

The changing religious profile of Asia: Buddhists, Hindus and Chinese Religionists

We have described the changing share and distribution of Christians and Muslims in different parts of Asia in our previous two notes, [XLII](#) and [XLIII](#). In this note, we present a similar analysis for the other major and older religions of Asia—Hinduism, Buddhism and Chinese Religions. In the [following note](#), we graphically depict these changes through maps of the distribution and percentage share of these three religions in different regions and countries of Asia.

During the last 110 years, Christians and Muslims together have improved their share in the population of Asia from 18.6 to 34.1 percent. On the other hand, share of the three major religions that we describe in this note has declined from nearly 80 percent to less than half of the population, while 15 percent of the population has turned irreligious.

The three religions that we describe here are largely confined to South Asia, Southeast Asia and East Asia. Total population of these regions has grown considerable slower than that of the Muslim dominant regions of Central and West Asia. East Asia, which has almost no Muslims, has grown the slowest of all and at a rate that is far below other regions of Asia. This differential growth of population, which also we describe in this note, has partly determined the relative growth of different religious communities of Asia.

Hindus (including Sikhs and Jains), who form about a quarter of the population of Asia, are confined almost entirely to South Asia. During the last 110 years, they have lost about 10 percentage points off their share in South Asia and by a similar amount in India according to the Census data. They have suffered a loss of about 10 percentage points in Sri Lanka and Nepal also. The loss has been much bigger in Pakistan, where their share has declined from nearly 17 to merely 1.3 percent, and in Bangladesh, where they have declined from 33 to 9.5 percent of the population.

With these losses, Hindus have been contracting to the boundaries of what currently constitutes India and they are losing their share even within those shrunken boundaries.

Buddhists are concentrated in East Asia and in some of the countries of Southeast Asia. Their share in East Asia had declined considerably from around the middle of the twentieth century. But they have recovered much of their share during the last decade. In 2010, they form 19 percent of the population of East Asia, which is somewhat more than their share of 18.3 percent in 1900. Within East Asia, their share has improved in all countries except Japan. The improvement is considerable in South Korea and Mongolia.

Thus Buddhists in East Asia have not only maintained their share in China, but they also seem to have expanded to newer regions and groups in South Korea and Mongolia.

In Southeast Asia, where the Muslim share has undergone a considerable rise, the share of Buddhists has declined from 31.7 to 26.8 percent. The decline is the most precipitous

in Vietnam, where they formed 69.3 percent of the population in 1900 and are reduced to 49.2 percent now. In Myanmar, their share has declined from nearly 87 percent to less than 75 percent and in Laos from 60.3 to 52.2 percent. There has been some decline in Singapore and also in Malaysia during the last decade. But they have more or less retained their share in the predominantly Buddhist countries of Thailand and Cambodia, where they now form 87 and 85 percent of the population, respectively.

Share of Buddhists in South Asia has improved everywhere except in Nepal. In India, their share has gone up from nearly zero in 1900 to 0.7 percent now. In Sri Lanka, they have improved from 59.2 to 68.9 percent. In Nepal, their share declined from 20.0 percent in 1900 to 8.2 percent in 2000 but has improved to 11.5 percent in the last decade. In Bhutan also there was a decline from 79 percent in 1900 to 74 percent in 2000 and there has been a sudden rise to 84 percent during the last decade. This rise in Buddhist share in Nepal and Bhutan during the last decade and in Sri Lanka over a longer period has been almost entirely at the cost of Hindus.

Share of Chinese Religionists in East Asia has declined from 71.3 to 27.7 percent. This decline is mainly because of their share in China declining from nearly 80 to just 31 percent with the strong rise of irreligion there. That phase of expanding share of the Irreligious has now passed and share of Chinese Religionists has begun to improve during the last decade though not as strongly as that of the Buddhists.

In Taiwan also, there has been a decline in the share of Chinese Religionists from 78 to 56 percent. But their share in South Korea has improved from 8 to 11 percent.

Thus Buddhists have retained their presence in the countries where they had a significant presence at the beginning of the twentieth century and have expanded to newer countries. Share of Chinese Religionists has declined in China. But it is mainly because of the rise of irreligion there; that phenomenon has now begun to reverse. Share of Hindus has declined in India, as well as in all other countries of South Asia. Their decline is qualitative different from that of the Chinese Religionists in East Asia. Decline of Hindus is driven by the rise of Muslims in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, of Buddhists in Sri Lanka and Bhutan, and of Buddhists and others in Nepal. This decline, therefore, is unlikely to be reversed soon.

It would be instructive to read this note in conjunction with the maps of the distribution and share of these three religions in different regions and countries of Asia given in the following note.

Religious profile of Asia

Population (in thousands) of different religions in Asia					
	1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
Total	956,145	2,146,877	3,180,422	3,682,366	4,164,252
Christians	21,897	101,384	248,713	312,833	342,011
Muslims	156,089	391,274	676,523	832,712	1,078,855
Hindus*	206,827	473,463	703,283	831,685	969,267
Buddhists	126,620	232,239	318,862	354,650	487,037
Chinese R**	380,930	238,082	354,637	392,315	449,385
Ethnic R	50,564	90,872	117,696	128,298	146,779
New Religionists	5,910	77,449	91,098	100,639	58,971
Non R/Atheists	54	537,963	670,327	730,538	619,610
Percent share of different religions in the population of Asia					
Christians	2.29	4.72	7.82	8.50	8.21
Muslims	16.32	18.23	21.27	22.61	25.91
Hindus*	21.63	22.05	22.11	22.59	23.28
Buddhists	13.24	10.82	10.03	9.63	11.70
Chinese R**	39.84	11.09	11.15	10.65	10.79
Ethnic R	5.29	4.23	3.70	3.48	3.52
New Religionists	0.62	3.61	2.86	2.73	1.42
Non R/Atheists	0.01	25.06	21.08	19.84	14.88

*Includes Jains and Sikhs. **Includes Daoists and Confucians.

Another look at the religious profile of Asia

In our previous two notes, we have given details of the changing religious profile of Asia and the changing share and distribution of Christians and Muslims in different regions and countries of the continent along with the relevant Maps. In this note, we give details of the share and distribution of other major religions of Asia, namely Hinduism, Buddhism and Chinese Religions. We also give details of the growth and distribution of the Irreligious, whose numbers have ballooned since the middle of the twentieth century. Before going into these details, however, we once again present an overview of the changing religious profile of Asia in the Table above.

Sharp decline in the share of religions other than Christianity and Islam

As we have mentioned in our previous notes [XLII](#) and [XLIII](#), Christianity and Islam have considerably increased their share in the course of the twentieth century. The two together claimed adherence of 18.6 percent of the population in 1900; that share in 2010 has risen to 34.1 percent. Share of the other older religions of Asia has declined from more than 80 percent to less than half of the population with another 15 percent having turned Irreligious.

Share of Chinese Religionists has declined the most precipitously

The decline has been the most precipitous in the share of Chinese Religionists. There are multiple reasons for that decline: There has been a rise in the share of Christianity in East Asia; there has been an even greater rise in the share of the Irreligious; and, total population of East Asia, particularly of China, has grown much more slowly than other parts of Asia. In the following, we shall discuss this decline of the Chinese Religionists in detail, as we present the changing share and distribution of religions other than Christianity and Islam in different regions and countries of Asia. But we begin with a description of the relative growth of the total populations of different regions of Asia.

Population of different regions of Asia

Total Population (in thousands) of different regions of Asia						
	1900	1970	1990	2000	2010	MF
Asia	956,145	2,146,877	3,180,422	3,682,366	4,164,252	4.36
South Asia	292,409	712,308	1,117,134	1,344,467	1,598,760	5.47
Southeast Asia	80,629	286,708	440,965	518,541	593,414	7.36
East Asia	532,545	986,644	1,350,465	1,485,217	1,573,970	2.96
Central Asia	20,921	75,229	121,687	146,309	166,112	7.94
West Asia	29,641	85,988	150,171	187,832	231,996	7.83

MF: Multiplication factor of population between 1900 and 2010.

East Asia and South Asia have grown slower than other regions

The population of East Asia and South Asia, the two most populous regions of Asia, has grown much slower than the other regions of Asia. In the last 110 years, population of East Asia has multiplied by less than 3 times and that of South Asia by around 5.5 times, while that of the other three regions has multiplied between 7 and 8 times.

Multiplication factor is related to Muslim share

The multiplication factor of the population of different regions seems related to the share of Muslims in the population. Central Asia and West Asia, where Muslims form, respectively, 94 and 89 percent of the population in 2010, have both multiplied by nearly 8 times. Southeast Asia, with nearly 37 percent Muslims in its population, has multiplied by 7.4 times. South Asia, with about 30 percent Muslims, has multiplied 5.5 times. And, East Asia, with only a few Muslims in its population, has multiplied by less than 3 times.

Region	%M	MF
Asia	25.91	4.36
South Asia	29.76	5.47
Southeast Asia	36.89	7.36
East Asia	1.37	2.96
Central Asia	94.25	7.94
West Asia	88.80	7.83

%M: Muslim share in 2010

China has grown slower than India

Population of East Asia has grown much slower than not only the more Muslim regions of Asia, but also South Asia. This is partly because of the higher growth of the much larger Muslim population of South Asia. But it is also because population of China has grown far slower than India because of the more stringent population control measures of the former after 1950.

	Population ('000)		%Growth	
	India	China	India	China
1900	229,900	472,000	--	--
1970	554,911	820,195	141.37	73.77
1990	850,785	1,141,120	53.32	39.13
2000	1,013,662	1,262,557	19.14	10.64
2010	1,224,614	1,348,932	20.81	6.84

Share of different regions in the population of Asia

Share of different regions in the population of Asia (percent)					
Total	1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
Asia	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00
South Asia	30.58	33.18	35.13	36.51	38.39
Southeast Asia	8.43	13.35	13.86	14.08	14.25
East Asia	55.70	45.96	42.46	40.33	37.80
Central Asia	2.19	3.50	3.83	3.97	3.99

Share of East Asia in total population of Asia has declined

A consequence of the lower growth of population in East Asia is that the share of the region in the population of Asia has declined drastically from 55.7 percent in 1900 to 37.8 percent in 2010. This is the one of the three major reasons—besides the rise of

Irreligion and that of Christianity—for the large decline in the share of Chinese Religionists in Asia.

Share of other regions has improved

Share of all other regions in the population of Asia has improved. What is of special significance is that South Asia also has improved its share from 30.6 percent in 1900 to 38.4 percent in 2010. This is partly because of the relatively faster growth of the Muslim population whose share in the region has increased by nearly 10 percentage points, as we have noticed earlier. But non-Muslim populations of the region have also recorded considerable growth. And therefore, share of Hindus in the population of Asia has indeed improved. This is largely because the population control policies of India have neither been as drastic, nor have these been implemented with the same rigour as in China. This seems to have proved a blessing in disguise. Hindus continue to form more than 23 percent of the population of Asia. More successful population control in India would have resulted in the share of Hindus in Asia suffering a considerable decline in this period.

Share of different religions is partly determined by changes in the total population of the regions they dominate

The changes that have occurred in the shares of different religions, especially of the Hindus, Buddhists and Chinese Religionist have been partly determined by the relative growth in the total population of the regions and countries where they have a significant presence. Of course, different rates of growth of the populations of different communities and conversions to other religions, especially Christianity, have also contributed to the changes in the relative presence of different religions in Asia. Therefore, while looking at the description and analysis of changing shares of different religions in Asia and its regions, the relative growth of the total populations of different regions described in this section should be kept in mind.

Share and distribution of different religions in Asia

HINDUS (including Sikhs and Jains)

Number ('000) of Hindus in different region of Asia, 1900-2010					
	1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
Asia	206,827	473,463	703,283	831,685	969,267
South Asia	205,504	469,706	694,321	820,315	960,594
Southeast Asia	1,307	3,611	8,233	10,334	7,079
West Asia	3	14	581	872	1,449
Distribution of Hindus in different regions of Asia in percent					
South Asia	99.36	99.21	98.73	98.63	99.11
Southeast Asia	0.63	0.76	1.17	1.24	0.73
West Asia	0.00	0.00	0.08	0.10	0.15

South Asia

Hindus are confined largely to South Asia

Hindus are confined almost entirely to South Asia. In the analysis here, we have added Sikhs and Jains to the Hindus. Of 206.8 million Hindus (including Sikhs and Jains) in

Asia in 1900, 205.5 million were in South Asia, leaving only 1.3 million Hindus outside the region. In 2010, the situation remains unchanged. Of 969.3 million Hindus, 960.6 million are in South Asia and less than 9 million in other regions. In 1900, Hindus in South Asia formed 99.4 percent of Hindus in Asia; in 2010 that ratio is 99.1 percent.

Within South Asia they are getting confined to India

	1900	1970	1990	2000	2010	MF
South Asia	205,504	469,706	694,321	820,315	960,594	4.67
India	187,523	446,083	661,946	781,455	921,030	4.91
Bangladesh	9,373	11,175	14,018	16,016	14,121	1.51
Pakistan	4,320	890	1,422	1,870	2,335	0.54
Nepal	3,410	9,103	14,514	18,367	20,300	5.95
Sri Lanka	832	2,199	2,043	2,171	2,725	3.28

Within South Asia, Hindus are largely confined to what now forms the Indian Union. Of 961 million Hindus in the region, 921 million are in India. Hindus in India form nearly 96 percent of all Hindus in South Asia. In 1900, of 205.5 million Hindus in the region, 187.5 million forming 91 percent of the total were in India. Of the remaining about 9 percent, nearly 7 percent were in Pakistan and Bangladesh, the two units that were carved out of what formed India up to the middle of the twentieth century. The contraction of Hindus outside India is also visible in the multiplication factors given in the Table above. Between 1900 and 2010, Hindus in India have multiplied 4.9 times. In Bangladesh, their number has multiplied only 1.5 times and in Pakistan it has contracted to nearly half. Their growth has been slower than the average also in Sri Lanka. Only in Nepal, their numbers have grown more than the average growth of Hindus in South Asia.

Hindus have grown slower than the total population in every country of South Asia

It is remarkable that in every major country of South Asia, Hindus have grown slower than the total population of that country. In the region as a whole, Hindus have multiplied 4.7 times, while the total population has multiplied by a factor of 5.5. The gap between the growth of total and the Hindu population is very high in Pakistan, Bangladesh and also Sri Lanka. The gap is considerable even in the predominantly Hindu countries of India and Nepal.

	MFT	MFH
South Asia	5.47	4.67
India	5.33	4.91
Bangladesh	5.19	1.51
Pakistan	6.82	0.54
Nepal	6.76	5.95
Sri Lanka	5.84	3.28

MF: Multiplication 1900-2010;
T: Total M: Hindu Population

Share of Hindus has contracted in every country of South Asia

As a consequence of the relatively slower growth of Hindus, their share in the total population of every country of South Asia and of the region as a whole has suffered a decline during this period. The decline has been calamitous, of course, in Pakistan and Bangladesh. But there has been a considerable decline in India, Nepal and Sri Lanka also. Even in tiny Bhutan, there has been a sudden decline in the presence of Hindus during the last decade.

	1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
South Asia	70.28	65.94	62.15	61.01	60.08
India	81.57	80.39	77.80	77.09	75.21
Bangladesh	32.69	16.76	12.81	12.40	9.50
Pakistan	16.97	1.35	1.19	1.19	1.34
Nepal	76.98	80.37	77.32	76.75	67.76
Sri Lanka	23.28	17.57	11.98	11.53	13.06
Bhutan	15.00	24.20	22.36	20.52	11.39

Recent improvement in the share of Hindus in Sri Lanka

As seen in the Table above, there was a sharp decline in the share of Hindus between 1900 and 1970 and again between 1970 and 1990. The first decline was probably related to the events associated with the Independence of that country. The second may have had something to do with the rise of Tamil militancy in northern Sri Lanka. Share of Hindus has indeed improved during the last decade that saw the final defeat of that militancy. The issue needs to be studied more carefully.

Southeast Asia

Hindus in Southeast Asia

Outside South Asia, the largest number of Hindus is in Southeast Asia. They have some presence in several countries of the region. But, their highest presence is in Indonesia and Malaysia. Of about 7 million Hindus in the region in 2010, 3.9 million are in Indonesia and 1.8 million in Malaysia. In addition, there are 8.2 lakh Hindus in Myanmar and 2.9 lakh in Singapore. This accounts for nearly all Hindus in Southeast Asia.

Decline in the share of Hindus in Southeast Asia

Between 1900 and 2010, share of Hindus has declined in all countries of Southeast Asia where they have a significant presence. The decline is particularly high in Malaysia, where their share has come down from 10.2 percent to 6.4 percent of the population. The decline is

	Percent share of Hindus in SE Asia			
	1900	1970	2000	2010
SE Asia	1.62	1.26	1.99	1.19
Indonesia	2.00	1.93	3.42	1.62
Malaysia	10.19	7.60	7.49	6.44
Singapore	7.48	6.75	5.51	5.69
Myanmar	2.78	0.94	1.98	1.71

also considerable in Singapore, where Hindu presence has declined from 7.5 to 5.7 percent. In Indonesia and Myanmar, there was a rise in the share of Hindus after 1970, which has been followed by a sharp decline during the last decade.

Sharp decline in the number of Hindus in the last decade

There has been a sharp decline in the absolute number and share of Hindus in Indonesia and Myanmar in the last decade. In Indonesia, there were 7.3 million in 2000; their number in 2010 is 3.9 million. In Myanmar, their number has declined from 9.0 to 8.2 lakh. This decline has resulted in the absolute number of Hindus in Southeast Asia declining from 10.3 million in 2000 to 7.1 million in 2010. This is another issue that needs to be looked into more carefully.

West Asia

Recent rise in the number of Hindus in West Asia

There were hardly any Hindus in West Asia at the beginning of the twentieth century and there were only 14 thousand of them even in 1970. Since then, there has been a significant rise in the number of Hindus in this region. Their number rose to above 5 lakh in 1990 and has now reached 1.45 million.

Almost all the Hindus are in Arabian Peninsula

Nearly all of the Hindus in West Asia are in the Arabian Peninsula. Of 1.45 million of them in the region in 2010, 510 thousand are in the United Arab Emirates, 364 thousand

in Saudi Arabia, 171 thousand in Oman and 102 thousand in Kuwait. In these countries, they have significant share of 6.8, 1.3, 6.2 and 3.7 percent, respectively. But Hindus in this region are mainly expatriate workers without any meaningful citizenship rights.

There are few Hindus in Central Asia or in East Asia.

BUDDHISTS

Number ('000) of Buddhists in different region of Asia, 1900-2010					
	1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
Asia	126,620	232,239	318,862	354,650	487,037
South Asia	3,599	14,065	21,139	24,565	28,231
Southeast Asia	25,565	90,140	123,143	141,234	158,923
East Asia	97,446	127,998	174,371	188,583	299,334
Distribution of Buddhists in different regions of Asia in percent					
South Asia	2.84	6.06	6.63	6.93	5.80
Southeast Asia	20.19	38.81	38.62	39.82	32.63
East Asia	76.96	55.11	54.69	53.17	61.46

Buddhists are concentrated in East Asia and Southeast Asia

Buddhists are concentrated largely in East and Southeast Asia. Of the Buddhists in Asia in 2010, 61.5 percent are in East Asia, 32.6 percent in Southeast Asia and 5.8 percent in South Asia. In 1900, East Asia had an even larger share of Buddhists. At that stage, nearly 77 percent of the Buddhists of Asia were in East Asia; of the rest 20.2 percent were in Southeast Asia and only 2.8 percent were in South Asia. Share of Southeast Asia in the Buddhists of Asia has increased mainly because of the faster growth of population in that region. Increase in the share of South Asia is both because of relatively higher growth of population of the region and conversion of certain sections of Indian population to Buddhism as we have discussed in [an earlier note](#). Below, we give further details of the distribution and changing share of Buddhists in different regions of Asia.

Growth of Buddhists has been slower less than that of Hindus

Between 1900 and 2010, the number of Buddhists in Asia has risen from 126 million to 487 million, thus multiplying by a factor of 3.85. Hindus in Asia, on the other hand, have multiplied by a larger factor of 4.69 percent, with their numbers rising from 207 million in 1900 to 969 million in 2010. Main reason for this larger growth of Hindus is in the larger growth of the total population of India as compared to China, as we have remarked earlier. But though the number of Buddhists has grown more slowly than that of Hindus, the former have retained their share in the countries of their dominance and have spread to many new countries, while Hindus have contracted to within the current boundaries of India and their share within India has also shrunk.

East Asia

Buddhism was confined to China and Japan

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Buddhism in East Asia was confined largely to China and Japan. Of 97 million Buddhists in the region then, 60 million were in China and 36 million in Japan. There were only a few Buddhists in other countries of the region.

	1900	1970	1990	2000	2010	MF
East Asia	97,446	127,998	174,371	188,583	299,334	3.07
China	60,000	54,000	94,000	105,829	208,066	3.47
Japan	35,666	64,685	68,606	69,931	71,307	2.00
South Korea	800	5,319	6,700	7,174	11,954	14.94
North Korea	200	288	320	365	369	1.85
Taiwan	580	3,679	4,280	4,686	6,145	10.59
Mongolia	200	27	465	599	1,493	7.47

It has spread to other parts of East Asia

In the course of the last 110 years, Buddhism has spread to all other major countries of East Asia except North Korea. Its spread has been particularly spectacular in South Korea, Taiwan and Mongolia. Only in Japan, there has been some contraction in the share of Buddhists, as we shall see below.

Buddhist share in East Asia has remained unchanged

The share of Buddhists in the total population of East Asia has remained nearly unchanged. They formed 18.3 percent of the population in 1900; their share in 2010 is 19 percent. There was a decline in their share in the latter half of twentieth century because of the rise of irreligion in China. However, during the last decade, share of Buddhists has recovered to somewhat above the level of 1900 with the recent recovery of faith in China.

1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
18.30	12.97	12.91	12.70	19.02

Buddhists in China

Two-fifths of the Buddhists in Asia and in the world are in China, but they form only 15.4 percent of the population of China. Their share was somewhat lower at 12.7 percent in 1900. It dropped to 6.6 percent in 1970 with the spread of irreligion under Marxist rule, but has risen considerably during the last decade.

1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
12.71	6.58	8.24	8.38	15.42

Buddhists in Japan

Unlike China, Japan is a predominantly Buddhist country. Nearly 80 percent of the population was Buddhist in 1900. That share declined to about 62 percent in 1970 and to 55.2 percent in 2000; it has slightly improved to reach 56.4 percent in 2010. This decline in the share of Buddhists is largely because of the rise in what the Christian sources on International Demography—which we have been using and have described in [an earlier note](#)—call ‘New Religionists’. They form nearly 26 percent of the population in 2010.

1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
79.57	62.00	55.53	55.19	56.35

Buddhists in South Korea

Buddhism has undergone its greatest expansion in South Korea. Number of Buddhists there has multiplied nearly 15 times, rising from 800 thousand in 1900 to 12 million in 2010. Their share in the population has increased from 10.0 to 24.8 percent.

1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
10.00	16.66	15.63	15.32	24.81

Buddhists in North Korea

In North Korea, Buddhists form less than 2 percent of the population. Much of the population is Irreligious or follows Ethnic Religions and also some ‘New Religions’.

Buddhists in Taiwan

More than a quarter of the population of Taiwan is Buddhist. Share of Buddhists in Taiwan has improved from 18 percent in 1900 to 26.5 percent now. There was some decline in their share between 1970 and 2000, because of the Irreligious acquiring a share of about 4 percent in the population. The sharp rise in the share of Buddhists during the last decade has been largely at the cost of Chinese Religionists, as we see later.

Percent share of Buddhists in Taiwan				
1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
18.14	25.07	21.12	20.92	26.47

Buddhists in Mongolia

As in South Korea, Buddhism has experienced an expansion in Mongolia in the last 110 years. In 1900, Buddhists had a share of 38 percent in the population; they have a share of 54 percent now, making Mongolia the most Buddhist country of East Asia after Japan. The sudden rise in the share of Buddhists in the last decade has been mainly at the cost of Ethnic Religions. The low share of Buddhists in 1970 was because of the sharp rise of irreligion in Mongolia. That trend was reversed by 1990.

Percent share of Buddhists in Mongolia				
1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
38.31	2.15	20.98	22.49	54.17

Thus in East Asia, Buddhism has experienced an expansion during this period. The expansion is not so much in its share of the total population, but more in its area of influence, which has expanded to cover South Korea and Mongolia. Many of the followers of Ethnic Religions in these countries have turned to Buddhism in this period.

Southeast Asia

	Number ('000) of Buddhists in different countries of Southeast Asia				
	1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
Southeast Asia	25,565	90,140	123,143	141,234	158,923
Thailand	5,488	32,931	47,639	52,383	60,298
Myanmar	9,055	21,309	29,358	33,145	35,823
Vietnam	7,623	26,235	33,502	39,534	43,212
Cambodia	2,138	6,038	7,284	9,462	12,007
Laos	905	1,566	2,034	2,650	3,236
Indonesia	200	1,099	1,630	1,938	1,944
Malaysia	105	690	1,160	1,479	1,502

Southeast Asia is more Buddhist than East Asia

Buddhists have a share of 26.8 percent in the population of Southeast Asia in 2010. This is significantly higher than their share of 19 percent in East Asia. Thailand, Myanmar and Cambodia are predominantly Buddhist countries and Vietnam and Laos are around half Buddhist. Among other major countries of the region, Indonesia and Malaysia are predominantly Muslim and Philippines largely Christian. Singapore is divided between Chinese Religionists, Buddhists and Christians, with the Chinese Religionists having the dominant share.

But number of Buddhists in East Asia is higher

East Asia, of course, has a much higher number of Buddhists than Southeast Asia. In 2010, there are 299 million Buddhists in East Asia and 159 million in Southeast Asia.

Buddhists in Southeast Asia have grown faster than in East Asia

Number of Buddhists in Southeast Asia, however, has grown much more than in East Asia during the last 110 years. Their number has multiplied by a factor of 3.1 in East Asia, while the multiplication factor in Southeast Asia is 6.2. In 1900, number of Buddhists in East Asia was nearly four times that in Southeast Asia; it is not even double in 2010. This is partly due to the much slower growth of the total population of East Asia.

Even so, share of Buddhists in Southeast Asia has declined

Notwithstanding this high growth of Buddhists, their share in the population of Southeast Asia has declined from 31.7 percent in 1900 to 26.8 percent in 2010. This is because of

Percent share of Buddhists in SE Asia				
1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
31.71	31.44	27.93	27.24	26.78

the much faster growth of Muslims and Christians in this region. As we have seen earlier, Muslims have experienced an accretion of 15 percentage points and Christians of 11 percentage points in their share between 1900 and 2010. On the other hand, Buddhists have lost 5 percentage points off their share in the population and Ethnic Religionists, as we shall see below, have lost more than 23 percentage points.

Buddhists in Thailand

Thailand has the largest Buddhist population in Southeast Asia; it is also the country with the largest share of Buddhists in the world. At the beginning of the twentieth

Percent share of Buddhists in Thailand				
1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
90.86	92.13	85.69	85.31	87.23

century, 91 percent of the population of Thailand was Buddhist. That ratio rose to 92 percent in 1970 with the share of Chinese and Ethnic Religionists declining in that period. After 1970, the share of Buddhists has declined by about 5 percentage points to reach 87 percent. Much of the gain has been that of Muslims, though there has been some increase in the share of Christians, Ethnic Religionists and the Irreligious also.

Buddhists in Myanmar

Share of Buddhists in Myanmar has declined more sharply than in Thailand. They formed 86.7 percent of the population in 1900; their share now is now 74.7 percent.

Percent share of Buddhists in Myanmar				
1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
86.65	78.63	72.45	72.67	74.69

The decline is because of the rise in the share of Christians and of Ethnic Religionists.

Buddhists in Vietnam

In Vietnam, Buddhists formed 69 percent of the population in 1900. Their share has declined to about 49 percent in 2010. This is largely because of the rise in the

Percent share of Buddhists in Vietnam				
1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
69.30	61.40	50.24	49.52	49.19

share of the Irreligious and the New Religionists, as we shall see later.

Buddhists in Cambodia

Cambodia, like Thailand and Myanmar, is a Buddhist country. They form 85 percent of the population in 2010.

Percent share of Buddhists in Cambodia				
1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
85.50	87.03	84.19	84.72	84.93

Their share was about the same in 1900 also. Despite the country passing through a Marxist phase, it has remained steadfastly Buddhist.

Buddhists in Laos

Share of Buddhists in Laos has declined from 60 percent in 1900 to 52 percent in 2010. The remaining population of Laos largely adheres to Ethnic Religions.

Percent share of Buddhists in Laos				
1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
60.33	57.75	48.98	48.78	52.19

Buddhists in Malaysia

Share of Buddhists in Malaysia has remained largely unchanged at around 5 percent. It had risen to above 6.5 percent in 2000, but has since declined to 5.3 percent.

Percent share of Buddhists in Malaysia				
1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
5.00	6.36	6.50	6.65	5.29

Buddhists in Singapore

There are only about 750 thousand Buddhists in Singapore. They form 14.8 percent of the population. Their share was higher at 17 percent in 1900.

Percent share of Buddhists in Singapore				
1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
17.00	9.64	14.26	14.46	14.81

Buddhists in Philippines and Indonesia

There are only 107 thousand Buddhists in Philippines, where they form about 0.1 percent of the population. Their number is higher at 1.94 million in Indonesia, but their share there is also less than 1 percent. Philippines is around 90 percent Christian and Indonesia about 80 percent Muslim, as we have seen earlier.

Thus among the Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia, Thailand and Cambodia have largely retained their faith intact, while there has been considerable decline in the Buddhist share in Myanmar because of the increased presence of Christianity and of Ethnic Religions, in Vietnam because of the rise of Irreligion and New Religions and in Laos because of the increasing share of Ethnic Religions.

South Asia

Number ('000) of Buddhists in different countries of South Asia

	1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
South Asia	3,599	14,065	21,139	24,565	28,231
India	200	3,779	5,950	7,249	8,772
Nepal	886	842	1,540	1,967	3,441
Sri Lanka	2,115	8,287	11,651	12,879	14,378
Bhutan	242	705	1,223	1,571	610
Bangladesh	157	450	700	802	921

Buddhist presence in South Asia is low

Of 487 million Buddhists in Asia in 2010, only 28 million are in South Asia, where they form less than 1.8 percent of the population. In the course of the last 110

Percent share of Buddhists in South Asia				
1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
1.23	1.97	1.89	1.83	1.77

years, their share has somewhat improved, partly because of the neo-Buddhist movement of India, which led to substantial numbers from certain caste groups converting to Buddhism. That movement has more or less exhausted itself. Presence of Buddhists in South Asia as a whole is low, but two of the countries in the region, Sri Lanka and Bhutan, are predominantly Buddhist and Nepal has a substantial Buddhist presence.

Buddhists in Sri Lanka

Half of the Buddhists in South Asia are in Sri Lanka. They form 69 percent of the population of the country. Their share has improved substantially since 1900, when they formed around 59 percent of the population. This improvement is largely at the cost of Hindus, as we have seen earlier.

Percent share of Buddhists in Sri Lanka				
1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
59.18	66.22	68.35	68.41	68.93

Buddhists in Bhutan

Bhutan is a small country with a population of 726 thousand. Buddhists form 84 percent of the population there. Their share has improved to this level from 79 percent in 1900 and only 67 percent in 1970. As in Sri Lanka, this rise in the share of Buddhists has been mainly at the cost of Hindus.

Percent share of Buddhists in Bhutan				
1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
79.02	66.58	72.13	73.97	84.02

Buddhists in Nepal

In Nepal, share of Buddhists has declined from 20 to 11.5 percent between 1900 and 2010. Share of Hindus has also declined in this period. The loss of Buddhists and Hindus has been to the gain of Ethnic Religionists, Christians and Muslims. Remarkably, during the last decade, share of Buddhists has increased by about 3 percentage points; this rise has been largely at the cost of Hindus.

Percent share of Buddhists in Nepal				
1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
20.00	7.44	8.20	8.22	11.49

Buddhists in India

Number of Buddhists in India increased from 200 thousand in 1900 to 3.8 million in 1970, and their share from 0.09 to 0.68 percent. This was because of the neo-Buddhist movement that we have discussed in detail in our earlier note on [Buddhists in India](#). Share of Buddhists has been now stable at around 0.7 percent for the last several decades.

Percent share of Buddhists in India				
1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
0.09	0.68	0.70	0.72	0.72

Buddhists in Bangladesh and Pakistan

There are 0.9 million Buddhists in Bangladesh, where they form 0.6 percent of the population. Their share in Bangladesh has been stable, while that of Hindus has been declining rapidly. There are only about 107 thousand Buddhists in Pakistan.

Thus, one of the main stories of South Asia is the contraction of Hinduism in the Buddhist countries of Sri Lanka and Bhutan and even in the Hindu country of Nepal, and a rise in the share of Buddhists in the first two and also in Nepal during the last decade.

CHINESE RELIGIONISTS

Number ('000) of Chinese R in different region of Asia, 1900-2010

	1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
Asia	380,930	238,082	354,637	392,315	449,385
East Asia	379,507	231,314	343,685	379,186	436,665
China	376,369	217,568	326,130	359,978	417,998
Taiwan	2,493	8,935	12,346	13,638	12,924
South Korea	640	4,768	4,917	5,251	5,304

Chinese Religionists here include Daoists and Confucianists.

East Asia

Chinese Religionists are largely in East Asia

Chinese Religionists, among whom we have included Daoists and Confucianists, are confined largely to East Asia. Of 449 million Chinese Religionists in Asia in 2010, 437 million are in East Asia. The remaining 12 million Chinese Religionists are in Southeast Asia. There are few Chinese Religionists in the rest of Asia.

Their share in East Asia has declined sharply

We have seen that the share of Chinese Religionists in the population of Asia has declined from 39.8 percent in 1900 to 10.8 percent in 2010. In East Asia, the decline has been from 71.3 to 27.7 percent, which is comparatively less precipitous than in Asia as a whole. The fall in East Asia has been mainly because of the rise of irreligion in China, which now claims 36.4 percent of the population of the region.

Percent share of Chinese R in East Asia				
1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
71.26	23.44	25.45	25.53	27.74

Distribution of Chinese Religionists in East Asia

Within East Asia, the Chinese Religionists are confined to China, Taiwan and South Korea. Of 437 million Chinese Religionists in East Asia, 418 million are in China, 13 million in Taiwan and about 5 million in South Korea. Chinese Religionists in South Korea are nearly all of them Confucianists, as we shall in a later note.

Chinese Religionists in China

Chinese Religionists formed nearly 80 percent of the population of China in 1900. In 2010, Chinese Religionists form 31 percent of the population, while the Irreligious have come to claim 40 percent. During the last decade, there has been a sharp decline in irreligion, as we shall see later. But the share of Chinese Religionists has increased by only about 2.5 percentage points, while Buddhists have experienced a substantial accretion, as we have noted above.

Percent share of Chinese R in China				
1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
79.74	26.53	28.58	28.51	30.99

Chinese Religionists in Taiwan

Chinese Religionist formed 78 percent of the population of Taiwan in 1900. By 1970, their share had declined to 61 percent. This was largely to the gain of Buddhists, but there was some accretion to the share of Christians and 'New Religionists' also, as we see later. During 2000-10, Chinese Religionists have again suffered a decline of about 5 percentage points. This has been largely to the gain of Buddhists, as we have seen above.

Percent share of Chinese R in Taiwan				
1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
77.95	60.88	60.93	60.88	55.67

Chinese Religionists in South Korea

There are about 11 percent Chinese R in South Korea. Their share has declined to this level from the peak of about 15 percent in 1970. But in recent decades, it has remained largely stable. Chinese Religionists in South Korea are mostly Confucianists.

Percent share of Chinese R in S Korea				
1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
8.00	14.94	11.47	11.21	11.01

Southeast Asia

Number ('000) of Chinese R in Southeast Asia, 1900-2010

	1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
SE Asia	1,413	6,697	10,796	12,941	12,467
Malaysia	525	2,698	4,325	5,364	5,220
Singapore	124	1,125	1,330	1,521	1,987

Chinese Religionists here include Daoists and Confucianists.

Chinese Religionists are mainly in Malaysia and Singapore

In Southeast Asia, Chinese Religionists have a significant presence only in Malaysia and Singapore. Besides these, there are about 2 million Chinese Religionists in Indonesia, where they form less than 1 percent of the population; about half a million in Cambodia with about 3 percent share in the population; 0.9 million in Thailand with a share of about 1.3 percent; 0.9 million in Vietnam with a share of about 1 percent; and, about 0.8 million in Myanmar with a share of about 1.7 percent. Most of the Chinese Religionists in Myanmar, as in South Korea, are Confucianists.

Their share in SE Asia is declining

There has been a recent decline in the share of Chinese Religionists in Southeast Asia. They had a share of 2.50 percent in 2000; it has fallen to 2.10 percent in 2010. This decline is visible in nearly all of the countries with marginal presence of Chinese Religionists that we have counted above. But the decline has been more significant in Malaysia and Singapore.

Percent share of Chinese R in SE Asia

	1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
	1.75	2.34	2.45	2.50	2.10

Chinese Religionists in Malaysia

In 1900, Chinese Religionists had a share of 25 percent in the population of Malaysia. That share declined only slightly to 24 percent in 2000. During the last decade, there has been a sudden decline in their share to 18.4 percent. Share of Buddhists and Hindus has also declined in this decade, though not so precipitously. All this loss has been to the gain of Muslims, as we have seen in the previous two notes.

Percent share of Chinese R in Malaysia

	1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
	25.00	24.86	24.24	24.11	18.38

Chinese Religionists in Singapore

Chinese Religionists formed half of the population of Singapore in 1900. Their share rose to 54 percent in 1970. It has since declined to just 39 percent. Much of this decline is to the gain of Christians and partly of Buddhists, as we have seen in this and the previous notes.

Percent share of Chinese R in Singapore

	1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
	49.52	54.23	44.10	42.65	39.07

Share of Chinese Religionist has thus declined precipitously in their home country of China and they have experienced some decline in Malaysia and Singapore also. Only in South Korea, their share has improved in this period.

CONCLUSION

1. In the course of the last 110 years, religions other than Islam and Christianity have experienced a sharp decline in their cumulative share. In 1900, Islam and Christianity together claimed 18.6 percent of the population. In 2010, that share has gone up to 34 percent.
2. Share of the older religions of Asia meanwhile has declined to less than 50 percent, with nearly 15 percent of the population having turned Irreligious.
3. The decline has been the most precipitous in the share of Chinese Religionists. They formed 39.8 percent of the population of Asia in 1900; their share now is 10.8 percent.

Relative growth of different regions

4. Part of the reason for the rise of Islam and decline in the share of others is that the population of regions dominated by Islam has grown faster than others.
5. In general, there is a correlation between the share of Muslims in a region and growth of its population during the last 110 years. Populations of Central Asia and West Asia, which are largely Muslim, have multiplied nearly 8 times. Population of Southeast Asia, where Muslims have a share 37 percent, has multiplied 7.4 times. Population of South Asia, with Muslim share of around 30 percent, has multiplied 5.5 times. And, population of East Asia, with Muslim share of only 1.4 percent, has multiplied less than 3 times.
6. Difference in the growth of South Asia and East Asia is also because population control measures of China have been more stringent than that of India.
7. Changes in the share of different religions in Asia have been partly determined by the differential growth of the population of different regions dominated by different religious communities.

Hindus

8. Share of Hindus in Asia has slightly improved from 21.6 to 23.3 percent because of the relatively higher growth of South Asia compared to East Asia.
9. But Hindus are confined mainly to South Asia, more than 99 percent of Hindus in Asia are in South Asia. And in the population of South Asia, their share in the population has declined sharply from 70.3 to 60.1 percent.
10. In the course of the last 110 years, Hindus seem to have contracted more and more within the boundaries of what currently constitutes India.
11. There has been a sharp decline in the share of Hindus within India. But the decline has been even sharper outside India.

12. Share of Hindus has declined from around 17 to 1.3 percent in Pakistan, from 32.7 to 9.5 percent in Bangladesh, 77 to 67.8 percent in Nepal, 23.3 to 13.1 percent in Sri Lanka and from 15 to 11.4 percent in Bhutan.

13. Of 9 million Hindus outside South Asia, 7 million are in Southeast Asia. Their share in the region has declined from 1.6 percent in 1900 to 1.2 percent in 2010.

14. Decline in the share of Hindus is sharper in countries where they have a significant population. Thus their share has declined from 2 percent to 1.6 percent in Indonesia, 10.2 to 6.4 percent in Malaysia, 7.5 to 5.7 percent in Singapore and from 2.8 to 1.7 percent in Myanmar.

15. There are about 1.3 million Hindus in West Asia. Almost all of them are expatriate workers in the Arabian Peninsula. Emigration of Indian workers to this region began after 1970, when there were only about 14 thousand Hindus there.

Buddhists

16. Share of Buddhists in Asia has declined by about 2 percentage points, but unlike Hindus in their home region of South Asia, Buddhists have improved their share in East Asia.

17. More than 60 percent of the Buddhists in Asia are in East Asia. And, their share in the population of that region has improved from 18.3 percent in 1900 to 19 percent in 2010. This is largely a consequence of the recent rise in their share in China.

18. In China, the share of Buddhists has improved from 12.7 percent in 1900 to 15.4 percent in 2010. This is a consequence of the recovery of faith that China has been experiencing in recent decades. In 1970, the share of Buddhists had declined to 6.6 percent and it was only 8.4 percent in 2000.

19. Share of Buddhists has improved even more strongly in other countries of East Asia. Their share has risen from 18.1 to 26.5 percent in Taiwan, from 38.3 to 54.2 percent in Mongolia and from 10 to 24.8 percent in South Korea. Only in Japan has their share declined from 79.6 to 56.4 percent, mainly because of the rise of 'New Religions'.

20. Thus in East Asia, Buddhism has undergone an expansion. Not only the share of Buddhists has increased in most of the countries of East Asia, but Buddhism also seems to have spread to newer areas and groups, particularly in South Korea and Mongolia.

21. Southeast Asia is the other region of Asia with a considerable Buddhist presence. Their share in this region has declined from 31.7 to 26.8 percent between 1900 and 2010.

22. Among the Buddhist countries of the region, the share of Buddhists in Thailand and Cambodia has remained largely intact. The former is 87 percent and the latter 85 percent Buddhist.

23. Share of Buddhists in Myanmar, however, has declined from 87 to 75 percent, because of rise in the share of Christians and Ethnic Religionists. And their share in Vietnam has declined from 69 to 49 percent because of rise in the share of the Irreligious and Ethnic Religionists.

24. Share of Buddhists in Malaysia has remained nearly unchanged and it has declined from 17 to about 15 percent in Singapore.

25. In South Asia, the share of Buddhists has increased from 1.2 percent in 1900 to 1.8 percent in 2010. Their share has increased in every country of the region except Nepal.

26. In India, the share of Buddhists has increased from nearly zero in 1900 to 0.7 percent now. That number has remained unchanged now for several decades.

27. In Sri Lanka, the Buddhist share has increased substantially from 59 to nearly 69 percent. That rise has been almost entirely at the cost of Hindus.

28. In Nepal, there has been a decline in the share of Buddhists from 20 to 11.5 percent. Share of Hindus has also declined in Nepal, while Christians, Muslims and Ethnic Religionists have all improved their share. However, there has been a significant rise in the share of Buddhists during the last decade and a corresponding decline in that of Hindus.

Chinese Religionists

29. Chinese Religionists are confined almost entirely to East Asia. Of 449 million Chinese Religionists in 2010, 437 million are in East Asia. And of them, 418 million are in China, 13 million in Taiwan and 5 million South Korea.

30. Share of Chinese Religionists in East Asia has declined sharply from 71.3 to 27.7 percent. The decline in China is from nearly 80 percent to 31 percent.

31. This decline in East Asia and China is because of the rise of irreligion in the latter during the Marxist phase.

32. The phase of irreligion seems to be now passing away, and the share of Chinese Religionists in China has improved from 28.5 to 31 percent during the last decade. There has been a larger improvement in the share of Buddhists. It seems that the Chinese Religionists in China would soon recover their share.

33. In Taiwan, the share of Chinese Religionists has declined from about 78 percent in 1900 to 56 percent now. This decline is largely because of the increase in the share of Christians and of New Religionists.

34. In South Korea, the share of Chinese Religionists has somewhat improved in this period, rising from 8 percent in 1900 to 11 percent now.

35. Outside East Asia, Chinese Religionists are mainly in Malaysia and Singapore. Their share has declined considerably in both countries, from 25 to 18.4 percent in Malaysia and from 49.5 to 39 percent in Singapore.

36. The Chinese Religionists have thus contracted in both East and Southeast Asia. But the larger decline in East Asia has been mainly due to the rise of irreligion in China. That process is likely to get reversed in the future.

37. Thus of the three major older religions of Asia, Buddhism seems to have expanded in this period of 1900 to 2010 and Chinese Religions are on the way to recovery. But Hindus (including Sikhs and Jains) have contracted to within the shrunken boundaries of India and their share has declined in every country of South Asia, including India. Since this decline has occurred because of the rise of other major religions, including Islam, Christianity and Buddhism, the prospects of Hindus beginning to recover their share seem remote.