of Yumasam or Kirat faiths. Christians have a share of 8.9 percent among the Limboo.

36. The Tamang have also been included among the STs during the last decade. Of them 84.3 percent are Buddhist, 9.2 percent Christian and 6.0 percent Hindu.