

Declining share of Buddhists in the population of India

During 2001-11, the Buddhists, like the Sikhs and Jains, have grown at a much lower rate than the Hindus; this is another issue that has often drawn media attention. There are two distinct categories of Buddhists in India. First, there is the smaller category of traditionally Buddhist communities among the Janjatis of Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and some of the other northeastern States; in Jammu & Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh in the north; and, among the people of Darjeeling and Sikkim. About 11 lakh of the total 84 lakh Buddhists counted in 2011 may be placed in this category. Second, there is the much larger category of what may be called “neo-Buddhists”, who have converted to Buddhism after 1951 under the influence of Dr. Ambedkar. As many as 65 lakh of about 73 lakh Buddhists in this category are in Maharashtra, the home State of their leader, where they now form nearly 6 percent of the population. The remaining about 9 lakh neo-Buddhists are mainly in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh and the smaller northern States of Punjab, Haryana and Delhi.

During 2001-11, Buddhist communities in these two categories and in different States have recorded fairly different growth. In general, the significant communities in the first category do not seem to have suffered any major decline, except to some extent in Sikkim, where the Christians and Muslims seem to have made deep inroads. The growth of the other category of Buddhists has always been somewhat erratic; during 2001-11, they have recorded low or even negative growth in many States.

Surprisingly, the Buddhists, excepting the traditionally Buddhist communities of Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh, have higher literacy, higher female literacy, higher urban ratio and lower fertility than the average in most States.

Buddhists in India, 1951-2011

In the Table here, we have compiled the number of Buddhists enumerated in the seven decennial Censuses since 1951. The Census counted only 1.81 lakh Buddhists in 1951. This was an underestimate, because that first Census following Independence could not be conducted in some of the States with significant Buddhist population. But, as we discuss below, the actual number of Buddhists in that year may have been around 2.5 lakhs. The number counted in the next Census, in 1961, was 32.5 lakhs. This sudden growth was because of the movement initiated by Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar calling upon his followers, especially among the Scheduled Caste Hindus communities, to convert to Buddhism. The movement, at that stage, was limited only to Maharashtra and to a few districts of Madhya Pradesh (including Chhattisgarh). During the next two decades, the number of Buddhists in India seems to have grown more or less in step with the total population. There was another spurt in their growth during 1981-1991, with the

Number and Growth of Buddhists (counted), 1951-2011

| Census Year | Persons in '000s | Percent Share | Growth Buddhists % | Growth Hindus % |
|-------------|------------------|---------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| 1951 | 181 | 0.05 | — | — |
| 1961 | 3,250 | 0.74 | 1696 | 20.73 |
| 1971 | 3,812 | 0.70 | 17.29 | 23.68 |
| 1981 | 4,720 | 0.71 | 23.82 | 21.27 |
| 1991 | 6,388 | 0.76 | 35.34 | 25.09 |
| 2001 | 7,955 | 0.77 | 24.53 | 20.35 |
| 2011 | 8,443 | 0.70 | 6.13 | 16.76 |

spread of “neo-Buddhism” of Dr. Ambedkar to newer States. During 1991-2001 also, their growth was somewhat higher than the average with several States, especially Karnataka, Punjab and Delhi, etc., recording extraordinary growth in their numbers.

During 2001-11, their rate of growth has suddenly dropped to 6.13 percent. As we shall see below, this drop is largely because of the stalling of their growth in Maharashtra and contraction in their numbers in several States, where there had been considerable accretion to the numbers of neo-Buddhists during the previous couple of decades. But, the growth has also been slower in many of the older Buddhist communities.

Buddhists in 1951: the traditionally Buddhist communities

The Census counted only 1.80 lakh Buddhists in 1951. Most of them were in West Bengal, Sikkim, Tripura, Mizoram and Assam. Significant numbers of Buddhist in Jammu & Kashmir, Arunachal Pradesh and remote parts of Himachal Pradesh remained uncounted. Estimating from the later data, Himachal Pradesh may have had about 12 thousand Buddhists in 1951. Interpolating between 1941 and 1961, we get nearly 45 thousand Buddhist in Jammu & Kashmir in 1951. For Arunachal Pradesh, the Census gave an estimate of the population for the first time in 1961. In that year, the number of Buddhists there was around 44,201; there may have been about 35 thousand Buddhists in 1951 also.

| Buddhists in 1951 | |
|--------------------------|----------|
| Enumerated | |
| INDIA | 1,80,823 |
| West Bengal | 81,665 |
| Sikkim | 39,397 |
| Tripura | 15,403 |
| Mizoram | 12,027 |
| Assam | 9,850 |
| Estimated | |
| Himachal P | ~12,000 |
| Jammu & Kashmir | 44,600 |
| Arunachal P | ~35,000 |

The number of Buddhists in other States was miniscule. There were about 1 to 3 thousand Buddhists counted in Bihar (including Jharkhand), Odisha, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh (including Chhattisgarh), Maharashtra, Tamilnadu and Uttar Pradesh; in all these States, they formed less than 0.01 percent of the population. Rajasthan had a relatively higher 4.4 thousand Buddhists; but, they formed no more than 0.03 percent of the population.

We can, therefore, assume that Buddhists listed in the Table above form the traditionally Buddhist communities of India. The large numbers counted in other States since 1961 are new Buddhist converts from traditionally Hindu communities. There would obviously be some neo-Buddhists in the States listed here, as there would be some older Buddhist communities in the States that now have large numbers of neo-Buddhists. For the sake of analysis, the traditionally Buddhist communities may be assumed to be limited to the States listed here and the Buddhists in other States may be assumed to be neo-Buddhists.

Buddhists after 1951: the neo-Buddhist communities

In 1961, the number of Buddhists in the country suddenly rose to 32.5 lakhs from around 2 lakhs in 1951. Of these, 28 lakhs were in Maharashtra alone; another about 1.1 lakh were counted in Madhya Pradesh (including Chhattisgarh). In this decade, the number of Buddhists grew several-fold in Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh (including Uttarakhand), Punjab and Delhi also. But the phenomenon was really significant in

Maharashtra, which now, in 2011, accommodates 77 percent of all Buddhists in the country. The States listed in the Table below, including Chhattisgarh and Uttarakhand, together accommodate 72 lakh of the total 84 lakh Buddhists in 2011; nearly all of them are likely to be post-1951 converts.

The neo-Buddhist Communities, 1951-2011

(numbers in thousands)

| | 1951 | 1961 | 1971 | 1981 | 1991 | 2001 | 2011 |
|-------------|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Maharashtra | 2.49 | 2,790 | 3,264 | 3,946 | 5,041 | 5,839 | 6,531 |
| Madhya P | 2.29 | 113.4 | 83.82 | 74.31 | 216.7 | 274.6 | 286.5 |
| Karnataka | 1.71 | 9.77 | 14.14 | 42.15 | 73.01 | 393.3 | 95.71 |
| Uttar P | 3.22 | 12.89 | 39.64 | 54.54 | 221.4 | 314.4 | 221.2 |
| Punjab | – | 2.33 | 1.37 | 0.80 | 24.93 | 41.49 | 33.24 |
| Delhi | 0.50 | 5.47 | 8.72 | 7.12 | 13.91 | 23.70 | 18.45 |

Growth of Buddhists in Maharashtra

| After the first spurt during 1951-61, the population of Buddhists in Maharashtra has not shown any extra-ordinary | Share and Growth of Buddhists in Maharashtra | | | | | | | |
|---|---|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| | | 1951 | 1961 | 1971 | 1981 | 1991 | 2001 | 2011 |
| | 000's | 2.49 | 2,790 | 3,264 | 3,946 | 5,041 | 5,839 | 6,531 |
| | %Share | 0.01 | 7.05 | 6.48 | 6.29 | 6.39 | 6.03 | 5.81 |
| %Growth | – | >> | 16.99 | 20.89 | 27.75 | 15.83 | 11.85 | |

growth. Their rate of growth was somewhat lower than the average of the population during 1961-71 and 1971-81, leading to a lowering of their share from 7.05 percent in 1971 to 6.29 percent in 1981. There was a slight improvement during 1981-1991, when Madhya Pradesh and some of the northern States experienced a fresh spurt in the growth of neo-Buddhists. Since 1991, the growth of Buddhists in Maharashtra has been somewhat below the average of the State and their share in the population has now declined to 5.81 percent.

Growth of Buddhists in Madhya Pradesh

| Madhya Pradesh (including Chhattisgarh) was the other State to undergo a sharp spurt in the number of Buddhists in 1951-61; in that | Share and Growth of Buddhists in undivided Madhya Pradesh | | | | | | | |
|---|--|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| | | 1951 | 1961 | 1971 | 1981 | 1991 | 2001 | 2011 |
| | 000's | 2.29 | 113.4 | 83.82 | 74.31 | 216.7 | 274.6 | 286.5 |
| | %Share | 0.01 | 0.35 | 0.20 | 0.14 | 0.33 | 0.34 | 0.29 |
| %Growth | – | >> | -27.8 | -7.96 | 187.7 | 26.73 | 4.34 | |

decade, their population grew from about 2.3 thousands to 1.13 lakhs. During the next two decades, however, their numbers contracted; they registered a negative growth of about 28 percent in 1971-81 and again of negative 8 percent during 1981-91. This was followed by another sudden spurt that raised the population of Buddhists in the State from 74.3 thousand in 1981 to about 2.2 lakhs in 1991. During the next decade also, Buddhists in undivided Madhya Pradesh grew slightly faster than the average. Now, during 2001-11, their growth has dropped to mere 4.3 percent, bringing their share in the population down from 0.34 to 0.29 percent. Their growth in Madhya Pradesh part of the undivided State has been even lower at 3.22 percent, while they have grown by 7.97 percent in Chhattisgarh.

Thus the growth of neo-Buddhists in Madhya Pradesh has been more erratic than in Maharashtra. Unlike Maharashtra, Buddhists here are confined largely to a few districts. These include Balaghat and Chhindwara of Madhya Pradesh and

Rajnandgaon of Chhattisgarh; these districts border the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra. There is also a noticeable presence of neo-Buddhists in Gwalior and Bundelkhand regions of the State.

Growth of Buddhists in Karnataka

| In Karnataka, the neo-Buddhist movement, was slow to take root. Their share in the population of | Share and Growth of Buddhists in Karnataka | | | | | | | |
|--|--|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|
| | | 1951 | 1961 | 1971 | 1981 | 1991 | 2001 | 2011 |
| 000's | 1.71 | 9.77 | 14.14 | 42.15 | 73.01 | 393.3 | 95.71 | |
| %Share | 0.01 | 0.04 | 0.05 | 0.11 | 0.16 | 0.74 | 0.16 | |
| %Growth | - | 471 | 44.73 | 198 | 73.21 | 439 | -75.7 | |

the State grew slowly up to 1991, with a noticeable spurt in 1951-61 and again in 1971-81. However, it was only during 1991-2001 that there was qualitatively significant change in the presence of Buddhists in the State; in that decade, their numbers suddenly grew from 73 thousand to 3.93 lakhs and their share in the population rose from 0.16 to 0.74 percent. That growth has not been sustained; in the following decade, their number has contracted to 93 thousand and their share in the population has reverted to 0.16 percent of 1991.

The sharp contraction in the Buddhist population of Karnataka is one of the more remarkable aspects of the religion data of Census 2011; but, as we have seen, this has followed an equally sharp increase in their numbers in the previous decade. Such changes are related more to political rather than demographic parameters. Incidentally, during 1991-2001, the most dramatic expansion of Buddhists had occurred in Gulbarga-Bidar region; their numbers in this region have now declined to fairly low levels.

Growth of Buddhists in Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Delhi

In these three northern States, there was indeed some spurt in the Buddhist numbers during 1951-61; and, there was some increase in their numbers and share during the next couple of decades in Uttar Pradesh (including Uttarakhand). But, the numbers of Buddhists in these States rose to significant levels only with the consistently high growth of 1981-91 and 1991-2001, even then their share in the population remained below 0.2 percent. As in Karnataka, that rise in the neo-Buddhist numbers has not been sustained. During the last decade of 2001-11, the population of Buddhists has sharply contracted in this whole region. (See, Table of neo-Buddhists at the beginning of this section).

Thus the spread of the neo-Buddhist movement outside Maharashtra has been slow and erratic. After the first spurt of Buddhism in 1951-61, many States experienced another significant rise during 1981-91 and 1991-2001; in all such States, the number of Buddhist has sharply contracted during 2001-11. In Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh (including Chhattisgarh) also, their rate of growth has declined below the average of those States.

Growth after 1951: the traditionally Buddhist communities

In the Table below, we have compiled numbers for Buddhists in the States that are known to have traditionally accommodated significant Buddhist communities. The total number of Buddhists in the States listed here adds up to about 11 lakhs in 2011. These along with the neo-Buddhist communities discussed earlier exhaust all but

about 1.5 lakh Buddhists in the country. These 1.5 lakh are rather thinly spread across the country.

The traditionally Buddhist Communities, 1951-2011

| | (numbers in thousands) | | | | | | |
|-------------|------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| | 1951 | 1961 | 1971 | 1981 | 1991 | 2001 | 2011 |
| W Bengal | 81.67 | 112.3 | 121.5 | 156.3 | 203.6 | 243.4 | 282.9 |
| Sikkim | 39.40 | 49.89 | 62.62 | 90.85 | 110.4 | 152.0 | 167.2 |
| Arunachal P | – | 44.20 | 61.40 | 86.48 | 111.4 | 143.0 | 162.8 |
| Mizoram | 12.03 | 18.72 | 22.65 | 40.43 | 54.02 | 70.49 | 93.41 |
| Tripura | 15.40 | 33.72 | 42.29 | 54.81 | 128.3 | 98.92 | 125.4 |
| Assam | 9.85 | 16.78 | 22.57 | 39.68 | 64.01 | 51.03 | 54.99 |
| J&K | 44.55 | 48.36 | 57.96 | 69.71 | 89.58 | 113.8 | 112.6 |
| Himachal P | – | 18.09 | 35.94 | 52.63 | 64.08 | 75.86 | 78.66 |

As seen in the Table above, the progression of Buddhists in these States has been much more smooth, without any major spurts or conspicuous contractions, except in Tripura.

West Bengal

| Buddhists of West Bengal form the largest of the older Buddhist communities in India; they comprise mainly the | Share and Growth of Buddhists in West Bengal | | | | | | | |
|--|--|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|
| | | 1951 | 1961 | 1971 | 1981 | 1991 | 2001 | 2011 |
| 000's | 81.67 | 112.3 | 121.5 | 156.3 | 203.6 | 243.4 | 282.9 | |
| %Share | 0.31 | 0.32 | 0.27 | 0.29 | 0.30 | 0.30 | 0.31 | |
| %Growth | | 37.46 | 8.24 | 28.63 | 30.25 | 19.54 | 16.24 | |

Gorkhas of Darjeeling. Of 2.83 lakh Buddhists counted in the State in 2011, 2.19 lakh are in Darjeeling and another 51 thousand in the neighbouring Jalpaiguri. They have a share of 11.3 percent in the population of the former and 1.3 percent in the latter. In the population of the State, their share has remained nearly unchanged at about 0.3 percent. There was some decline because of the low growth they experienced in 1961-71; otherwise, their rate of growth has been above the average of the State throughout this period. In 2001-11, they have grown by 16.24 percent compared to the growth rate of 10.8 percent of the Hindus.

Sikkim

| Buddhists of Sikkim are the second largest traditionally Buddhist community. They have registered consistently | Share and Growth of Buddhists in Sikkim | | | | | | | |
|--|---|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|
| | | 1951 | 1961 | 1971 | 1981 | 1991 | 2001 | 2011 |
| 000's | 39.40 | 49.89 | 62.62 | 90.85 | 110.4 | 152.0 | 167.2 | |
| %Share | 28.61 | 30.76 | 29.84 | 28.71 | 27.15 | 28.11 | 27.39 | |
| %Growth | | 26.64 | 25.50 | 45.09 | 21.49 | 37.76 | 9.98 | |

high growth since 1951, though it has been occasionally slower than the average of the State. Consequently, their share in the population has declined from the peak of 30.8 percent in 1961 to 27.4 percent now. There has been a sudden decline in their growth during 2001-11. This seems related to the rise of Christians during the last three decades; Christian share in the population has gone up from 2.2 percent in 1981 to 6.7 percent in 2001 and 9.9 percent in 2011. The share of Hindus in Sikkim has also declined sharply from 68.4 percent in 1991 to 60.9 percent in 2001 and 57.8 percent in 2011. In 2001-11, Hindus have grown by just 7.01 percent, which is slower than even the Buddhists. Christians and Muslims, in this decade, have grown by 68 and 28 percent, respectively.

Arunachal Pradesh

Buddhists in Arunachal Pradesh are concentrated in Twang and West Kameng in the west and Lohit and Changlang in the east of the State. Of 1.63 lakh Buddhists counted in 2011, 71 thousand are in the former two and 75 thousand in the latter two districts, leaving only about 17 thousand Buddhists in other parts of the State. Regular Census was conducted in Arunachal Pradesh only in 1971. Buddhists retained a share of about 13 percent in the population up to 2001. In 2001-11, their growth has been far below the State average of 26 percent and their share has declined to less than 12 percent.

Share and Growth in Arunachal Pradesh

| | 1971 | 1981 | 1991 | 2001 | 2011 |
|---------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 000's | 61.40 | 86.48 | 111.4 | 143.0 | 162.8 |
| %Share | 13.13 | 13.69 | 12.88 | 13.03 | 11.77 |
| %Growth | | 40.85 | 28.78 | 28.42 | 13.83 |

Mizoram

In Mizoram, Buddhists have a significant presence in the western districts. Of 93.4 thousand Buddhists counted in 2011, 51.5 thousand are in the southwestern Lawngtlai district; there are another 27.5 thousand Buddhists in Lunglei adjoining Lawngtlai on the north and 12.3 thousand in Mamit adjoining Lunglei on the north. There are few Buddhists in the eastern districts.

Share and Growth of Buddhists in Mizoram

| | 1951 | 1961 | 1971 | 1981 | 1991 | 2001 | 2011 |
|---------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 000's | 12.03 | 18.72 | 22.65 | 40.43 | 54.02 | 70.49 | 93.41 |
| %Share | 6.13 | 7.04 | 6.81 | 8.19 | 7.83 | 7.93 | 8.51 |
| %Growth | | 55.65 | 20.98 | 78.52 | 33.63 | 30.49 | 32.51 |

Population of Mizoram is now 87 percent Christian. Notwithstanding the dominating presence of Christians since 1951, Buddhists have retained and even somewhat improved their share in the population. There has been a slight improvement in their share during 2001-11 also, though in this decade their share in Lawngtlai has declined from 52.2 to 43.7 percent.

Tripura

In 2011, there are 1.25 lakh Buddhists in Tripura. Their numbers and share in have distinctly improved during 2001-11; this improvement has followed a considerable contraction in their numbers in the previous decade. The growth of Buddhists in Tripura has been somewhat erratic; but up to 1981, their share was fairly stable at somewhat below 3 percent. Now, it has risen to 3.4 percent.

Share and Growth of Buddhists in Tripura

| | 1951 | 1961 | 1971 | 1981 | 1991 | 2001 | 2011 |
|---------|-------|---------|-------|-------|-------|--------|-------|
| 000's | 15.40 | 33.72 | 42.29 | 54.81 | 128.3 | 98.92 | 125.4 |
| %Share | 2.41 | 2.95 | 2.72 | 2.67 | 4.65 | 3.09 | 3.41 |
| %Growth | | - 118.9 | 25.42 | 29.61 | 134.0 | -22.87 | 26.75 |

Assam

In Assam, the growth of Buddhists seems to have stalled since 1991. Their population contracted by a fifth during 1991-2001; and in 2001-11, it has grown by mere 7.8 percent compared to the State average of 17.1 percent. There are not many Buddhists in the State, and a majority of them are concentrated in districts bordering Arunachal Pradesh in the east and the west; of about 55 thousand Buddhists counted in 2011, 16 thousand are in

Share and Growth of Buddhists in Assam

| | 1951 | 1961 | 1971 | 1981 | 1991 | 2001 | 2011 |
|---------|------|---------|-------|-------|-------|--------|-------|
| 000's | 9.85 | 16.78 | 22.57 | 39.68 | 64.01 | 51.03 | 54.99 |
| %Share | 0.12 | 0.15 | 0.15 | 0.22 | 0.29 | 0.19 | 0.18 |
| %Growth | | - 70.38 | 34.46 | 75.84 | 61.32 | -20.28 | 7.77 |

Tinsukia, 5 thousand in Sonitpur and the remaining are mostly in districts adjoining these.

Jammu and Kashmir

| | | Share and Growth of Buddhists in Jammu & Kashmir | | | | | | |
|--|---------|---|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| | | 1951 | 1961 | 1971 | 1981 | 1991 | 2001 | 2011 |
| Outside the northeast, the major traditional Buddhist communities are in Ladakh region of J&K and in the | 000's | 44.55 | 48.36 | 57.96 | 69.71 | 89.58 | 113.8 | 112.6 |
| | %Share | 1.37 | 1.36 | 1.26 | 1.16 | 1.14 | 1.12 | 0.90 |
| | %Growth | - | 8.55 | 19.84 | 20.27 | 28.51 | 27.03 | -1.06 |

adjoining regions of Himachal Pradesh. Up to 2001, Buddhists have grown at a rate only slightly below the average of the State, except in 1961-71. During 2001-11, however, the Buddhist population of the State has experienced a contraction and their share in the population has declined to less than 1 percent. During the decade, the number of Buddhists in Leh (Ladakh), which accommodates nearly 80 percent of all Buddhists of the State, has come down from 90.6 to 88.6 thousand and their share in the population of the district has declined sharply from 77.3 to 66.4 percent. The Buddhists in this State, like the Hindus and Sikhs earlier, seem to have come under demographic pressure.

Himachal Pradesh

| | | Share and Growth of Buddhists in Himachal Pradesh | | | | | |
|---|---------|--|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| | | 1961 | 1971 | 1981 | 1991 | 2001 | 2011 |
| Buddhists in Himachal Pradesh are concentrated in Lahul & Spiti bordering Leh of J&K, Kinnaur bordering Tibet | 000's | 18.09 | 35.94 | 52.63 | 64.08 | 75.86 | 78.66 |
| | %Share | 0.64 | 1.04 | 1.23 | 1.24 | 1.25 | 1.15 |
| | %Growth | - | 98.67 | 46.45 | 21.76 | 18.38 | 3.69 |

and in Kullu and Kangra. Of 78.7 Buddhists counted in 2011, 19.5 thousand are in Lahul & Spiti, 18.1 thousand in Kinnaur, 15.4 thousand in Kullu and 14.5 thousand in Kangra. Up to 2001, their growth has been somewhat above the average of the State. Part of the high growth of the early decades is attributed to the arrival of Tibetan refugees into the State. During 2001-11, however, they have grown by only 3.7 percent, while the total population of the State has risen by 12.9 percent. The State seems to have followed the pattern of the neighbouring Punjab and also Delhi, where the Buddhist population has contracted during this decade.

Summing Up

Traditionally Buddhist Communities

The relatively larger traditionally Buddhist communities of West Bengal and Mizoram have continued to grow faster than the average of their States and their shares in the population have somewhat improved. In Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh, they have grown slower than their respective State averages during 2001-11; in both these States, there has been rapid spread of Christianity during the last two or three decades. In Tripura, the Buddhists have grown faster than the average following the contraction they had experienced during 1991-2001. In Assam, the share of Buddhists was rising up to 1991, since then it has begun to decline. Their growth during 2001-11 has been better than in 1991-2001 when they experienced negative growth. In both Jammu & Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh, the growth of Buddhists in 2001-11 has been below the average; in J&K, the number of Buddhists has actually contracted.

The neo-Buddhist Communities

The growth of the largest neo-Buddhist community, that of Maharashtra, has been below the average of the State for the last two decades; new accretions to the movement, it seems, have stopped and the community has somewhat lower fertility than the average. In Madhya Pradesh (including Chhattisgarh), where the neo-Buddhists had grown rapidly over the earlier two decades, their growth rate has now declined to very low levels. In Karnataka, there was a dramatic rise in the neo-Buddhist numbers in 1991-2001; during 2001-11, their population has sharply contracted. There has also been a contraction in their numbers in the northern States of Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Delhi.

Possible causes of lowered growth

Slowing down of the neo-Buddhist movement

One of the causes for the lowered growth of Buddhists seems to be a slowing down of the neo-Buddhist movement. That seems to be the main reason for the sharp contraction of Buddhist populations in Karnataka, Punjab, Delhi and Uttar Pradesh, etc. It seems many of those who had converted to Buddhism in these States have reverted to Hinduism. The sharply lowered growth in Madhya Pradesh may also be partly due to this reason. This retraction of neo-Buddhism in some of the major States during the last decade can perhaps be seen as another indicator of the reassertion of Hinduism that we have noticed in the religion data of Census 2011 in several other contexts.

Demographic factors: higher female literacy, higher urbanisation, lower fertility

Various demographic indicators show that Buddhists, particularly neo-Buddhists, have a relatively lower fertility. As seen in the Table below, literacy, especially female literacy, among Buddhists in India is considerably higher than the average, their urban ratio is also higher and, for every hundred of population, they have 2 children less than the average.

Literary, Child Ratio, WPR and Urban Ratio of Buddhists: 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 |
| Buddhist | 81.29 | 88.31 | 74.04 | 11.63 | 43.15 | 53.39 | 32.54 | 42.97 |
| Maharashtra 2011 | | | | | | | | |
| Total | 82.34 | 88.38 | 75.87 | 11.86 | 43.99 | 56.00 | 31.06 | 45.22 |
| Buddhist | 83.17 | 89.97 | 76.20 | 11.33 | 43.55 | 54.18 | 32.58 | 47.76 |
| West Bengal 2011 | | | | | | | | |
| Total | 76.26 | 81.69 | 70.54 | 11.59 | 38.08 | 57.07 | 18.08 | 31.87 |
| Buddhist | 81.95 | 88.14 | 75.79 | 8.43 | 37.02 | 47.94 | 26.10 | 34.69 |
| Mizoram 2011 | | | | | | | | |
| Total | 91.33 | 93.35 | 89.27 | 15.36 | 44.36 | 52.35 | 36.16 | 52.11 |
| Buddhist | 48.11 | 61.68 | 33.77 | 20.18 | 43.80 | 48.92 | 38.39 | 2.46 |

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.

This all-India pattern of higher literacy, higher urbanisation and lower number of children seems to be a reflection of the situation in Maharashtra, which has nearly 80 percent of the Buddhists in the country. The urban ratio and literary of Maharashtra is in general higher than the Indian average and number of children is lower. Within

Maharashtra also, the literacy and urbanisation levels among Buddhists are slightly higher and number of children percent of the population is slightly lower than the average of the State.

It seems that the call of Dr. Ambedkar to convert to Buddhism has been heeded by relatively more literate and more urban people. This is true also in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh and in many other States with significant neo-Buddhist communities. The difference between the literacy and fertility of Buddhists and the total population is, in fact, much larger in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh than in Maharashtra. Even in Punjab, the Buddhists have higher literacy than the average, though the number of children among them is slightly above the average.

In West Bengal also, literacy and urbanisation levels are higher among the Buddhists and the number of children percent of the population is considerably lower; this would probably reflect in their lowered growth in the future.

In Jammu & Kashmir and in Himachal Pradesh, the number of children percent of the population is much lower among the Buddhists, though their literacy levels are relatively lower in the latter and near the average in the former.

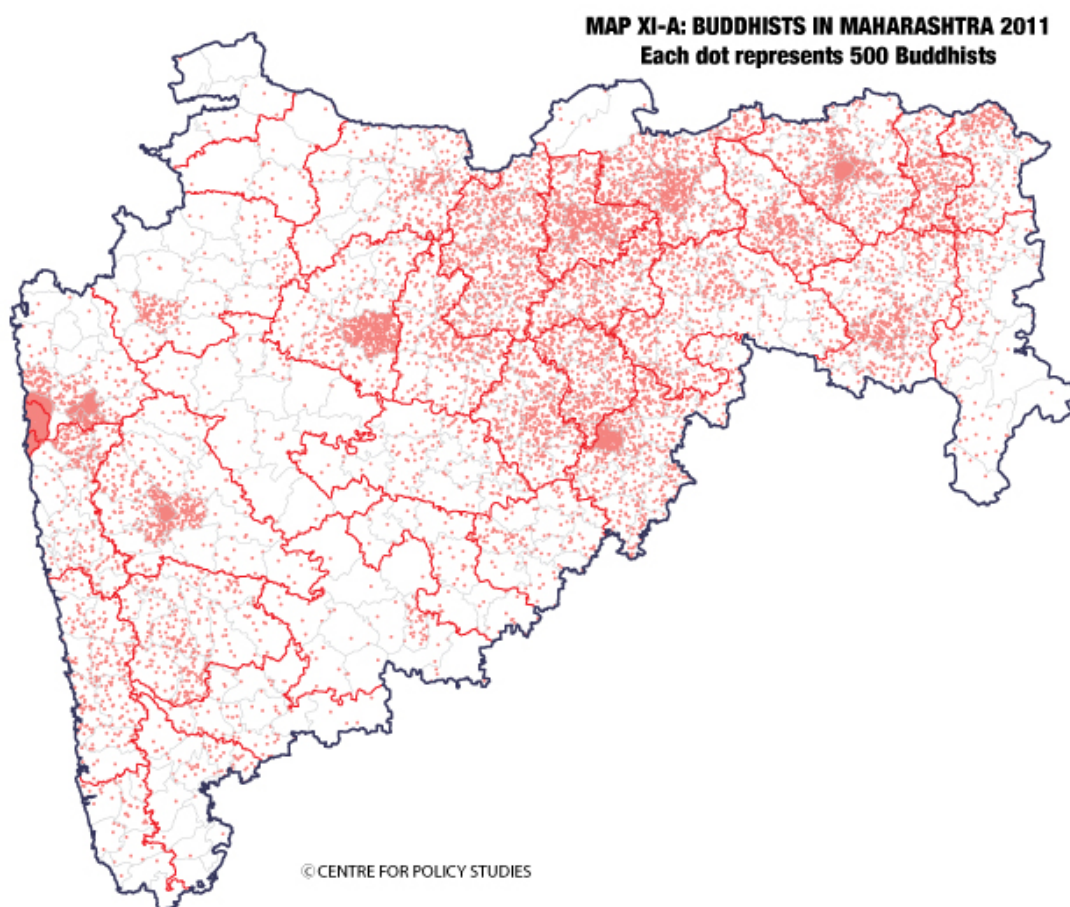
In Sikkim, the demographic parameters of Buddhists are largely similar to the total population, but the number of children among them is marginally lower.

It is only in the traditional communities of the northeast, especially in Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh, that the Buddhists have lower literacy and higher number of children than the average. In Mizoram, they have nearly 5 more children per hundred of the population than the average and it shows in their consistently higher growth in that State.

Concluding Remarks

It is indeed remarkable that the Buddhists who are concentrated mainly in remote areas of the country and neo-Buddhists, who are converts from the generally deprived Scheduled Caste communities, turn out to have higher literacy and lower fertility than the average population. This seems to be one of the main reasons for their lower growth during the last decade. There is also a slowing down of neo-Buddhist movement, resulting in some of the converts reverting to Hinduism; this seems to be the reason for their negative growth in Karnataka, Punjab, Delhi and Uttar Pradesh. Their larger community in Maharashtra, it seems did not have much new accretion after the first spurt. The lower growth of Buddhists there during the last two decades, and therefore their lower average growth in the country, seems to be determined by the demographic attributes of higher literacy and higher urbanisation.

Appendix: Distribution of Buddhists in Maharashtra



In Map XI-A above, we give the distribution of Buddhists in Maharashtra, who form the largest neo-Buddhist community of India. The largest concentration of Buddhists is in the Vidarbha districts of Buldana, Akola, Washim, Amravati, Wardha, Nagpur, Bhandara, Gondia, Gadchiroli, Chandrapur and Yavatmal. Nearly 30 lakh of the total 65 lakh Buddhists are in these 11 districts. Their share in the population of eight of these districts is between 12 to 15 percent; it is as high as 18 percent in Akola. In Gondiya, Gadchiroli and Yavatmal, which have a relatively higher proportion of Scheduled Tribes, the share of Buddhists is between 7-10 percent. Another about 12 lakh Buddhists are in the Marathwada districts of Nanded, Hingoli, Parbhani, Jalna and Aurangabad; their share in the former three of these is above 10 percent, in Hingoli they form 15 percent of the population. There are another about 18 lakh Buddhists in the western Maharashtra districts of Thane, Mumbai Suburban, Mumbai, Raigarh, Pune, Satara and Ratnagiri; their share in the population of these districts is below 5 percent except in Mumbai Suburban and Ratnagiri, where they form 5 and 7 percent of the population, respectively. As seen in the Map, within the various districts that we have mentioned, the Buddhists seem further concentrated in particular sub-districts.