Abstract

A religious group is an association or community that shares similar beliefs, symbols and religious practices. This study examined the major religious groups in the light of their distribution, growth, sex ratio, literacy, work participation and age structure; and compared them with one another as well as with “All Religious Groups”. The present study has been conducted in India, a country known for one of the oldest civilisations in the world with a kaleidoscopic variety of cultural heritage. The study is based on the data taken from the 2001 Census of India. The district has been employed as the basic unit of the study. The district-wise data has been mapped by choropleth method and the discussion on spatial pattern of the religious groups in context to their population characteristics is mainly based on what emerges on these maps. Thus, areas associated with mass conversion to a religion, place of origin of a religion and the highly urbanised area supported high concentration of a religious group. Conversely, the areas of relatively low concentration of the religious groups displayed conditions opposite to those found in the areas of relatively high concentration.

The investigation of spatial patterns of growth of major religious groups of India provides that the inter-census period 1991-2001 was marked by unprecedented acceleration in the growth of the Jain population. The Sikhs showed the lowest growth rate, while it was the highest in the case of Muslims.

The sex composition of the major religious groups varied from one group to another. The Christian community treated its women better as compared to others. Unlike in the case of total sex ratio in which at least one religious group (the
Christians) recorded preponderance of females, in the child sex ratio, none of the six major religious groups recorded sex ratio in favour of the girl child.

There were much of variations in the literacy rates of the six major religious groups. The difference in the literacy rates of the religious groups owed much to the level of literacy of their females.

All the religious groups displayed varied proportion of workers in their population. This could largely be attributable to the difference in the proportion of their females in the workforce. Higher work participation rate of the Buddhists was primarily due to their high female work participation rate. Contrastingly, the low work participation rate for the Muslims was mainly due to their low female work participation rate. More than religion, it was the region and its socio-cultural manifestations, which influenced the proportion of workers.

The Muslims and Jains were the two religious groups, which had age structures quite diverse from the other major religious groups. The Muslims had the highest proportion of 0-14 years of age group and the lowest proportions of 'working' and 60 years and above age groups, whereas the Jains had the lowest proportion of 0-14 years age group and the highest proportions of 'working' and 60 years and above age groups. This highlights that the Muslims were in the early stage of demographic transition, while the Jains were at an advanced stage.

Thus, it comes out strikingly that the Muslims due to their high rate of natural increase, very low literacy rate (especially among the females), a very low work participation rate and a high dependency ratio are found to be lagging far behind all other major religious groups of the country. All these factors have slowed down their progress and deprived them of a chance to join the mainstream of the nation.