

## **Christianity among the Scheduled Tribes of the Northeast: Meghalaya**

*Meghalaya has now become a Christian tribal State. More than 86 percent of the total population of the State is from the Scheduled Tribes (STs) and among the STs more than 84 percent are now Christian. The process of conversion of the Scheduled Tribes of Meghalaya that began in the early decades of the twentieth century and picked up pace after Independence is not yet complete. Therefore, the share of Christians in the ST population has been rising from decade to decade. In the last two decades, their share has risen from 75.3 to 84.4 percent, marking an accretion of 9 percentage points.*

*The Khasi and the Garo are the two major Scheduled Tribe communities of Meghalaya. Rise in the share of Christians among the Khasi has been relatively modest during the last two decades; they formed 77 percent of the Khasi population in 1991; their share now is 83 percent. The rise among the Garo has been much larger; Christians formed about 83 percent of the Garo population in 1991; their share in 2011 is 96 percent.*

*The extraordinary rise in the share of Christians among the Garo has implied the near extinction of the followers of their traditional Songsarek persuasion. The number of the Songsarek has declined from more than 88 thousand in 1991 to about 17 thousand in 2011. Number of the followers of the traditional Niamtre and Khasi persuasions among the Khasi has also declined, but not as drastically as that of the Songsarek.*

*After the Khasi and the Garo, the three largest tribes of Meghalaya are the Hajong, Raba and Koch. These three are pre-dominantly Hindu tribes and there has been hardly any conversion to Christianity among them. Their numbers add up to only about 94 thousand in the total ST population of 25.6 lakh. Growth in the population of these communities during the last two decades has been less than half of the growth of the total ST population. This is partly because the Hajong, Raba and the Koch have been living under great pressure among the predominantly Christian and numerically dominant Garo.*

*The rise of Christianity in Meghalaya, at least during the recent decades, has been mainly at the cost of the followers of the so-called Other Religions and Persuasions (ORPs). Because of this, the richly diverse religious practices of the people—like Songsarek of the Garo or Niamtre of the Khasi—which had survived for uncounted centuries under the benignly protective umbrella of Hinduism, are now about to disappear. This is a great cultural, religious and civilizational tragedy that is unfolding before our eyes in the present times that are supposedly be much more tolerant and supportive of diversity both in nature and in society.*

## MEGHALAYA

### Religious Demography of the Scheduled Tribes and Others in Meghalaya, 2011

	Total	Christian	ORP	Hindu	Muslim	Others
Total Pop	29,66,889	22,13,027	2,58,271	3,42,078	1,30,399	23,114
ST Population	25,55,861	21,57,887	2,51,612	1,22,141	10,012	14,209
Non-ST Pop	4,11,028	55,140	6,659	2,19,937	1,20,387	8,905
% of Total Pop	100.00	74.59	8.71	11.53	4.40	0.78
% of ST Pop	100.00	84.43	9.84	4.78	0.39	0.56
% of non-ST Pop	100.00	13.42	1.62	53.51	29.29	2.17

### *Meghalaya is now a Christian tribal State*

Of the total population of 29.7 lakh counted in Meghalaya in 2011, 25.6 lakh is from the Scheduled Tribe communities, and an overwhelming majority of the STs in the State has now been converted to Christianity. Christians form 84.4 percent of the ST population. After the Christians, the largest numbers are of the followers of Other Religions and Persuasions (ORPs), who have a share of 9.8 percent among the Scheduled Tribes. We shall see below that the rise in the share of Christians in the STs during recent decades has been largely at the cost of the ORPs, while the share of Hindus, who have now been restricted to a few smaller tribes, has declined only slightly.

### *Muslims have a considerable share in the non-ST population*

Before looking at the changing religious demography of the Scheduled Tribes, let us look at some aspects of the religious demography of the non-ST population. Muslims have a share of more than 29 percent in the non-ST population. Of the 4.11 lakh non-ST population of the State, 2.20 lakh are Hindu and 1.20 lakh Muslim. Most of the Muslims are in the West Garo Hills district, which adjoins the Muslim-dominant Dhubri district of Assam on the west and Bangladesh on the south. There are also 55 thousand Christians in the non-ST population giving them a share of 13.4 percent in this group.

### *Sudden rise of Christianity in the non-ST population*

The number and share of Christians in the non-ST population of Meghalaya has risen suddenly during the last two decades. In 1991, there were less than 3 thousand Christians in the non-ST population; their number has now risen to more than 55 thousand and their share in this

#### Rise of Christians in the non-ST population of Meghalaya, 1991-2011

	Total	Christian	%C
1991	2,56,851	2,806	1.09
2001	3,25,960	39,495	12.12
2011	4,11,028	55,140	13.42

population has gone up from 1.1 to 13.4 percent in these two decades. The share of Muslims in this period has also risen from 23.3 to 29.3 percent. The share of Hindus in the non-ST population has consequently declined from 67 to 53.5 percent.

### *Rising share of Christians in the STs of Meghalaya*

As we have seen in an [earlier note](#), the share of Christians in the population of Meghalaya has been rising since the beginning of the twentieth century, though the process became much more rapid after Independence. This has taken place mainly through the conversion of the tribal communities; as we have seen, there were only a handful of Christians in the non-ST

#### Rise of Christians in the ST population of Meghalaya, 1991-2011

	Total	Christian	%C
1991	15,17,927	11,43,286	75.32
2001	19,92,862	15,89,491	79.76
2011	25,55,861	21,57,887	84.43

population up to 1991. Unlike in Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland, the process of

Christianisation of the Scheduled Tribes in Meghalaya is not yet complete and, therefore, the share of Christians in the ST population keeps recording considerable accretion from decade to decade. As seen in the Table above, in the last two decades, their share has risen from 75.3 to 84.4 percent, marking an accretion of as much as 9 percentage points.

*Rise of Christians is at the cost of the ORPs*

The rise of 9 percentage points in the share of Christians in the ST population of Meghalaya is matched by the loss of nearly the same 9 percentage points in the share of ORPs. The absolute number of ORPs has also declined from 2.83 lakh in 1991 to 2.52

**Decline of ORPs and Hindus in the ST population of Meghalaya, 1991-2011**

	ORP	Hindu	%ORP	%H
1991	2,83,054	88,313	18.65	5.82
2001	2,63,010	1,18,011	13.20	5.92
2011	2,51,612	1,22,141	9.84	4.78

lakh in 2011. There has been a decline of about a percentage point in the share of Hindus also during the last decade; during the previous decade, their share had slightly improved. It seems that nearly all of the conversion among the STs to Christianity has been occurring from the category of Other Religions and Persuasions (ORPs), which includes traditional tribal practices known as the Khasi, Niamtre and Songsarek, etc. Of 2.52 lakh persons counted as practitioners of ORPs in 2011, 1.36 lakh have mentioned their religion as Khasi; another 81 thousand are of Niamtre and 19 thousand of Songsarek persuasions. In the early decades of the twentieth century, nearly all of the STs would have identified themselves with one of these and similar other religious practices; and, all of these would have been seen as falling within the large umbrella of Hinduism. Counting these practices as other than Hinduism seems to have been the first step towards their conversion to Christianity. As we see below, the tribal communities that identify themselves as Hindus have seen little conversion, at least in Meghalaya.

**Christianity among the individual tribes of Meghalaya**

*Khasi and Garo are the major tribes of Meghalaya*

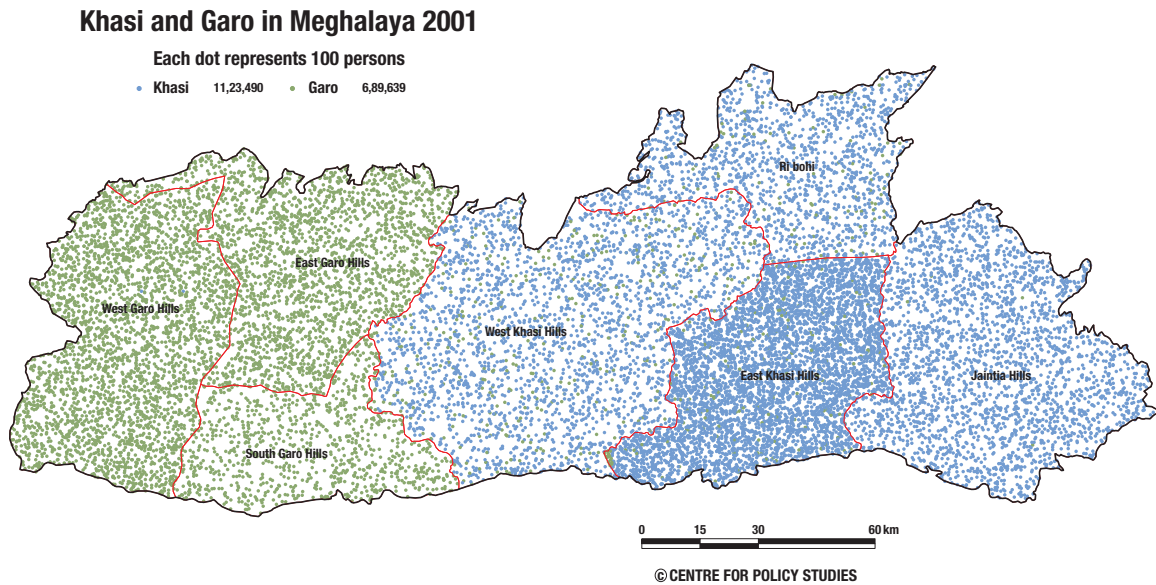
The Khasi and the Garo are the largest tribal communities of Meghalaya; of the ST population of 25.6 lakh counted in 2011, 22.3 lakh belong to these communities; the two together thus account for more than 87 percent of all STs in the State. The Khasi comprise several tribes including the Khasi, Jaintia, Synteng, Pnar, War, Bhoi and Lyngngam. The Census also has a category of Generic or Unclassified Tribes; numbers under this category have been rising rapidly and in 2011, 1.74 lakh of the STs have been counted as Generic tribes. As seen in the Table here, the share of the Khasi and Garo in the total ST population has somewhat declined during the last two decades because of the rise in the share of the Generic or Unclassified tribes. These three larger groups exhaust more than 24 lakh of the STs in Meghalaya, leaving only about 1.5 lakh in the 15 other tribal groups for which the Census has tabulated the numbers. And, as we shall see below, all three of these larger groups of tribes have become predominantly Christian.

**The major tribal groups of Meghalaya**

	1991	2001	2011
Total ST	15,17,927	19,92,862	25,55,861
Khasi etc.	8,70,165	11,23,490	14,11,775
Garo	5,46,734	6,89,639	8,21,026
Generic	6,715	46,912	1,74,216
% Khasi etc.	57.33	56.38	55.24
% Garo	36.02	34.61	32.12
% Generic	0.44	2.35	6.82

### *Distribution of the Khasi and Garo across Meghalaya*

The Khasi and Garo occupy distinctly separate geographical regions in the State. District-level data for the individual Scheduled Tribes has not been released yet for 2011. The Map given here is for the district-wise numbers of the Khasi and Garo as counted in 2001. As seen in the Map, the Khasi occupy the four central and eastern districts into which the earlier United Khasi and Jaintia Hills district has been divided, and the Garo occupy the three western districts comprising the earlier Garo Hills district. The two regions seem exclusive to the two major tribal groups; there are nearly no Khasis in the western part, though there are about 61.7 thousand Garos in the central and eastern part, mainly in the West and East Khasi Hills districts.



The growth of Christianity in the Garo Hills has been somewhat slower than in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, but now 96 percent of the Garo and 83 percent of the Khasi have been converted.

### *Growth of Christianity among the Khasi*

The share of Christians among the Khasi has grown from 77.1 percent in 1991 to 83.1 percent in 2011; that of ORP has correspondingly declined from 21.7 to 15.4 percent. A considerable number of the Khasi still continue to follow their traditional religious practices. Of 2.5 lakh persons counted under ORPs in 2011, 2.2 lakh are from the Khasi group of tribes.

Growth of Christianity among the Khasi			
	1991	2001	2011
Total Khasi	8,70,165	11,23,490	14,11,775
Christian	6,71,170	8,95,966	11,73,693
ORP	1,89,226	2,02,978	2,17,488
Hindu	8,077	17,641	10,302
% Christian	77.13	79.75	83.14
% ORP	21.75	18.07	15.41
% Hindu	0.93	1.57	0.73

Of these, 1.30 lakh have mentioned their religion as Khasi and 77.6 thousand as Niamtre. The proportion of the followers of Khasi and Niamtre practices among the Khasi has declined sharply from about 22 percent to 15.4 percent between 1991 and 2011; but the decline has not been as sharp as in the followers of the Songsarek way of the Garo, as we see below.

About 6.8 thousand of the Khasi have been counted as Atheist and nearly a thousand as non-Christian. The number of Hindus among the Khasi had suddenly risen from 8.1 thousand to 17.6 thousand during 1991-2001; it has undergone an equally sudden decline to 10.3 thousand during 2001-11.

*Growth of Christianity among the Garo*

Nearly all of the Garo have been converted to Christianity now. Growth in the share of Christians in the last two decades has been much sharper among them than in the Khasi. The Garo Christians have registered an accretion of 13 percentage points in their share and they now form 96 percent of the total Garo population compared to 83 percent in 1991.

	1991	2001	2011
Total Garo	5,46,734	6,89,639	8,21,026
Christian	4,53,056	6,17,590	7,87,029
ORP	90,456	49,917	20,297
Hindu	2,707	9,129	4,776
% Christian	82.87	89.55	95.86
% ORP	16.54	7.24	2.47
% Hindu	0.50	1.32	0.58

Corresponding to that gain, the share of the ORPs has declined sharply by more than 14 percentage points. Not only the share but also the absolute number of the ORPs among the Garo has declined steeply from 90.5 thousand in 1991 to 20.3 thousand in 2011. The number of Hindus among the Garo, like their number in the Khasi, had suddenly increased from 2.7 to 9.1 thousand during 1991-2001 and has equally suddenly declined to 4.8 thousand now.

*The Songsarek religion of the Garo is now disappearing*

Nearly all of those counted under the category of ORPs among the Garo are followers of the traditional Songsarek persuasion. Of 20.3 thousand Garos counted under ORPs in 2011, 17.3 thousand are Songsarek and the rest are

	Total Garo	Songsarek	%S
1991	5,46,734	88,426	16.17
2001	6,89,639	46,542	6.75
2011	8,21,026	17,257	2.10

listed as pagan, atheist or non-Christian. Similarly, of 49.9 thousand Garos counted under ORPs in 2001, 46.5 thousand are Songsarek and the rest are listed under various categories like pagan, atheist, *sansari*, etc. And of 90.5 thousand Garos counted in this category in 1991, 88.4 thousand are Songsarek. In the last two decades alone, the share of the followers of the Songsarek among the Garo has declined from around 16 percent to merely 2 percent and their absolute number is reduced to just about 17 thousand. Thus an ancient faith that up to the beginning of the twentieth century had defined the identity, self-image and the way of being of the Garo is now about to disappear; there would not be many Songsarek counted in the next Census. At this point, it seems proper to reflect that the Songsarek way of being and worship had survived uncounted centuries within the larger Hindu mainstream, but it has not been able to survive even a century of Christianity in this region!

*The Hindu tribal communities of Meghalaya*

After the Khasi and the Garo, the largest three tribes of Meghalaya are the Hajong, the Raba or Rava and the Koch. These three are much smaller communities as compared to the Khasi or the Garo, and these are almost exclusively Hindu. In their total population of about 94 thousand, there are only 2,393 thousand non-Hindus; of them 2,050 are Christian, nearly three-fourths of them among the Raba.

	Total	Hindu	%H
Hajong	38,576	38,054	98.65
Raba	32,662	31,013	94.95
Koch	22,716	22,494	99.02
Total	93,954	91,561	97.45

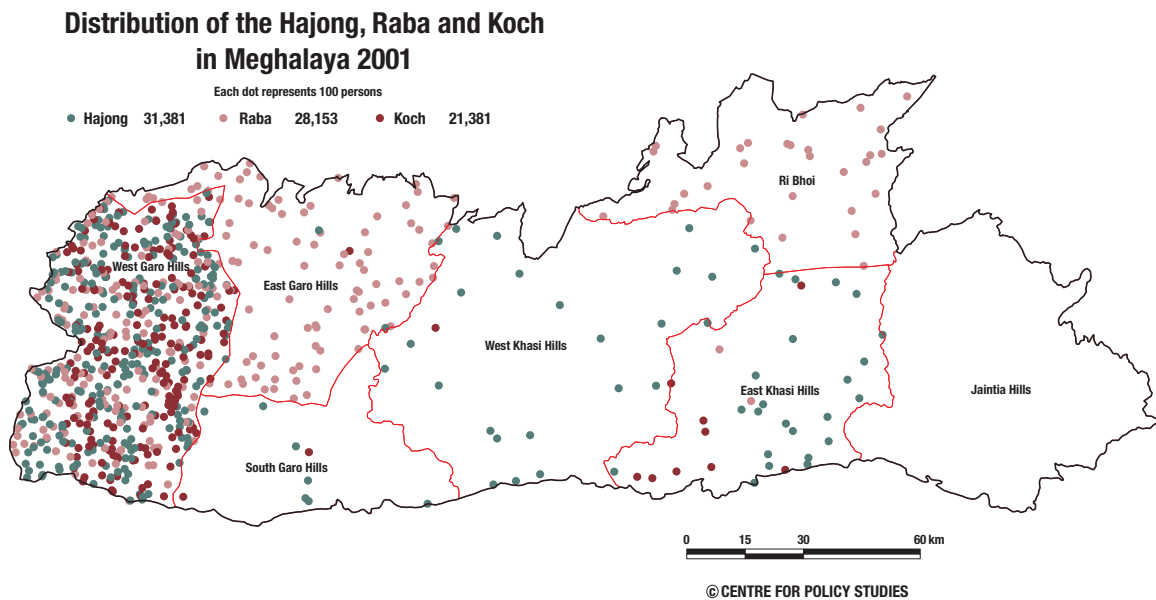
### *Hindus among the other tribal communities*

Of the 1.22 lakh Hindu STs counted in 2011, nearly two-thirds, amounting to 91.6 thousand are from the Hajong, Raba and Koch communities. Of the remaining 30.6 thousand Hindus, 10.3 thousand are among the Khasi, 4.8 thousand among the Garo and 7.1 thousand among the Generic tribes. There are also about 4 thousand Hindus among the Mikir and about 3.5 thousand among the Boro-Kachari; they form 21 and 74 percent, respectively, of the population of these smaller communities. Incidentally, 62 percent of the Mikir and 24 percent of the Boro-Kacharis in Meghalaya have become Christian.

Hindu among other communities			
	Total	Hindu	%H
Khasi	14,11,775	10,302	0.73
Garo	8,21,026	4,776	0.58
Generic	1,74,216	7,065	4.06
Mikir	19,289	3,998	20.73
Boro Kachari	4,660	3,493	74.96

### *Distribution of the Hajong, Raba and Koch*

As we have mentioned earlier, district-level data for the numbers of different Scheduled Tribe communities has not yet been released for Census 2011. In the Map below, we have shown the distribution of the three Hindu tribal communities of Meghalaya as recorded in the previous Census. As may be seen in the Map, all three of these are concentrated in the West Garo Hills district. As we have mentioned earlier, this district adjoins Dhubri district of Assam on the west and Bangladesh on the south. There are considerable numbers of the Raba in Assam, especially in the Goalpara and Darrang regions, where they are listed as *Rabha*.



Outside West Garo Hills District, there are significant numbers of the Raba in East Garo Hills and Ri Bhoi districts and of the Hajong in the West Khasi and East Khasi Hills.

### *Decline in the share of Hindu tribes*

During the last two decades there seems to have been hardly any conversion from the Hindu tribal communities of Hajong, Raba and Koch. But as seen in the Table below, the growth in the population of these communities has been much slower than that of the ST population in general and of the predominantly Christian Garo, Khasi and the Generic Tribes, in particular. The population of the three Hindu communities has grown by 28.3 percent in these two decades, while that of the STs as a whole has grown by 68.4 percent and of the predominantly Christian communities by 69.1 percent. This lower growth, and not conversion, of the Hindu communities is what has led to the decline of the share of Hindus in the STs of the State from 5.82 percent in 1991 to 4.78 percent in 2011, though there was a marginal increase in their share in 2001, when the number of Hindus had suddenly risen among both the Garo and the Khasi.

<b>Growth of the Christian and Hindu communities, 1991-2011</b>				
	1991	2001	2011	%GR
<b>Total ST</b>	15,17,927	19,92,862	25,55,861	<b>68.38</b>
<b>Christian tribes</b>				
<b>Khasi etc.</b>	8,70,165	11,23,490	14,11,775	62.24
<b>Garo</b>	5,46,734	6,89,639	8,21,026	50.17
<b>Unclassified</b>	6,715	46,912	1,74,216	2494
<b>Total of above</b>	14,23,614	18,60,041	24,07,017	<b>69.08</b>
<b>Hindu communities</b>				
<b>Hajong</b>	29,997	31,381	38,576	28.60
<b>Raba</b>	24,859	28,153	32,662	31.39
<b>Koch</b>	18,370	21,381	22,716	23.66
<b>Total of 3 above</b>	73,226	80,915	93,954	<b>28.31</b>

### *Hindu tribal communities are under great pressure*

This lower growth is probably a consequence of the pressure that the numerically small Raba, Hajong and Koch Hindu communities have to face in a region that has come to be numerically, politically and socially dominated by the Christian Garo. There have been persistent stories of the Garo-Raba conflict in the Garo Hills and the neighbouring Goalpara region of Assam. This conflict often leads to bloody rioting and the displacement of large numbers of the Raba and Hajong, etc. The declining share of the Hindu tribal communities in Meghalaya underlines the need for support of these beleaguered Hindu groups—not only in Meghalaya but also in other States of the Northeast. Incidentally, the number of the Raba in Assam also has grown by only about 25 percent in the last two decades. Does the lower growth of the Raba have something to do with their Hindu ways?

### *Other smaller tribes of Meghalaya*

Besides, the Christianised Khasi and Garo and the Hindu Hajong, Raba and Koch, there are several other smaller tribal communities in the State. Of these the largest is the Mikir; the proportion of Christians among them has increased from 48.5 percent in 1991 to 61.9 percent now in 2011. The next largest is the Kuki group of tribes; they have a population of 14.3 thousand in 2011 of whom 13.7 thousand are Christian. There has been a steep increase in the total population of both the Mikir and the Kuki. Then there are smaller communities of the Naga, Lushai and Dimasa; Christians form around 98 percent of the population of the Naga and Lushai and 76 percent of the Dimasa.

### *Tentative increase in the Buddhist presence*

There are about 6.9 thousand Buddhist STs counted in the State in 2011. Of these, 3.3 thousand are among the Garo, 1.8 thousand among the Khasi and about a thousand among the small Buddhist community of Man Tai. The total number of Buddhist STs in the State has increased to this level from

ST Buddhists of Meghalaya			
	1991	2001	2011
Total	868	2249	6,886
Khasi	80	344	1,803
Garo	109	999	3,332
Generic	25	45	580
Man Tai	552	568	946

merely 868 in 1991. There has been a spectacular increase in their numbers in the largely Christianised communities of the Khasi and the Garo and among the unclassified generic communities which are also largely Christian. In the predominantly Buddhist Man Tai community also, there has been a significant rise in their number during the last decade. The absolute number of Buddhists among the STs of Meghalaya is still small. But does the sharp increase in their numbers, especially among the Khasi and the Garo, during the last two decades indicate some tentative beginning of the resurgence of Buddhism among the converted communities?

## CONCLUSION

1. Meghalaya has now turned a Christian tribal State. More than 86 percent of the total population of the State is from the Scheduled Tribes (STs) and among the STs more than 84 percent are now Christian.
2. There is a considerable Muslim presence in the relatively small non-ST population of the State; they form 29 percent of this population. Most of the Muslims are in the West Garo Hills district, which is surrounded by the Muslim dominant Dhubri district of Assam on the west and by Bangladesh on the south.
3. The presence of Christians in the non-ST population has increased suddenly during the last two decades. Their number has risen from less than 3 thousand in 1991 to above 55 thousand now, raising their share in the non-STs from about 1 percent to 13 percent.
4. Hindus now form only 55 percent of the non-ST population and their share in the ST population is less than 5 percent.
5. The process of conversion of the Scheduled Tribes of Meghalaya that began in the early decades of the twentieth century and picked up pace after Independence is not yet complete. Conversion of the Scheduled Tribes to Christianity in Meghalaya has not been as sudden and quick as in Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland.
6. Therefore, the share of Christians in the ST population has kept recording considerable accretion from decade to decade. In the last two decades, their share has risen from 75.3 to 84.4 percent, marking an accretion of 9 percentage points.
7. The accretion to the Christian share in Meghalaya is largely at the cost of the followers of Other Religions and Persuasions (ORPs). During the last two decades, the number of persons counted under this category has declined 2.83 to 2.52 lakh and their share in the ST population has declined from nearly 19 percent in 1991 to less than 10 percent now.
8. The Khasi and the Garo are the two major Scheduled Tribe communities of Meghalaya. The Khasi—including Jaintia, Bhoi and several other related communities—



form 55 percent of the ST population. The Garo form another 32 percent. There are also considerable numbers counted among the Generic or Unclassified tribes, who form 7 percent of the ST population in 2011. Only 6 percent of the STs are from communities outside these three large groups. And, all these three are now predominantly Christian.

9. The Khasi inhabit mostly the central and eastern part of the State, the Garo mainly the western part.

10. The rise of Christianity among the Khasi has been relatively subdued during the last two decades. Christians formed 77 percent of the Khasi population in 1991; their share now is 83 percent. The share of ORPs among the Khasi, who are followers of mainly Khasi or Niamtre persuasions, has correspondingly declined from about 22 to 15 percent.

11. The rise of Christianity among the Garo during these two decades has been much more spectacular. Christians formed 83 percent of the Garo population in 1991; their share in 2011 is 96 percent. The share of ORPs in the Garo has correspondingly declined from 16.5 to 2.5 percent.

12. The Garo ORPs are mainly followers of the Songsarek persuasion. The number of Songsarek has declined sharply from 88 thousand in 1991 to 17 thousand in 2011.

13. The data indicates that the Songsarek way, which defined the identity and self-image of the Garo, is likely to become extinct soon. The Niamtre and Khasi practices of the Khasi are also likely to face the same fate in not distant a future.

14. There was a considerable rise in the number and share of Hindus among both the Khasi and the Garo during 1991-2001; that rise has been reversed during 2001-11.

15. Besides the Khasi and the Garo, the three largest tribal communities of Meghalaya are the Hajong, Raba and Koch. These three are predominantly Hindu communities. In their total population of about 94 thousand in 2011, 92 thousand are Hindus.

16. There has not been much conversion to Christianity among the Hindu communities of the Hajong, Raba and Koch. But their growth during the last two decades has been less than half of the ST population in general. Between 1991 and 2011, the combined population of the three Hindu communities has grown by 28 percent while the total ST population has grown by 68 percent.

17. The Hajong, Raba and Koch are concentrated mainly in the West Garo Hills district, and there they are known to have been under great pressure from the majority Christian Garo. The Garo-Raba conflict has often led to rioting and large-scale displacement of the Hindu communities.

18. The number of ST Buddhists in Meghalaya has suddenly risen from less than a thousand in 1991 to nearly 7 thousand in 2011. The rise is mainly among the Garo and the Khasi. Does it imply that at least some of those who had converted to Christianity are now returning to their original faiths?

19. The situation of the Scheduled Tribe communities of Meghalaya should make us reflect on the situation where the traditionally diverse ways of the people of India like the Songsarek, the Niamtre, the Khasi and many others—which together form the richly diverse Hindu religion—have reached the verge of extinction as a result of their recent encounter with Christianity. If all these were allowed to disappear, how would Hinduism survive? What would be Hinduism divested of its multiple limbs and branches?