

The large numbers counted under the category of “Religion Not Stated”

One of the striking features of the Religion Data of Census 2011 is the unusually larger number of persons counted under the category of “Religion Not Stated” (RNS). In 2001, there were 7.3 lakh persons in this category; the number in 2011 is 28.7 lakhs. Some quick analysis in the media has tried to portray this as the spread of “atheism” in India.

The data compiled below shows interesting attributes of the RNS group. One, the rise in their numbers has been particularly marked in Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Punjab. Two, the level of literacy, female literacy and urbanisations among the RNS is somewhat higher than the average in India and in different States, but the number of children per hundred of population in the RNS populations is considerably higher than the average in almost all States. At the all India average level, there are 5 more children per hundred of the population among the RNS; the gap in Bihar is of as many as 7 children per hundred and in Arunachal Pradesh it rises to more than 11.

This profile of the RNS population does not seem to suggest that this is some random group of people who have individually taken the decision to become “atheists”. Atheism, in general, is a phenomenon of the highly educated and highly urban, who are unlikely to have high fertility. The peculiar attributes of the RNS population suggest the rise of some new groups in some States.

The rise in RNS population during 2001-11 is large, though the overall numbers are still small. It is important to study the phenomenon in detail, because it seems to have acquired a vigour of its own.

Population under Religion Not Stated, 1951-2011

In the Table here, we have compiled the population of persons counted under the category of Religion Not Stated (RNS) since 1961. Before that this category did not exist, and persons under this category and those later counted as Other Religions and Persuasions (ORPs) were combined together under “Others”. As seen in the Table, the numbers of RNS began rising after 1981. As we have been noticing, the decade of 1981-91 seems to mark a milestone in the changing religious demography of India in many respects. The RNS population rose to 4 lakhs in 1991 and again to more than 7 lakhs in 2001. In 2011, it has abruptly risen to nearly 29 lakhs; and the share of RNS in the population of India has risen to a non-negligible, 0.24 percent; in other words, one person in every 400 has been counted under this category.

Numbers of RNS, 1961-2011		
Census	Persons	%Share
1961	1,11,007	0.03
1971	36,083	0.01
1981	60,217	0.01
1991	4,15,569	0.05
2001	7,27,588	0.07
2011	28,67,303	0.24

Distribution of the RNS population

In the Table below, we have compiled the numbers of persons counted under RNS in 2001 and 2011 in those States, where they have a significant share in the population

and where there has been remarkable change during 2001-11. The States listed here account for about 24 of the 29 lakh persons counted under RNS in 2011.

Number and share of RNS in different States

	2001	2011	2001	2011
INDIA	7,27,588	28,67,303	0.07	0.24
Uttar Pradesh	69,440	5,82,622	0.04	0.29
Andhra Pradesh	94,934	4,04,100	0.12	0.48
Maharashtra	97,713	2,86,290	0.10	0.25
Punjab	4,468	87,564	0.02	0.32
Bihar	37,817	2,52,127	0.05	0.24
Jharkhand	25,387	68,343	0.09	0.21
West Bengal	54,895	2,28,267	0.07	0.25
Tamil Nadu	59,344	1,88,586	0.10	0.26
Karnataka	1,20,247	1,66,087	0.23	0.27
Kerala	25,083	88,155	0.08	0.26
Arunachal Pradesh	9,302	6,648	0.85	0.48
Manipur	1,057	10,969	0.05	0.38
Meghalaya	7,015	9,578	0.30	0.32
Sikkim	1,168	1,828	0.22	0.30

Andhra Pradesh

Among the larger States, Andhra Pradesh (including Telangana) has the highest share of RNS in its population; one in every 200 persons there has been counted in this category. The number of RNS in the State has increased from less than 1 lakh in 2001 to more than 4 lakhs in 2011. The highest proportion of RNS is in Hyderabad and Rangareddy districts, where they form 1.58 and 1.15 percent of the population, respectively. The proportion of Hindus in Hyderabad has declined drastically from 55.4 to 51.9 percent during 2001-11; much of the loss has been towards the gain of Muslims, but a part of it seems to have accrued to the category of RNS. The RNS proportion is relatively high also in Adilabad at 0.81 percent.

Incidentally, Andhra Pradesh has been seeing a decline in the proportion of Christians since 1971, when the share of Christian in that State had reached a peak of 4.2 percent and had become as high as 15 percent in Guntur and 11 percent in Krishna. Since then their share has been consistently declining and has reached negligible proportions. It is said that this has happened because of the converted persons turning “crypto-Christians?”. Could the RNS be another form of crypto-Christians?

Punjab

Punjab has experienced the largest increase in the number and share of the RNS population. Their number has increased from 4.5 thousand in 2001 to 87.6 thousand in 2011; and their share in the population has gone up from 0.02 to 0.32 percent.

The largest share of RNS in Punjab is in Gurdaspur, where they form 0.66 percent of the population; 15 thousand of about 88 thousand RNS in the State are in this district. Incidentally, Gurdaspur also has nearly 8 percent Christians in its population, which is the highest presence of Christians in any district. Amritsar accommodates another

about 11 thousand of RNS with a share of 0.44 percent; Amritsar adjoins Gurdaspur and has the second highest share of Christians in the State at 2.2 percent.

Besides, Gurdaspur and Amritsar, there is high presence of RNS in Ludhiana, Moga and Nawanshahar (Shahid Bhagat Singh Nagar); in all three of these the share of RNS is 0.45 percent or more and the three together accommodate about 23 thousand of RNS. The share of RNS in Jalandhar is also relatively high at 0.39 percent. The growth of RNS numbers in these districts needs to be studied at the micro-level.

Uttar Pradesh

Uttar Pradesh has the largest population of RNS in the country. Of 28.7 lakh RNS in India, 5.8 lakh are in Uttar Pradesh. They form 0.29 percent of the population. There were only 69 thousand persons counted under RNS in 2001.

There is a significant presence of RNS in almost all districts of the State. Their highest share, however, is in Gautam Buddha Nagar, where 1 in every hundred has been counted in this category. Gautam Buddha Nagar is also the district with the highest share of Christians in the State at 0.45 percent of the population. Besides Gautam Buddha Nagar, Agra, Bareilly, Firozabad, Aligarh, Meerut, Allahabad and Sonbhadra have a relatively higher share of RNS; they form more than 0.5 percent of the population in each of these districts, in Agra their share is 0.83 percent.

Maharashtra

In Maharashtra, 2.9 lakhs have been counted under RNS; there were about a lakh in this category in 2001 also. They have the highest share in the populations of Gadchiroli (0.63%), Gondiya (0.50%), Jalgaon (0.49%) and Nandurbar (0.44%). All of these districts have a substantial presence of the Scheduled Tribes. The RNS share is relatively high in Yavatmal, Thane, Bid and Osmanabad also.

Bihar and Jharkhand

The proportion of RNS has increased considerably in Bihar and Jharkhand. In Bihar, the highest share of RNS is 0.53 percent in Sheohar. Their share is relatively high also in Gaya, Patna, Nawada and Muzaffarpur. In Jharkhand, the RNS are spread across the State, but their share seems relatively high in the Ranchi region.

West Bengal

In West Bengal, the number of RNS has increased from about 55 thousand to 2.3 lakhs during 2001-11; their share in the population of the State is now 0.25 percent. Their highest presence is in Kolkata, where they form more than 1 percent of the population. About 49 thousand persons have been counted under RNS in Kolkata in 2011; their number in 2001 was 8.5 thousand.

Tamil Nadu

In Tamil Nadu, the numbers counted under RNS have increased from less than 60 thousand in 2001 to about 1.9 lakhs in 2011. The share of RNS in the State is the highest in Chennai (0.83%), Kancheepuram (0.55%), Thiruvallur (0.51%) and Ramanathapuram (0.48%). Incidentally, the former 3 are the only districts with a significant presence of Christians outside their older concentrations in the Kanniyakumari, Tirunelveli, Thoothukudi, Ramanathapuram region and in the Nilgiris.

Karnataka

In Karnataka, there was a significantly high share of RNS already in 2001; in 2001-11, it has risen marginally from 0.23 to 0.27 percent. The highest share of RNS in the State is in the northern districts of Gulbarga (0.71%) and Bidar (0.60%); and in Dharwad (0.40%) and Bangalore (0.43%). As we have noticed in the previous note, Gulbarga and Bidar have seen much religious demographic change during the last couple of decades.

Kerala

In Kerala, the number of RNS has gone up from about 25 thousand in 2001 to 88 thousand in 2011, and their share in the population has risen from 0.08 to 0.26 percent. The highest share of RNS in the State is in Thiruvananthapuram at 0.67 percent.

Arunachal Pradesh

Unlike in other parts of the country, the number of RNS in Arunachal Pradesh has declined from 9.3 thousand in 2001 to 6.6 thousand in 2011. As many as 6.9 thousand of 9.3 thousand RNS in 2001 were in Tirap; now there are only 622 RNS counted in the district, while the share of Christians in that district has risen from around 50 percent in 2001 to 75 percent in 2011. In this State at least, the RNS seems to have been some kind of a halfway house to being counted as full Christians.

Manipur, Meghalaya and Sikkim

In these States, the total number of RNS is small, but in all of these they have a presence of more than 0.3 percent. In Manipur, this level of presence is new; the other States had a similar presence in 2001.

Demographic attributes of persons counted under RNS

Slightly higher literacy and higher urbanisation

In the demographic attributes of literacy and female literacy, the RNS population of India is slightly better than the average, as seen in the Table below. This seems to be true in all States, except in some of the States of the northeast. The level of urbanisation of RNS populations is also higher than the average in most States. At the all India level, about 43 percent of RNS population is urban compared to the average of 31 percent for the total population. But, yet there are sufficiently large numbers of RNS counted in the rural areas. Of 28.67 lakh persons counted in this category in India in 2011, 16.44 lakh are rural and 12.24 lakh are urban. The rise in the numbers of RNS is clearly not confined to urban areas alone.

Much higher fertility

The really significant parameter differentiating the populations counted as RNS from others is the much higher level of children below the age of 6 among them. At the all India average level, there are 18.4 children per hundred of the RNS population, the corresponding number for the total population is 13.6 children per hundred. Thus there are nearly 5 extra children per hundred in the RNS population.

Literary, Child Ratio, WPR and Urban Ratio of RNS: INDIA 2001

Religion	Lit	Lit-M	Lit-F	0-6%	WPR	WPR-M	WPR-F	UR
Total	72.98	80.88	64.63	13.59	39.80	53.26	25.52	31.14
RNS	74.69	81.95	67.31	18.44	31.32	38.37	23.98	42.68
Andhra Pradesh 2011								
Total	67.02	74.88	59.15	10.81	46.61	56.98	36.16	33.36
RNS	72.63	80.37	65.42	15.04	35.26	40.61	30.13	53.90
Uttar Pradesh 2011								
Total	67.68	77.28	57.18	15.41	32.94	47.71	16.75	22.27
RNS	70.01	78.37	60.84	19.48	27.38	35.42	18.37	34.17
Bihar 2011								
Total	61.80	71.20	51.50	18.38	33.36	46.47	19.07	11.29
RNS	64.28	74.02	54.10	25.72	25.62	29.49	21.44	15.97
Arunachal Pradesh 2011								
Total	65.38	72.55	57.70	15.33	42.47	49.06	35.44	22.94
RNS	62.89	70.78	55.78	26.79	25.20	24.12	26.18	23.77

Lit: Literary Ratio; Lit-M: Male Literacy Ratio; Lit-F: Female Literacy Ratio; 0-6%: Percentage of population in 0-6 year age group; WPR: Work Participation Rate; WPR-M: Male WPR; WPR-F: Female WPR; UR: Urban Ratio in percent.

The pattern is repeated across almost all States, including those in the northeast. And in many of the States, the gap in the number of children is much larger. Thus, in Bihar, there are 7 extra children per hundred of the RNS population, and in Arunachal Pradesh, the difference is of more than 11 children per hundred.

This consistently high number of children in the RNS populations across all States cannot possibly be a matter of chance. Notice that the higher fertility of RNS populations persists irrespective of whether they have higher or lower levels of general and female literacy. And the gap in fertility is generally too large to be explained by the much smaller gap in literacy or urbanization.

Summing Up

There has been a sudden rise in the number and share of persons counted under the category of “Religion Not Stated” (RNS). The data compiled above indicates that this is not some random counting or statistical issue. It seems to be a systematic phenomenon. It is important to study it in detail to understand the underlying sociological or political causes of this sudden spurt in the RNS numbers.

One of the purposes of collecting extensive demographic and socio-economic data through large-scale Censuses is to be forewarned about the important issues likely to arise in a society in the future. But this is possible only when the data is taken seriously and significant phenomena that show up in the data are followed up through large-scale and micro-level surveys and studies. We urgently need to undertake such surveys and studies to understand the decline of Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists, the changes in the proportion of ORPs and the rise of RNS.

With this note, we close our analysis of the relatively minor religious categories of the Religion Data of the Census. We shall now return to further study the more significant interplay between the three largest religious groups in India, the Muslims, Christians and the Indian Religionists. It is the relative proportions of these three that have determined the history, sociology and politics of India for several centuries.

Appendix: Distribution of the population counted under Religion Not Stated in 2011

