

Religion Data of Census 2011: VII

The Changing numbers of Other Religions and Persuasions (ORPs)

In our previous post on the religious demography of Jharkhand, we have noticed that the ORPs in that State are a significant player in the contention for demographic space that is occurring between different communities almost everywhere in India. The main players are, of course, the Hindus, the Muslims and the Christians. But, the Sikhs, the Jains, the Buddhists and the ORPs add complexity to the situation; and, like the changing numbers of Hindus, Muslims and Christians, any sharp changes in their numbers in different regions also has important sociological, political and strategic consequences. Before continuing with the larger story of the relative growth of Hindus, Muslim and Christians in different parts of India, we discuss the details of the changing religious profile of these less numerous communities in this and the following post. We begin with the ORPs.

Five major religions and others

The Census of India compiles numbers for five major religious communities: Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists. Persons belonging to religions other than these five are added together under the category of Other Religions and Persuasions (ORPs). In addition, there is a residual category of Religion Not Stated (RNS).

The details of the relatively less numerous religions compiled together in the category of ORPs are compiled and published separately in an Appendix to the main Religion Tables. Hindus, Muslims, Christians, etc., themselves are also composite categories; people tend to belong to many sects and beliefs within these larger categories. Numbers of the followers of these diverse sects and beliefs are also recorded and tabulated in an Annexure to the main Religion Tables.

In the Table here we give the numbers counted in the seven categories of the main Religion Tables of 2001 and 2011. As seen in the Table, 96% of the Indians belong to one of three largest religions, Hindu, Muslim or Christian. Of the total population of 121 crore in 2011, nearly 117 crore is accounted for by these

Religious Demography of India, 2001-2011

	Population in '000s		Share in Percent		Decadal Growth %
	2011	2001	2011	2001	
Total	1,210,855	1,028,610	100.00	100.00	17.72
Hindus	966,257	827,579	79.80	80.46	16.76
Muslims	72,245	138,188	14.23	13.43	24.65
Christians	27,820	24,080	2.30	2.34	15.53
Sikhs	20,833	19,216	1.72	1.87	8.42
Jains	8,443	7,955	0.70	0.77	6.13
Buddhists	4,452	4,225	0.37	0.41	5.37
ORPs	7,938	6,640	0.66	0.65	19.55
RNS	2,867	728	0.24	0.07	294.08

three. Of the rest, about 2 crore are Sikhs, 84 lakh Buddhists, 44 lakh Jains and 79 lakh ORPs. The number of RNS used to be fairly small; in 2011 it has suddenly increased to about 29 lakhs; this needs to be looked into it.

Though the number of persons belonging to religions other than Hindu, Muslim and Christian is small, yet their numbers can be fairly significant and the changes in their relative presence quite consequential in some parts of the country. As seen in the Table above, between 2001 and 2011, the Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists have all grown at a much slower pace than the total population and their relative share in the population of India has declined. The ORPs have, however, grown at a somewhat higher rate than the Indian average and there has been a slight rise in their share. In the following, we discuss the demographic progression of the ORPs since Independence and shall give detailed data about the Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists later.

Background of the category of ORP

As we have noted, ORPs is a Census category that encompasses all persons belonging to religions other than the five major religions—Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Jain and Buddhist—whose numbers are compiled in the main Religion Tables.

In the pre-Independence times, numbers for the Parsis, Jews and the so-called Tribal Religions, also referred to as Animists in the earlier Censuses, were also separately tabulated. The last was a very ambiguous category; in each of the Census Reports, the then British Census Superintendents engaged in extensive anthropological discussion about the meaning of Tribal or Animist and went through great intellectual contortions to separate these religions from the underlying and overarching Hindu religion. But they were unable to find a satisfactory definition and the instructions to the enumerators had to be changed in every Census.

After Independence, persons belonging to religious other than the main five are tabulated together under the category of Other Religions and Persuasions, ORPs. The category includes a large number of local religious practices prevalent mainly in States and districts with considerable presence of Janjati (Tribal) communities. It also includes some relatively small religious communities of adherents of religions of foreign origin, like the Jews, the Parsis and Bahais, etc. In addition, some rather small communities like the Nirankaris and Ausho Commune International also have managed to find a place in this category as distinct religious persuasions. As we shall see below, a large majority of the persons counted among ORPs are in fact followers of a handful of religious practices prevalent in specific Janjati areas.

Number and Share of ORPs

The number and share of ORPs in India was fairly small up to 1991. Their number, however, more than doubled during 1991-2001; the increase in the current decade of 2001-2011 has, however, been modest and in line with their growth in the earlier decades. This moderation of the trend of rapid growth of ORPs is one of the more significant features of the religious demographic data of 2011 and is perhaps another indicator of the noticeable resurgence in the Hindu numbers in several parts of India that we have been noticing.

Number and Share of ORPs 1951-2011

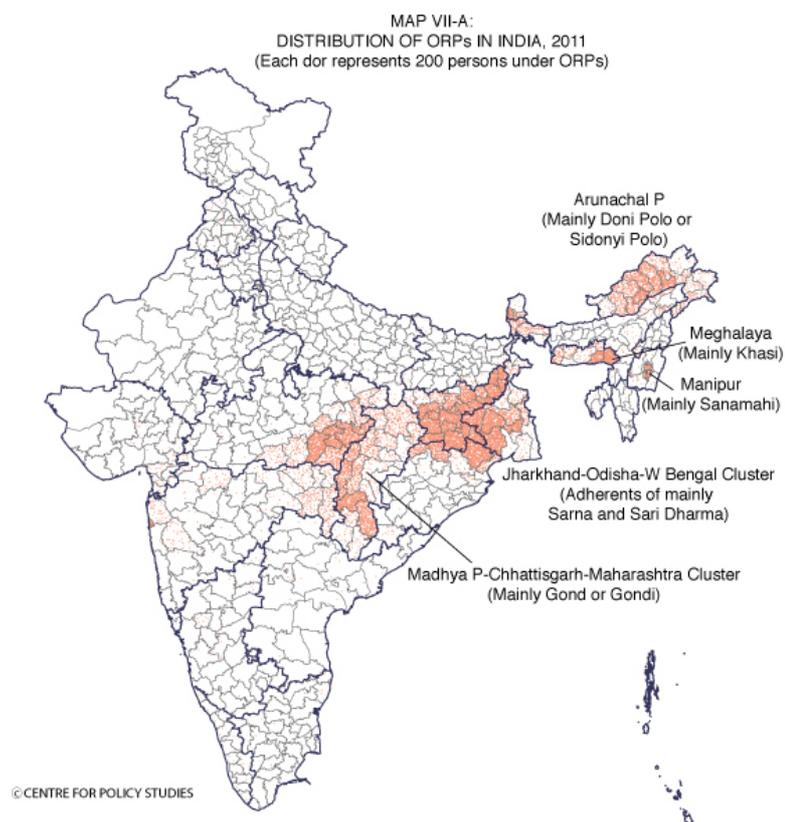
Census Year	Persons in '000s	Percent Share	Decadal Growth %
1951	1,848	0.52	—
1961	1,607	0.37	-13.04
1971	2,185	0.40	35.97
1981	2,766	0.42	26.59
1991	3,269	0.39	18.19
2001	6,639	0.65	103.09
2011	7,938	0.66	19.57

Distribution of ORPs

	Number of ORPs			Percent Share		
	2011	2001	1991	2011	2001	1991
INDIA	79,37,734	66,39,626	32,69,355	0.66	0.65	0.39
Jharkhand	42,35,786	35,14,472	14,39,066	12.84	13.04	6.59
West Bengal	9,42,297	8,95,796	4,52,403	1.03	1.12	0.66
Odisha	4,78,317	3,61,981	3,97,798	1.14	0.98	1.26
Madhya P	5,99,594	4,09,285	45,087	0.83	0.68	0.09
Chhattisgarh	4,94,594	95,187	17,370	1.94	0.46	0.10
Maharashtra	1,78,965	2,36,841	99,768	0.16	0.24	0.13
Arunachal P	3,62,553	3,37,399	3,13,118	26.20	30.73	36.21
Manipur	2,33,767	2,35,280	14,066	8.19	10.86	0.76
Meghalaya	2,58,271	2,67,245	2,98,466	8.71	11.53	16.81

A large majority of the ORPs in India are concentrated in just 9 States of India listed in the Table above. Of the total 77.9 lakh ORPs in 2011, 77.8 lakhs are in these States, and 42.4 lakhs of them are in Jharkhand alone.

Within these 9 States, the ORPs are concentrated further in a few districts. Consequently, we get 3 distinct clusters of ORP concentration comprising of several contiguous districts of Jharkhand, West Bengal and Odisha in the east; of some contiguous districts of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Maharashtra in the centre; and, of much of Arunachal Pradesh and some parts of Meghalaya and Manipur in the northeast. These 3 clusters of ORPs are clearly visible in the Map VII-A below, which gives the distribution of ORPs in the districts of India.



Jharkhand-West Bengal-Odisha region

We have seen earlier that the ORPs in Jharkhand are concentrated in Singhbhum and parts of Ranchi region. In West Bengal, they are concentrated in Bankura, Puruliya and Pashchimi Medinipur districts lying on the east of the Singhbhum region; of 9.42 lakh ORPs in the State, 7.54 lakh are in these 3 districts. Of 4.78 lakh ORPs in Orissa, 3.52 lakhs are in Mayurbhanj and another 0.90 lakhs in Sundargarh. Both these districts adjoin Singhbhum and Ranchi regions of Jharkhand. The considerable increase in the share of ORPs in the population of Orissa is largely because of the sudden rise in the number of ORPs in Sundargarh from 21.4 thousand in 2001 to 90 thousand in 2011; the proportion of Hindus in that district has therefore declined from 78.2 to 73.2 percent. Overall proportion of ORPs in this cluster, however, has remained unchanged.

Madhya Pradesh-Chhattisgarh-Maharashtra region

In this region, there was a great rise in the numbers of ORPs between 1991 and 2001; in that decade, their number went up from 45 thousand to 4 lakhs in Madhya Pradesh, from 17 thousand to 95 thousand in Chhattisgarh and from about 1 lakh to 2.4 lakhs in Maharashtra. During 2001-11, their number has increased again from 4 to 6 lakhs in Madhya Pradesh; and, it has increased phenomenally from about a lakh to nearly 5 lakhs in Chhattisgarh. In Maharashtra, however, the ORPs have declined from 2.4 to 1.8 lakhs.

In 2001 ORPs in this region were concentrated largely in Dindori, Mandala, Seoni and Balaghat of Madhya Pradesh; Kawardha, Bilaspur and Korba, and to a lesser extent in Bastar region of Chhattisgarh; and, in Gondiya, Gahchiroli, Bhandara, Chandrapur, Nagpur and Yavatmal of Maharashtra. These districts form a contiguous region extending across the three States. In addition, there was considerable presence of ORPs in Mumbai-Pune regions in the western part of Maharashtra.

In Madhya Pradesh, the number of ORPs in Dindori, Mandala, Seoni and Balaghat has increased from about 3.60 lakhs to about 4.48 lakhs now; the proportion of ORPs in Dindori of this region has declined considerably, but there has been a larger increase in Mandala. Chhindwara in the same region has now acquired more than 25 thousand ORPs compared to only about 4 thousand in 2001. In addition, there are now about 80 thousand ORPs in Shahdol, Umariya, Anuppur, Sidhi and Singrauli region where there were only about 20 thousand of them in 2001. The ORP presence seems to have expanded to several other areas like Betul, Satna and Katni. The proportion of ORPs has also increased slightly in Jabalpur; this district accounts for another about 20 thousand ORPs. Thus, in Madhya Pradesh, the area of ORP influence in the southeastern part of the State has clearly expanded beyond the few districts of 2001; and within this region, there has been much change in the proportion of ORPs from district to district, though overall the ORPs have registered a considerably high growth.

In Chhattisgarh, the growth of ORPs has been much sharper than in Madhya Pradesh; here the footprint of ORPs seems to have spread to almost all districts of the State as may be seen in Map VII-A above. The proportion of ORPs in the State as a whole has risen from 0.46 to 1.48 percent, leading to a nearly similar decline in the proportion of Hindus. The rise in the presence of ORPs has been particularly remarkable in Uttar

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Bastar Kanker and Bastar districts; there were only about 7 thousand ORPs in these two districts in 2001, their number in 2011 is 1.93 lakhs. In Kanker, the proportion of ORPs has increased by as much as 13.24 percentage points and that of Hindus has declined by 13.61 percentage points; in Bastar, the share of ORPs has increased by 6.02 percentage points and that of Hindus has declined by 6.59 percentage points.

In the Kawardha-Bilaspur-Korba region, where the presence of ORPs had become the most marked in 2001, their share has increased considerably and has spread further to Rajnandgaon and Durg. In Rajnandngaon, the share ORPs has risen by 4.21 percentage points from less than 0.2 percent in 2001; the share of Hindus in the district has correspondingly declined by 3.67 percentage points.

The presence of ORPs has also expanded to Koriya, Sarguja, Jashpur region in the north that adjoins Shahdol-Umaria-Anuppur region of Madhya Pradesh. In each of these 3 districts, the share of ORPs has increased by about 1.7 percentage points and there has been a considerable decline in the Hindu share.

Chhattisgarh thus seems to have experienced an unusual and widespread growth of the ORPs and corresponding contraction of the Hindus.

In the adjoining districts of Maharashtra, on the other hand, the share of ORPs has declined and their presence seems to have gotten restricted to fewer districts. In fact, the share of ORPs has either declined or remained nearly unchanged in all districts of the State. The largest decline, however, has occurred in Gadchiroli, where their share of 4.62 percent in 2001 was the highest in the State in 2001; in 2011, their share has declined to 2.80 percent.

This rise of ORPs in some districts and some parts of central India and decline in others, is obviously an indicator of the extremely dynamic nature of religious demography in many parts of India.

ORPs in the Northeast Region

As seen in the Table above, the proportion of ORPs in Arunachal Pradesh has declined considerably during 2001-2011; this decline comes on top of an even larger decline during 1991-2001. This decline is a consequence of the large-scale conversion of tribal communities to Christianity. Arunachal Pradesh is going through this process since 1981; Nagaland, Mizoram, etc., have passed through this process earlier; there the presence of ORPs has become negligible.

We see similar decline in the share of ORPs in Meghalaya. This too is because some of the tribal communities in certain districts of Meghalaya have not been fully converted; their share in the population, however, is declining from decade to decade, as that of the Christians has been rising.

The situation of Manipur is however different. The tribal communities of Manipur, inhabiting the hill districts, have already been converted and there are few persons belonging to ORPs among them. The proportion of ORPs there was negligibly small in 1991. In 2001, a considerable number of the Meiteis of the plains districts of Manipur chose to get counted as adherents of Sanamahi religion, and this suddenly increased the proportion of ORPs in Manipur to 10.86 percent. In 2011, the vigour of

that movement among the Meiteis seems to have waned and the proportion of ORPs has somewhat declined in the State and in all of the four plains districts of Bihunpur, Thoubal, Imphal West and Imphal East, where their presence had increased suddenly in 2001.

The Religions and Persuasions counted among the ORPs

The Census category of ORPs includes, as we have seen, several religious practices. The Census also publishes detailed district-wise data for each of the individual religions and persuasions included in the ORPs. Such data has not been yet published for the Census of 2011. According to the disaggregated data of 2001 for the ORPs, there are a total of 108 religions and persuasions included among the ORPs. Many of these religions and persuasions listed in the ORPs Tables have only a few adherents; 62 of these have less than a thousand followers and another 32 have between one to ten thousand followers. Only 6 of these religions and persuasions have more than a lakh of adherents; these six account for 59.5 lakhs of the total 66.4 lakh ORPs counted in 2001.

The six larger ORPs, 2001	
Total ORPs	66,39,626
Sarna	40,75,246
Sari Dharma	6,38,266
Gond/Gondi	5,86,723
Doni Polo/Sidonyi Polo	3,02,928
Sanamahi	2,23,742
Khasi	1,22,694

Among these 6 religions and persuasions, the largest is Sarna. Of 66.4 lakh ORPs, 40.8 lakhs are Sarnas. And of the 40.8 lakh Sarnas, 34.5 lakhs are in Jharkhand and 3.5 lakhs in of Odisha; of the latter 3.3 lakhs are in Mayurbhanj alone. Sarnas seem to exhaust nearly all of the ORPs of Jharkhand and Odisha.

Sari Dharma is the second largest religion listed among the ORPs. In 2001, there are 6.38 lakh followers of Sari Dharma; of these 6.37 lakhs are in West Bengal, 5.52 lakhs in Bankura, Puruliya and Medinipur districts and the most of the remaining in Hugli and Bardhaman.

Gond/Gondi is the third largest religious practice listed among the ORPs. Of 5.87 lakh Gonds/Gondis counted in 2001, 4.00 lakhs are in Madhya Pradesh, 0.89 lakhs in Chhattisgarh and 0.84 lakhs in Maharashtra. Gond/Gondi is thus the religion of the Madhya Pradesh-Chhattisgarh-Maharashtra cluster of ORPs in central India that we have mentioned above.

Of 3.02 lakh adherents of Doni Polo/Sidony Polo counted in 2001, 3 lakhs are in Arunachal Pradesh. Of 2.24 lakh Sanamahis, 2.22 lakhs are in Manipur; and of 1.23 lakh Khasis, nearly all are in Meghalaya and of them 1.09 lakhs are in East Khasi Hills district.

Thus, the main religions counted under ORPs are religious practices prevalent in geographically limited regions that often have considerable presence of the Scheduled Tribes. But these religions and persuasions are not exclusive to the Scheduled Tribes alone. The Sanmahi adherents of Manipur are in fact the non-tribal Meiteis. But, even a practice like Sarna, which prevails mainly in the Schedule Tribes of Jharkhand and the adjoining districts of Odisha has considerable following among the non-tribal people of that region. According to the published data of Census 2001, of 34.5 lakh

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Sarnas in Jharkhand, only 31.4 lakh are from the Scheduled Tribes, and there are more than 3 lakh non-tribal adherents of Sarna practice.

But the growth of the major religions and practices listed under the category of ORPs seem to have been the result of systematic and intense campaigns among the followers of these local practices to get themselves counted outside the Hindu fold. Some of these movements, like those of Sanamahis in Manipur and of Gonds/Gondis in Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, are quite recent. Others, like that of Sarnas in Jharkhand and Sari Dharma in West Bengal, have a longer history and seem to have run their course.

Incidentally, many of these ORPs movements have been particularly strong in regions that have significant Christian evangelical activity. During 2001-2011, there has been a significant rise in ORPs in the particularly disturbed region of Bastar, and in the whole State of Chhattisgarh.

Besides the locality specific religions that we have discussed above, the ORPs category also includes Parsis and Jews; in 2001, their total number is 69,601 and 4,650, respectively. There are also 11,324 Bahais among the ORPs in 2001. These, of course, are separate religions of non-Indian origin. But before closing this discussion of the ORPs, we must ask whether religious practices like that of the Sarnas, Sari Dharmis, Gonds or Doni Polos, etc., are really distinct religious practices or are these sects and practices within the larger Hindu fold. The Census itself counts large groups that follow distinct religious practices, like the Lingayats, as sects within Hinduism. The Census also counts several distinct religious practices as sects within Islam or Christianity.

The analysis of changing numbers of ORPs does point to the need for systematic documentation of the diverse religious practices of the Indian people and an intense sociological and philosophical reflection on which practices need to be counted as separate religions and which are to be seen as distinct paths that have always flourished within the vast umbrella of Hinduism. The analysis also points to the need of a larger Hindu awakening that begins once again to emphasise the overarching unity of thought and experience that underlies the great diversity of Hindu religious practices.

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