

# **High Fertility in Khasi Tribe of Northeast India- A Repercussion of the Fear of Identity Loss?**

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## **1. Introduction**

There have been two widely accepted findings in Indian demography: 1) that the major northern states have experienced higher fertility than the southern states; usually explained by a lower level of women's autonomy, common in the 'culture against women' (Dyson and Moore 1983) in the North Indian kinship system, and; 2) that there is considerable fertility differentials between populations of different religious persuasions. Most studies conducted so far in India have arrived at these findings by studying the non-tribal communities of India. Unfortunately, the 461 tribal communities (also known as Scheduled Tribes<sup>1</sup>), which comprise around 9% of India's population (Census of India 1991), have not attracted any significant attention by demographers. Very few studies have been conducted to understand the population dynamics of these communities that traditionally have high fertility compared to the non-tribal communities (Gangadharam 1999).

The important question is whether the explanations behind the fertility dynamics observed in the non-tribal communities of north India, are applicable to tribal communities as well. This question is crucial for India's population policy, because, as Kulkarni (2002) warns, when there is diversity (spatial, cultural, ethnic or religious) between various population groups, a policy might give priority to the concerns of dominant groups at the cost of the disadvantaged and minority groups. Although the formulation of separate population policies for different social groups is not

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<sup>1</sup> 'Scheduled tribe' can be defined as a particular group that:

- is geographically isolated from the mainstream;
- exhibit ethnic distinctiveness and linguistic differences from the national society;
- has a strong sense of ethnic solidarity and an absence of the caste system;
- is minimally involved in the market economy and its subsistence needs guide their production decisions rather than market signals and they have a sustained-yield economic system;
- uses primitive (ancestral) technology that is suitable to the needs of their immediate environment. (Goswami 1990, pp.85-86)

feasible, it is essential that the characteristics and needs of diverse population groups be taken into account in the formulation of national or state policies (Kulkarni 2002).

Data from the 1998-99 National Family Health Survey of India (NFHS) shows that the state of Meghalaya, which is the homeland of three matrilineal tribes namely the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo, constituting 86% of the total population of the state, had the highest fertility (TFR=4.57) in India. The same survey also shows that the total fertility rate of the state increased by 23% over the eight-year period 1992-1999 although there is a strong possibility that this increase was partially due to other factors such as sampling (urban vs. rural) or better reporting in 1999. This apparent increase was in spite of the fact that tribal women in the state of Meghalaya, especially the Khasi women would appear to enjoy a higher level of autonomy under their traditional matrilineal kinship system than women in other communities under the patriarchal kinship system. For example, the total fertility rate of the patriarchal tribes, which constitute 25% of the total population of the neighbouring state of Assam, declined during 1992-1999, from 3.00 (IIPS 1995) to 2.10 per woman (IIPS 2000).

The direct positive association between women's autonomy and fertility, observed among the Khasi, is in contrast to the inverse relationship between these two variables, generally observed in other populations. This anomaly is the main research question being addressed in this paper.

## **2. Data and Research Methods**

This study is predominantly based on primary data collected through the fieldwork survey in Khasi community. Data (both quantitative and qualitative) were collected during January – June 2000. A total of around 400 ever-married women were interviewed. Although the survey was largely conducted through interviews with structured questionnaires, the focus group discussions and the in-depth interviews were integral parts of the survey, and needed a considerable amount of time and effort in successfully organising them to achieve the objectives of the survey. The sample of Khasi women was drawn from two villages in East Khasi Hill districts of Meghalaya. This field-research employed a purposive or judgmental sampling instead of any controlled probability sampling. Almost every household in the villages where at least one eligible woman (ever-married woman in 14-49 age group) was a member of that household, was included for this field research. The selection of the villages was also purposive and the villages were identified based on the basis of higher concentration of population of the particular community. Another

reason for selection of these two particular villages was that the entire population in these two villages had a percentage ratio of population based on religious affiliation (converted Christian and non-converted) very similar to that of the entire state population. For empirical analysis, women in the survey were categorized in seven different five years age groups.

### **3. The Scheduled Tribes of Northeast India**

The term 'scheduled tribe' is of recent origin. It came into existence with the birth of the Constitution of India on January 26, 1950. Prior to that scheduled tribes were variably termed 'aboriginals', 'adivasis', 'forest tribes', 'hill tribes' and 'primitive tribes'. Article 342 of the constitution provides for the scheduling of tribes for a state as a whole, or any part thereof. Article 244 empowers the President to declare any area, where there is a substantial population of tribal people, as a scheduled area (Srivastava 2000, p.18). Though most tribal communities have been broadly classified under the one category 'scheduled tribes', each tribal group possesses a unique cultural identity. Northeast India, comprising the seven states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura has the unique distinction of having more than one hundred tribal communities that dominate the total population of this region.

As far as the religion of these tribal communities is concerned, over the years different missionary groups have been very successful in converting the tribal people of Northeast India to Christianity. There has been no study conducted so far to analyse the impact of religious conversion on fertility behaviour. This dimension of religion and fertility constitutes another important research question that will be examined later in this paper.

A careful analysis of the institutional settings of these tribes in Northeastern India can provide explanations of the fertility differentials existing between them. But identifying the institutional settings (kinship, religion and culture) and distinguishing those that generate high fertility from those that generate low fertility is a task that has not been given proper attention by researchers. The institutions referred to above have persisted through time to generate a society's distinctive patterns of social organisation. Reproductive behaviour is a core element of social life in a community and as such it reflects the values and norms of that community. Especially in traditional societies, the fertility level is significantly influenced by the societal norms about

family size and related behaviour, such as age at first marriage and consummation, timing of intercourse, sexual abstinence, use of contraception and abortion. As described by Freedman (1963), in each society the norms about these vital matters are consistent with the social institutions in which they are deeply embedded. In a traditional, closely-knit society, it is unlikely that fertility changes will occur without prior or, at least, simultaneous changes in the institutions (Freedman 1963). Since in developing societies social norms have more control over reproductive behaviour than in western liberal democracies where greater emphasis is placed on individual freedom of choice, the question of high fertility in Khasi matrilineal society needs to be addressed not only as a reflection of individual behaviour, but also as predominantly as a reflection of community behaviour, community needs and community values.

#### **4. Cultural Revival in Tribal Communities**

In recent times a revivalist movement has influenced the tribal societies of India, especially the tribes in Northeast India that are trying to seek a separate identity. This is due to a combination of several factors such as perceived social, political and economic injustices arising out of the short-sighted policies of different regional and national level political parties competing for power (Narahari 1997). Some tribal communities feel increasingly threatened by an influx of illegal migrants that has the potential to reduce the tribal population to minority status in their own land.

One response to these injustices and to the perceived threat of a reduction to minority status has been for the community to attempt to preserve control over their own land by restricting land rights and inheritance only to particular tribal members, for example, the Khasi community members. Another response that appears to have occurred is the adoption of a larger family size norm than that held previously.

In the present study, it is hypothesised that the perception of minority status and the adoption of a more defensive position vis-à-vis outside groups have impacted on fertility outcomes of the tribal communities of Northeast India. This hypothesis will be tested by examining the current reproductive norms of the tribal groups under study and will be evaluated in detail later in the thesis. A confirmation of this hypothesis would make a most relevant contribution to the Indian Government's attempt to develop population policies that are more responsive to the needs and aspirations of local ethnic communities.

## **5. Some Empirical Findings**

### **5.1 Demographic**

The mean CEB (Children Ever Born) for all women in the reproductive age group was estimated to be 3.8. The number of children ever born reflects an accurate picture of the fertility performance of a population as live-born children who have since died are also included in this estimate. An interesting feature of the data on the number of children ever born is that it does not reveal any difference between the converted and non-converted groups. The total marital fertility rates (TMFR) calculated for the year 1999 show a very high value (8.9) for Khasi women. The fertility of the converted was lower (7.0) than that of the non-converted women (9.4). Findings in this survey revealed that Khasi women started child-bearing almost immediately after entering into a marital union. The mean age at first marriage was 20.8 and the mean age at first live birth was 21.5. There also appears to be a considerable prevalence of pre-marital sex and subsequent births in the Khasi society and this reduced the interval between the age at first marriage and age at first birth. In the present study, it has been observed that current use of contraception was only 28%. More than 70% of the contraceptive users were currently using temporary methods. There is also a difference in contraceptive use by religious conversion status. Among the non-converted women, 40% was currently using a method of contraception and the percentage of women using a permanent method of contraception was higher than those using a temporary method. Among the converted women, only 19% was using a method of contraception. Only 11 cases (3 induced) of abortion were reported in the survey.

### **5.2 Women's autonomy in Khasi Society:**

The percentage distribution of women, shown in the Table 1, depicts the comparative level of women's autonomy. The overall comparison clearly shows that a higher proportion of Khasi women enjoyed more autonomy not only as compared to women in other schedule tribes but also compared to all women in India as a whole.

**Table 1**  
**Indicators of women’s autonomy: decision-making, freedom of movement, access to money and treatment from household members**

Percentage of ever-married women									
Community	Involved in decision making about				Do not need permission to		Have access to money	Mistreated if	
	Cooking	Own health	Purchase of jewellery	Staying with parents	Go to the market	Visit friends and relatives		Go to the market without permission	Spend money without permission (earned herself)
Khasi	96	97	88	80	35	31	93	14	10
Schedule tribe	88	50	53	49	31	26	51	NA	NA
All India	85	52	53	48	32	24	60	NA	NA

NA = Not available

Source: Fieldwork Survey 2000 & IIPS 2000

### 5.3 Ideal Family Size:

A well-developed, but underutilized, body of literature suggests that people’s fertility motivations are better understood when they are asked a series of attitudinal questions rather than more simplistic, single-response questions such as ‘what was your ideal family size?’ (Stash 1996). In this current research the question asked to the women who had living children was: ‘if you could go back to the time you didn’t have any children and could choose exactly the number of children to have in your whole life, how many would that be?’. On the other hand the question asked of the women with no living children was: ‘if you could choose exactly the number of children to have in your whole life how many would that be?’.

The answer to these questions indicated that around 82% of the Khasi women wanted more than two children. More than 50% of women aged 40 years and above had more children than their ideal family size. It was also found that approximately 21% of the women who had completed their child bearing, had a fertility outcome that matched desired family size. The ideal family size is more than 3 for each age group. The desired family size was higher than the actual until the women reach the age of 29.

**Table 2**  
**Actual and desired family size of Khasi women by current groups**

Age Group	Family Size		
	Actual	Desired	Gap <i>(Actual – Desired)</i>
less than 20	1.3	3.4	-2.1
20-24	2.1	3.3	-1.2
25-29	3.0	3.5	-0.5
30-34	4.0	3.8	0.2
35-39	6.0	3.8	2.2
40-44	5.3	3.7	1.6
45-49	5.3	3.8	1.5

Source: Fieldwork Survey 2000

Data on sex composition of the ideal family size showed a strong preference for daughters among the Khasis.

One interesting finding was that when the ideal family size was an even number (2 or 4), a majority of the women wanted equal numbers of sons and daughters. But when the ideal family size was an odd number, the women preferred to have a larger number of daughters than sons.

### **6. Religious Pressure on Khasi Women**

The in-depth interviews (Fieldwork Survey 2001) revealed that although the church and the missionaries did not directly promote or spread any pro-natalist ideology, their firm stand against the use of modern contraceptive methods and abortion has had a noticeable

impact on reproductive behaviour. For most of the converted women, decisions regarding the use of modern contraceptive methods or abortion were highly influenced by the anti-contraception and anti-abortion stand of the church. During in-depth interviews women were asked their reasons for using or not using (currently using or having ever-used) any form of modern contraception. Due to the highly sensitive issue of religious conversion in India, it was very difficult during the fieldwork 2001 to initiate focus group discussions linking religious beliefs and reproductive decisions. Nevertheless, almost three-quarters of the converted women referred to religious prohibition as the main reason for not using modern contraceptives. Interestingly the women did not express much dissatisfaction over the religious prohibition on using modern contraception, but showed a great deal of determination to conform to the religious norms regarding their reproductive choices though some women revealed that they secretly violated the prohibitions of the church. Some of the replies to this question are quoted and discussed below.

**Respondent A:** age 35 years, married, number of children 5 (4 girls and 1 boy)

*Even if I am provided with adequate family planning facilities, I would never in my entire life make use of it. This is an evil practice and my religion does not allow evil practices.*  
(Fieldwork Survey 2001)

Respondent A expressed her strong determination not to use family planning. From her words it was very clear that she would never compromise with her religious beliefs on family planning. She considered family planning as an evil practice. It was not clear from her comments whether the church taught her to form such an opinion about family planning, but her words definitely imply that she did not intend to practice family planning '*in her entire life*' and rationalised her decision strongly on religious grounds. It also showed the dominance of religious norms or values in the decision making process as the respondent stated – '*my religion does not allow*'.

**Respondent B:** age 30 years, married, number of children 5 (4 boys and 1 girl)

*I will never use it even if I get it for free. It doesn't matter even if I do not get a square meal a day, I'll never practice such an act. Being a Catholic I was brought up with the*

*knowledge that one should not practice such methods to stop births and I never wanted and will never want to violate such belief.* (Fieldwork Survey 2001)

Respondent B revealed her preference to follow her religious beliefs over the economic cost in taking reproductive decisions. The respondent's desire to forego '*a square meal a day*' in order to shun family planning showed her determination to conform to the religious norms even if she had to face economic hardship. Moreover, the respondent categorically mentioned that she was '*brought up with the knowledge*' that one should not practise contraception. This indicates the influence of familial and social environments in passing on the value system that existed in her society. A noteworthy observation here is that the respondent referred to the use of contraception as a method of stopping births rather than spacing births. The respondent's stress on '*being a Catholic*' implies the importance of religious values and norms in influencing reproductive behaviour of the converted Christian members of the society.

**Respondent C:** age not known, married, number of children 6 (3 boys and 3 girls)

*Contraception is not allowed in our church but we used to practice the withdrawal methods (giggles).* (Fieldwork Survey 2001)

The interview with respondent 'C' also showed that religious norms predominantly dictate reproductive decisions and behaviour. An important dimension revealed from the interview with C was that the respondent was not adverse to either preventing or spacing births, but she was against the use of modern contraceptives as a method of family planning, which is the church promoted norm.

**Respondent D:** age 47, married, number of children 10 (7 boys and 3 girls)

*Family planning in our church is way out of the question. But I sometime used pills secretly.* (Fieldwork Survey 2001)

Respondent D indirectly expressed her apprehension at openly going against the norms dictated by the church. This also indicated that there was pressure from the religious

authorities to strictly follow these norms. Although it was not clear whether a public disagreement with the church's norms would mean a possible break with the religion, her opinion implied the presence of some sanctions imposed either by the church or by the society where she lived.

**Respondent E:** age 46, married, number of children 5 (2 boys and 3 girls)

*Our church does not allow us to use contraception. But after consultation with the priest, he allowed me to use contraception because of my poor health.* (Fieldwork Survey 2001)

The interview with respondent 'E' imparted a somewhat different picture as far as the rigidity of the norms was concerned. From the respondent's inference it was evident that although the religious norm did not support contraception, this was flexible depending on the situation – with valid health reasons allowing a relaxation of the prohibition.

**Respondent F:** age 56, married, number of children 8 (4 boys and 4 girls)

*We are not allowed to use contraception in our church, however, in order to space my children, I used to use pills only without telling anyone.*

(Fieldwork Survey 2001)

The opinion of respondent F – a mother of eight children again proved the fact that reproductive decisions were very much dictated by and influenced by the church. Like respondent D, the opinion of this respondent also clearly indicated the presence of some sanctions imposed either by the church or by the society. The words of this particular respondent revealed the fact that the need to space births was the main consideration in her decision to use contraception.

The above discussion on respondents' opinions suggests that reproductive behaviour and reproductive decisions of the converted Christians were strongly influenced by the church-ordained norms or rules. During the fieldwork it was observed that although family planning facilities were not adequate in the villages (both Christian and non-Christian), they were accessible. However the lack of proper knowledge about family

planning methods strengthened the religious norms and forced women to rationalise their reproductive decisions on religious grounds. An important aspect that is worth mentioning here is the role of the church or the Christian missionaries in dealing with the Khasi traditional beliefs. The available literature on the role of Christianity in Khasi culture (eg. Snaitang 1993) suggests that the missionaries did not want to change certain traditional features of the Khasi society. As far as reproductive norms were concerned, this role by the missionaries or the church was obvious in the sense that similar to the church-ordained norms, Khasi traditional norms did not support the deliberate prevention of births.

## **7. Cultural Pressure on Khasi Women**

Khasi women have been under tremendous cultural pressure to adhere to traditional values and norms prevailing in their society. It is very difficult to pinpoint whether it is due to a lack self-confidence (or intrinsic empowerment) among the Khasi women or if there is some other reason which is offsetting the positive impact of their high autonomy in empowering them to transform institutional structures and ideologies into a system which favours women. According to Khasi traditional belief or thought, the intrinsic value of the family is considered not only in terms of possessions, wealth and well being, but also in the numbers of children born and reared. Qualitative data from the focus group discussions and from in-depth interviews indicate that most Khasi women are strongly of the view that *'every child that comes into the world, comes with two hands and a bag of rice'*. The symbol of 'two hands' offers a pragmatic and utilitarian image relating directly to its inherent ability to enhance production. This traditional view means that God the Creator will always provide, and that a child will cater not only for his/her own needs, but also for the needs of the others around them. This view is still prevalent in most traditional societies and can be explained by the 'value of children' attached to it.

Most of the explanations given by social scientists for such traditional views relied on the economic values of children rather than non-economic values, but in reality non-economic values can have a stronger influence on adherents to such views without any change over time. Such views on children in a society may have their roots in some economic values, but they become the cultural norms of society with the passage of time. People in a traditional society follow these norms even though the economic value of the children is no longer considered an important factor

for wanting to have more children. In-depth interviews with the Khasi women indicated a strong cultural value attached to their reproductive decisions, especially the decision to have a large family. The majority of the Khasi women who participated in the interviews expressed their strong support for the above mentioned belief system. This belief has encouraged Khasi women to produce children without much fear about the survival of the newborn. Family planning methods like vasectomy and tubectomy are considered anathema by the Khasis. This explains the very low use of permanent methods of family planning among the Khasis. Abortion is deemed equivalent to murder. One participant (a Khasi married woman of age 30 years) in the in-depth interview mentioned – *‘those, who for no great and weighty health reason indulge in abortion, will invite the fury, and curse of God’* (Fieldwork Survey 2001). Hence the incidence of induced abortion is negligible among the Khasi community.

Going through the marriage rites special prayers are organised so that the couple may be blessed with many children, and they may live long enough to see their grandchildren’s children. When Christianity came to these hill areas, the Christian doctrine further confirmed this ideology regarding marriage. Hence this concept is sealed in faith among both Christians and non-Christians. During the in-depth interviews with Khasi women, it was found that around 70% of the women directly or indirectly included cultural reasons as one of the factors for having a large family. The role of cultural sensitivity in reproductive decision making among the Khasi women is clearly evident from the views expressed by respondents. Some of the quotes are cited and discussed below.

**Woman 1** (age 35, married, number of children 5, non-converted)

*As a Khasi I am taught not to do any brutal act of stopping birth of any children. Everything is will of God. I have strong faith in our belief that only large family is a happy and prosperous family. I have to abide by the rules to feel culturally secure. Family planning is an evil practice and I will never make use of any family planning method in my entire life even if it is provided free of cost.*

On the question of economic security, she mentioned:

*I am less concerned about that as the God is always there to help me at the time of distress. Everything is the will of the God.* (Fieldwork Survey 2001)

The above quotes reveal a few important issues:

- The woman did not express any dissatisfaction in following the norms but her words definitely revealed a cultural compulsion on her as she mentions 'I am taught' and 'I have to abide by the rules'. This is more of an outside force making the woman believe in that system. This reflects the lack of 1) intrinsic capability and 2) self-confidence of the woman, which are needed for inner transformation of consciousness that would enable her to overcome external barriers to change the traditional ideology or to accessing resources. Going by the definition of empowerment as suggested by Sen and Batliwala (2000), the woman does not have genuine empowerment as she lacks both the above mentioned attributes.
- The notion of a large family as 'happy and prosperous family' within the Khasi belief system may indicate the economic value attached to children, but this notion also implies social and cultural security. The woman did not appear to use the word 'prosperous' just to imply an improvement in her or the family's economic status. She expressed her least concern about economic condition, as she believes that it is entirely up to God. In other words it is not an economically conscious choice of the woman have a large family size although the use of the word "prosperous" in general can represent an improvement in economic status or condition.
- The woman mentions stopping birth as a 'brutal act'. Again from her words it appears that she was taught to believe so.
- She is aware of the family planning methods or options available to her. But she is not ready to practice them, as she is very much against it.
- The woman is left with at least 10 more years of her reproductive life. She has five children so far and yet does not want to stop.

**Women 2** (age 30, married, number of children 5, converted)

*I have a fear that my clan will die out unless I have a large family size. I would have felt lonely with a small family. I feel blessed and happy producing many children. Small family is a pitiable family. It does not matter much even I don't get one square meal a day, but I'll never practice family planning which is an anti-social act. Being a Catholic, I am restricted from doing such practice and being taught and brought up with this knowledge. I don't want to violate my belief.*  
(Fieldwork Survey 2001)

This respondent (Woman 2) is very conscious about the continuity of her clan. She expresses her fear of losing the clan in future and this fear has led to her decision to have a large family. Her economic priority is much lower than her cultural or religious priority as she mentions that she won't use family planning even if she suffers from economic hardship (a square meal) by not adopting family planning. This respondent also appears submissive to the cultural and religious norms regarding her decisions.

Dr. Revi Singh Lyndoh, a very respected Khasi priest, a learned scholar and a great writer among the Khasis has always encouraged and promoted the traditional thought of the Khasis. His writings reflect his worries that unless some 'protection' is taken, the Khasi, being very small community in India, will lose their identity in the near future. But by and large, there is a strong fear among the Khasis of losing their identity due to a perceived population decline because to start with, the Khasi population is a minority group in India. This perceived fear might not have impacted upon the family size norms directly but must have impacted on norms related to proximate determinants of fertility. Because of the fear of losing their identity the majority of Khasis consider any attempt to change their belief systems and prevailing cultural norms as a threat, and are determined to oppose such attempts at any cost.

Around eighty percent of the women, among whom in-depth interviews were conducted, explained cultural and religious reasons as the dominant factors in their reproductive decisions.

## **8. High fertility: A Repercussion of the Fear of Identity Loss?**

Previously we have shown that deep-rooted pro-natalist cultural norms have resulted in a conscious stand against contraception and abortion – leading to high fertility in Khasi society. The pro-natalist cultural norms in Khasi society are not exceptional as these have also been observed in many other societies before the onset of the demographic transition. What is exceptional in this case is the reinforcement of these traditional pro-natalist norms, a phenomena that was not observed in other societies during their early period of demographic transition. In this context, it is worth mentioning the minority group hypothesis (Goldscheider and Uhlenberg 1969). The hypothesis suggests some tentative generalisations to explain the dynamics of ‘minority status’ and ‘fertility’ relationship and considers the degree of, and the desire for, acculturation, as the key element in this relationship. The hypothesis asserts that the degree of acculturation and the desire for acculturation do not necessarily imply structural integration or total assimilation. In fact during the process involves a structural separation that produces the insecurities of minority group status (Goldscheider and Uhlenberg 1969, pp. 370-371). If the desire for acculturation is not an integral part of the social situation of the minority group, members of the groups may become concerned with group preservation and quantitative strength. Resistance to assimilation may tend to enforce the persistence of traditional patterns of family life conducive to high fertility in spite of technical and economic conditions that might otherwise lead to lower fertility. This paper supports the view that this is the most likely explanation for persistence of high fertility situation in Khasi society.

### **8.1 Fear of Identity Loss**

Like many other tribal communities in India, the Khasis have a strong fear of loosing their identity (SATP 1999). This fear of identity loss identified by Ganguly (2000) has arisen mainly out of:

- a perceived social, political and economic injustice resulting from the short-sighted policies adopted by authorities during and especially since the colonial era;
- an influx of both legal and illegal in-migrants with the potential to reduce them to a minority status in their own land; and
- widespread religious conversion.

## 8.2 The 'Perceived Injustice'

Indigenous locally based ethnic groups throughout the world as well as in India, have been struggling for their very existence. This struggle is essentially a result of the consequences of a continuous conflicting situation in a particular society where the people are humiliated, alienated and deprived of their rightful claims to both material and cultural resources (Rao 1998). Indigenous people worldwide remain marginalised groups that suffer social, political and economic deprivation at the hands of more advanced society that wields political and socioeconomic clout through the processes of colonisation, subjugation and economic control. In the process, the indigenous population is normally subjected to systematic denudation of their socioeconomic base, displacement from their traditional land and large-scale exploitation of their natural resources, that serves to further consolidate the power base of the controlling nation state. The World Bank Study (1982 in Rao 1998, p.275) mentions:

Economic Development has often been promoted at the expense of Tribal Institutions. Development strategies often tacitly assumed that there were no viable institutions or practices existing in the tribal culture that could be used to foster development. This has led to the large-scale transfer of national structures and practices to tribal cultures that were little understood.

In India, insurgency among different tribal groups began as a result of the institutionalised violence unleashed by the colonial state in 1855. Blaming the British colonial power Nag (2000, p.255) writes:

The advent of British rule was marked by a series of unprecedented structural changes attempting to integrate the Northeast's tiny tribal and semi-tribal formations into capital empire. ...Tribal sovereignty was usurped, their exclusivity and insularity demolished, and their ethnic and cultural frontiers redrawn. Warring tribes were integrated under a single administrative or ecclesiastical umbrella, kinfolk were divided between territories, cultural relations were politicised and normal social conflicts communalised. Traditional intellectuals were replaced by new middle classes, new discourses introduced, and newer identities imposed.

But the situation of the tribal groups did not improve in the post-colonial era. National Legislation in independent India tended to act as the strongest instrument of denial of the rightful entitlements

of the tribal landholders (Rao 1998, p.276). Though the Governments in post-colonial India assured the individual tribal claims over the land, they did not specifically uphold the community ownership of the land by the tribes. Criticising the the sanctioning and application of new national administrative rules indiscriminately to the tribal territories, Rao (1998, p.276) states that it has in a way given a blanket status for the once owned tribal lands as that of the state's property albeit without taking the tribal transitional specifics into account. This resulted in the loss of the original claim over the resources (Land and Forest) and created a resource crisis for the tribal communities which had a tremendous social impact on the tribes.

The crisis over the land resources has begun to take shape through this legal system and its application resulting in severest economic cultural violence which acted as the causative grounding that effected the tribes to revolt against the oppressive order set in their respective tribal regions all over India. Various tribal movements confirm this reality. (Rao 1998, p.276)

The struggle for identity of various tribal groups including the Khasis in Northeast India is best defined by the concept of ethnonationalism which refers to the phenomenon of political movements launched on the basis of ethnic identity. Carmen Abubakar (1989, in Pachuau 2002) defines ethnonationalism as 'Ethnic groups claiming to be (or to possess) nations and states in the past or that have the potential of becoming (nations or state and) who are now demanding and asserting these claims as (historic) rights to self determination for local autonomy or independence'. Tambiah (1996, in Pachuau 2002) delineates the political history of most of the Third World countries into three phases. The first phase is the decolonisation period. The second phase (between 1950 to 1960) is the phase of optimistic nation-building. The stress on nation-building downplayed the internal diversity and cleavages (within the new nations) in favour of the primacy of nation state. The optimism and suppressive characters of nation-building in the second phase were challenged and even reversed by the eruption of ethnic conflicts in the third and the present phase of ethnonationalism. The phase of ethnonationalism is characterised by regional or subnational reactions and resistances to what is seen as an over-centralised and hegemonic state (Tambiah 1996, in Pachuau 2000). In the case of the tribal communities in the Northeast the very notion, as well as the movement of ethnonationalism clearly reflects a crisis of identity (Pachuau, accessed online 12.4.2002). Ethnonational self-understanding displays the experience of being pulled between the notion of ethnic identity and national identity (Pachuau, 2002).

The Northeast region of India, consisting of eight states<sup>2</sup>, has historically been culturally contiguous with Tibet, the northern region of Burma and of Bangladesh.<sup>3</sup> It is inhabited by literally hundreds of indigenous peoples<sup>4</sup> of Mongoloid racial ancestry<sup>5</sup> who were politically independent<sup>6</sup> until the process of European de-colonisation. The cultures, however different in many ways, share the characteristic hunting and gathering economic base. This common economic base led to the development of complicated codes of land use and harvesting of natural resources, not only within the village population, but also within villages and within different tribal groups (Laifunbam and Thockchom 2000). The British colonised the region only partially. Except for parts of Assam up to Shillong and the part of Sikkim now known as the Darjeeling district of Northern West Bengal, these regions were self governing territories under the autonomous rule of the independent tribal chiefs and kings (Laifunbam and Thockchom, 2000). Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century the British presence in these mountainous areas was minimal. The impenetrable terrain and the tribal character of the peoples posed difficulties for the British to intervene in internal affairs over most of the region. When the region was restored to indigenous rule in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, the region was divided and incorporated into the Union of India, Bangladesh (erstwhile East Pakistan) and Burma. The British had largely been content to use the region as a passage across difficult terrain from sub-continental India to Southern Burma and eastern and south eastern Asia, demanding some tribute from the tribal governments (Laifunbam and Thockchom 2000). Successor governments have been more concerned with consolidating national boundaries resulting in a high militarisation of indigenous lands and later with the extraction of natural resources including timber, metals and minerals and hydroelectric power.<sup>7</sup>

The dislocation and denial of traditional land rights including the territorial, self determination and sovereignty rights of the indigenous peoples of the region is to be blamed for the ongoing conflict in Northeast India. The European colonial concept of State and territory and resource

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<sup>2</sup> Includes Sikkim

<sup>3</sup> The Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh

<sup>4</sup> According to Amnesty International 250 distinct tribes inhabit the North East region of India. However, a number of indigenous tribes and peoples are not recognised under the Presidents Schedule and are therefore not included in this enumeration.

<sup>5</sup> Most indigenous peoples of the region claim descent from autochthones intermixed with prehistoric migrants of the Northern Mongoloid races and the Khmer and allied tribes of South East Asia.

<sup>6</sup> When the British left Asia they had not actually ruled the majority of the peoples in this region who had a long history of independence and who were also independent when the new South Asian countries were first born.

<sup>7</sup> At present, for instance, over 70,000 army and para-military troops are stationed in Manipur which has a population of approximately 2 million ie. one per 30 civilians.

ownership was imposed on the region. The State was a centralised bureaucratic administration and political government and it had the power to alienate the land and natural resources from traditional communities through private ownership (Laifungbam and Thockchom 2000). It resulted in an conflict between the State and the indigenous people. The conflict continued and over the years it has resulted in violence. A number of armed opposition groups operate in the region. Most are fighting for total independence from India, but some are demanding greater autonomy within the existing state structure (Laifungbam and Thockchom 2000). As a part of existing repressive policies towards dissident political groups, entire population groups in the provincial states of the Northeast India have been forcibly relocated. In the state of Mizoram, for instance, almost the entire population was relocated along highways to suppress autonomy and independence movements. Forcible relocation of indigenous peoples on to traditional lands of a different tribal group has also put considerable pressure on host populations leading to friction and frequently violent conflict (Ganguly 2000, Hazarika 2000). The most notable of these in this past decade, have been the Kuki-Naga conflict from 1992 to 1995 and the Kuki-Paite conflict in 1996-1997. Thousands of families were massacred and rendered homeless and landless during these periods and entire villages were relocated or erased and the populations dispersed during these ethnic conflicts (Hazarika 2000). Criticising the Government policies Ganguly (2000) writes:

Northeast India is largely cut off from mainland India and in these remote pockets, unhappy youngsters are easily prone to feeling persecuted. They feel their community is singled out because they belong to a different ethnic stock. The resentment, if not addressed, can easily be fanned into violence.

Harriss (2002, p.2), in his Consultation Paper about the Northeastern states, submitted to the 'National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution' states:

The Northeast of India, home to numerous diverse communities and located strategically with borders with Bhutan, Tibet/China, Myanmar and Bangladesh has seen much violence and bloodshed over the past few decades. This includes insurgencies in the States of Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura and Assam and the growth of militants groups in Meghalaya. In addition there are conflicts and confrontations over land use and control as well as issues of language, identity formation, demographic change and minority/majoritarian relations.

One response among the Khasis has been for the community to attempt to preserve control over their own land by restricting land-rights and inheritance only to members who belong to the tribes living in Meghalaya. For example, land in Meghalaya is owned by Village Councils - the concept of private or state ownership is traditionally non-existent. The councils operate under the administrative umbrella of the autonomous tribal district councils, which are extremely conscious of tribal rights and their autonomy vested under the sixth schedule of the Indian constitution (Hussain 2003).

Another response that appears to have occurred is the development of a larger family size norm than existed previously (Fieldwork Survey 2001). This particular aspect supports the hypothesis that the perception of minority status and the adoption of a more defensive position vis-à-vis outside groups have impacted on fertility outcomes (Fieldwork Survey 2001).

### **8.3 Threat from Outsiders**

It is impossible to delineate clear boundaries between racial and ethnic groups but it is equally obvious that practical distinctions are being made all the time. Most people strongly identify themselves with a particular group and adopt some sort of attitude towards members of other groups, which ranges from a mild awareness of difference, curiosity, to fanatical hostility. In some cases they become uneasily aware that other racial/ethnic groups already outnumber them and/or are increasing more rapidly (Parsons 1999). When Meghalaya was created in 1972, an uneasy calm prevailed. But in spite of the growing feeling of being exploited by the so called development policies of the government, the Khasis in Meghalaya, remained relatively calm until 1993, while the rest of the states of the Northeast have been rocked by separatist tribal insurgency for years. Open conflict started once Nepalese and Bangladeshis migrated into the state of Meghalaya after the local government removed restrictions on the movement of foreigners in an effort to promote tourism. Tension between the Khasis and the outsiders sporadic until then, has been increasing since that time. The Khasis say their culture is under threat. Demographic invasion from across their borders was a matter of serious concern in this part of the country. There was no serious attempt on the part of the Central and the State Governments to solve the problem. Migration from other countries of the region, especially Bangladesh and Nepal, and from other regions within the national boundaries of India, caused populations to increase rapidly, causing land pressure on indigenous populations and their marginalisation. In Tripura and Assam, indigenous populations have been reduced to tiny minorities and the process in other

states, most notably Meghalaya, Manipur and Nagaland is well under way. In the last 30 years indigenous Tripuri have been reduced from 92 to 30 per cent of the population of Tripura (Census of India 1991). Meghalaya has endured massive communal riots between migrants from Bangladesh and Bengal and there have been measured and measurable increases in the rate of in-migration and immigration due to economic pressures from Nepal, Bengal, Bihar and due to political pressures against the indigenous peoples of Bangladesh (Waats 1999).

There is no protection from the large-scale settlement of non-indigenous populations on indigenous peoples' lands in any of the South Asian countries. While there are some laws protecting tribal lands from alienation by individuals of the tribe or to private ownership outside the tribe, the government itself retains the right to appropriate and re-allocate these lands for public interest. Moreover, since these lands are largely unmapped and unregistered, it is impossible to prevent settlement by migrants especially those of the same nationality, regardless of ethnic origin. It has now become customary for even politicians to build vote banks by encouraging settlement of non-tribal people (most of whom are illegal migrants) on such lands, the settlers being dependent on political patronage for their basic necessities. ((Laifungbam and Thockchom 2000)

Khasi tribal elders are worried that their fragile hold on ancient tradition is slipping. They blame the outside influence of non-tribal migration, and most of all, the administration imposed by democratic India (Ganguly 2000). Behind all these demands and struggles, the overriding factor is one of identity. The fear of losing identity is paramount. This is compounded by the security factor, which is essentially a question of protecting the land from outsiders. The latter factor was so important that as far back as 1873 the colonial power introduced the Inner Line Regulations for most of the areas to secure the tribal identity (Shetty 2003). The tribes in the hills fear that people from the plains and neighbouring countries may take their lands to set up trade and industrial projects and thus, jeopardise their security and upset the demographic balance. Mizos (inhabitants of Mizoram) told the then Home Minister S. B. Chavan in 1994 that 'the need for tribal people is survival as a tribal and development is our secondary issue' (Madhab 2001). For that reason, the State Government of Mizoram does not even levy sales tax, the most productive of state taxes. If sales tax is levied, registration certificates will have to be given to outside traders which will enable them to establish residency (Madhab 2001).

'Our people have a deep-rooted fear of losing our identity. We want to check the influx of foreigners', Khasi Students Union President Paul Lyngdoh told Reuters (in Watts 1999). Strong opposition to immigrants is a recent phenomenon. Most migrants settled in Meghalaya years or decades ago and work as traders, doctors or teachers. The families of some settled there during the days of British colonial rule. Most schools, hospitals and churches were built by immigrants or their descendants. According to official statistics non-tribes people currently account for about 30 percent of the state's 1.7 million people. The Khasis say the outsiders are grabbing jobs at a time when unemployment is rising and industrial activity is low. According to Government officials ethnic tensions are exaggerated. But political analysts are of the opinion that the officials would do well to read the writing on the wall. 'Khasi by birth, Indian by accident' is a common slogan scrawled on walls in Meghalaya (watts 1999).

#### **8.4 Threat from Religious Conversion**

Religious conversion among the tribal groups in India has been a very sensitive issue in recent times. A detailed discussion of the impact of Christianity on tribal society is beyond the scope of this research. Moreover due to the extreme sensitivity of the conversion issue, the fieldwork for this research was constrained and limited to examining the impact of religion on reproductive behaviour. But the feeling of religious conversion as a threat to the tribal culture was observed among the non-converted tribes people during the fieldwork. It was also observed that converted Christians have stopped following certain traditions as they consider these traditions to be anti-social and also as barriers to development.

The evidence provided by the National Informatics Centre (2002), there are some 880,000 Khasis in Meghalaya, which has a population of some 1.8 million at present. Coming from ethnic Mongol extraction, they are believed to have migrated to Northeast India more than 2000 years ago and British missionaries converted many to Christianity in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The limited number of studies on the impact of Christianity on tribal society in Northeast India can be broadly divided into two categories: one projecting Christianity as a positive force and another claiming Christianity is a force of destruction of the tribal culture. The tribal way of life in Northeast India has been termed as 'Savage', 'Wild' and 'uncivilised' by Mary Mead Clark in her book 'A Corner in India' published by the American Baptist Publication Society of Philadelphia (in Ramdas 2003). Roy (1981) not only disregards the impact of Christianity and ecclesiastical sources, but also concludes that Christianity was responsible for creating an anti-national spirit among the

members of the tribe. Shukla (1980, in Snaitang 1993) and Ghangurde (1998) express a very similar view on the influence of Christianity in Northeast India accusing it of working against the interest of the nation. Snaitang (1993) criticises both Roy and Shukla as jumping into unwarranted conclusions without careful investigation and proper documentation. Supporting Christianity as a strong force for positive changes among different tribal communities in Northeast India, Snaitang (1993) acknowledges that missionaries sought to replace the religious elements in the traditional culture, but at the same time sought to preserve the folklore. Because of the theological motivation the attitude of the Christian missionaries towards social change was complex. Some elements in traditional society, such as the kinship system, the language and the village administration, were approved, while other elements, which were thought to have religious implications, were condemned (Snaitang 1994). On the issue of Christianity and tribal identity Snaitang (1994, p.132) concludes:

It is clear that the 'mixed' policy adopted by the missionaries of rejecting some elements of the traditional culture (those believed to have religious or moral implications) and affirming others did not adversely affect the Khasi sense of identity. Quite the reverse was true. Those elements that they affirmed and strengthened were actually those that had traditionally provided whatever weak sense of ethnic identity existed. Hence as the church grew and developed the overall effect was one of the contributing to an awareness of tribal identity. In fact it was in the new forms of religious life that tribal identity was strengthened because the practices and structures of the church operated at the ethnic rather than sub-ethnic level.

Whatsoever the impact of Christianity on the tribal society, the fact is that there has been a sea change in these societies – both at the individual and at the community level. After conversion to Christianity the tribal people began abstaining from their indigenous festivals. Hence we see the Christian Khasis of Meghalaya do not take part in the Sad-Suk-Mynstem festival or the Nongkrem festival (Fieldwork Survey 2000). Those converted to Christianity in Arunachal Pradesh have started distancing themselves or are made to do so, from festivals like the Solung or Mopin. The Christian Garos remain cut off from the Wangla festival dance. The phenomenon continues throughout the tribal population. People start staying away from their traditional dances, accept western names for their children, start wearing western clothes, sing western music and so on. The cultural alienation is very clear. The supporters of Christianity term these changes as dynamic, progressive or evolutionary and discern that the emerging identity of the tribal people in Northeast India as a result of these changes is much better than the traditional identity.

Social psychoanalysts believe that conversion, re-conversion and industrial invasion have cast a noxious net on the India of indigenous people (The Hindustan Times, 1999). A study examining the external influences on tribal communities in India concluded that external influences have been imposed on the life of the tribal people in recent years and most important among these external forces is the role of Christian missionaries. The social scientists involved in this study also conclude that the spread of Christianity has resulted in a variety of social, cultural, political and economic changes in the traditional life of the people<sup>8</sup>. It has worked both as an integrating force for some tribal groups under church leadership, and also as a fragmenting force that destroyed the indigenous tribal organisation (The Hindustan Times 1999).

Those who accuse Christianity of destroying the tribal culture maintain that the Christian tribal people face a situation in which they bear only the name of their respective tribe but are devoid of their culture and tradition and thus face a loss of identity. The Third General Assembly<sup>9</sup> (1981) of the World Council of Indigenous People (WCIP), in one of its findings, boldly pointed out that after conversion the Christian converts are assimilated into the Western ways of living.

It stressed the need for setting up an international convention on the rights of indigenous people and pledged that it would fight for their rights against any encroachments.

Emphasising that the growing sense of cultural and ethnic revival among the tribal people is a direct outcome of religious conversion, Ramdas (2003) mentions: “it all starts with the loss of religion resulting in the loss of culture and in the end they loose their identity”.

In 1899, the Seng Khasi (a tribal organisation) was formed for the defence of Khasi culture, traditions and beliefs against the intolerant influence of the Welsh Presbyterian Missionary movement. The Seng Khasi valiantly preserved their belief and traditions including their matriarchal family structure and arts despite opposition from the colonial power and the foreign missions (Ramdas 2003).

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<sup>8</sup> The study was conducted by John Widdup Berry of Queens University, Canada, Ramesh Chandra Mishra of Benaras Hindu University, and Durganand Sinha of Allahabad University (The Hindustan Times, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> The assembly was held in Canberra from 27<sup>th</sup> April to 2<sup>nd</sup> May, 1981 and representatives of 30 countries attended the Conference)

The aims and objects of the Seng Khasi include fostering a sense of brotherhood among the Khasis who retain their socio-cultural and religious traditions, to work for their advancement through education, to encourage national sports like archery, to encourage traditional cultural dances and other festivals to undertake welfare and development activities. More specifically, Seng Khasi aims for preservation of the Khasi culture, the protection of the identity of the people, promotion of their art and culture, and the pursuit of knowledge to keep pace with the times without losing their moorings anchored to their ancient heritage (R.T. Rymbai in Ramdas 2003).

All the tribal communities of the Northeast India now have a common platform in the Inter Tribal Cultural Forum (ITCF) to provide a forum for the tribal people for years to come. Hipshon Roy, the President of the Indian Tribal Cultural Forum, said at the Inaugural Conference of the forum,<sup>10</sup> that the Khasis saw that they could not survive in isolation and have come out of their seclusion to speak to the whole country and the world. Today as an Associate Member of the International Association of Religious Freedom (IARF) Khasis have entered the international field. Along with all the indigenous peoples of the world, with a banner saying, 'all we ask for is our own way of life, not that people believe as we do, we respect other's beliefs, if that is their truth'. The living patriotism enshrined in the Seng Khasi Organisation, in their song which says:

with our flag we wave, For our country's sake, All of you, our dearest mates, In  
established custom wade. O, sons and daughters of Khasi Land, Your origin be ever  
vigilant, Cling to established custom of the Land, By which ancients perfect as plan,  
With noble thought intent sublime (Ramdas 2003).

## **9. Cultural Revival and the Demographic Outcome**

The impact of the feeling of identity loss and the subsequent cultural revival on demographic outcomes has been an area of utmost concern for the tribal communities in Northeast India. However this is an area of research, which is also too sensitive to be pursued with in-depth field investigation.

The combination of three factors discussed above namely, perceived injustice (policy loopholes), perceived threat from immigrants and religious conversion have definitely led the Khasi community to take a more protective stand in the preservation of their ethnic and cultural identity. This stand has resulted in the reinforcement of certain cultural norms and taboos prevailing in the

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<sup>10</sup> the conference was held in Guwahati, India on 31st January, 1982

society, limiting land rights and reservation of government jobs only to the members of the three major tribal communities living in Meghalaya. Although each of these components has had a direct or an indirect impact on demographic outcomes, it is not at all easy to describe the pathways of that process.

The most commonly observed reaction of the members of various tribal communities in Northeast India has been that of propagating the idea of power through numbers. This particular strategy was adopted by openly aggressive nations like Germany, Japan and Italy in the 1930s. When discussing this particular strategy of achieving or maintaining power through large populations Parsons (1999) suggested that a minority group that is, or believes itself, oppressed by a majority, can feel impelled to increase its numbers as the only means of getting enough power to achieve equality and justice.

Parsons (1999) gave some historical examples of racial/ethnic population competition in various parts of the world. Although there was much population competition between native tribes in South Africa before the white man came, the first clear example of competitive breeding in the region was White versus White. The Boers made strenuous and successful efforts to outbreed the English. In more recent times, as the total population doubled in about 25 years to 45 millions in 1993, Blacks came to outnumber Whites by a ratio of more than a six to one that is rapidly increasing. At a symposium held in 1971 two South African scholars noted that the Whites were becoming an ever smaller minority and this has led to:

A dualistic White view which seeks to generate an increased growth of the White population and at the same time....a drastic reduction in the growth rate of the Non-Whites. (Goliber 1985, in Parsons 1999)

The family planning programme was introduced in 1975 with the primary objective to curb Black population growth. Black township devoid of any other form of medical service were well supplied with mobile birth control clinics, although these were often invaded by activists urging the women to go home and produce more soldiers for the liberation struggle (Parsons 1999). Competitive breeding among different ethnic groups in the USA has also been observed. The report of hearings on Population Growth and the American Future (1972, in Parsons 1999) noted that a feeling of powerlessness and exclusion led to a suggestion that more numbers was the only way to break the system make it so they can no longer be ignored. In 1992 the concept of competitive breeding was further boosted by a group 'Black Men Making Babies' (Parsons 1999,

p.327). They believed that without powerful countermeasures, violence will wipe out their race in the near future. The co-founders of this group announced:

We're network of black men who advocates responsibility producing more children...Our battle cry is: 'Mo babies, Mo babies, Mo babies'. (Parsons 1999, p.327)

The practical distinctions between race and ethnicity are being made all the time and most people fairly strongly identify themselves with their group and adopt some sort of overt attitude towards outside-groups. In some cases they become uneasily aware that other racial/ethnic groups already outnumber them and/or are increasing more rapidly (Parsons 1999). Some resort to positive population competition by means of increased immigration, restricted emigration and/or higher birth rates. Some groups are pursuing a negative policy of population competition, reducing the numbers of their rivals by means of dispossession, expulsion, or genocide (Parsons 1999).

The observations from the fieldwork suggest that the practice of competitive breeding among the Khasis was not widespread though not absent (please refer to the responses of the interviewees analysed later in this section). There have been conscious attempts to revive or stick to certain cultural norms and taboos related to contraception and abortion – the two crucial proximate determinants of fertility. Although this can not directly be termed as a reflection of competitive breeding, this is certainly a reflection of the ideology of strengthening the power base (either economic, social, or cultural) – a similar ideology which competitive breeding is based on. Khasi traditional norms do not support the use of any form of contraception to prevent births (or any conscious effort to prevent births). Abortion is considered to be a sin in Khasi tradition. While these norms are not unusual (as many other traditional societies do have similar norms), reinforcing these traditional norms in recent years is something that the Khasis are more concerned with. In the wake of their cultural revival, traditional Khasis are more concerned with following these norms without any question. This has definitely induced the fertility rate not only to remain at a high level but also to increase at an alarming rate (IIPS, 1995, 2000). At the same time this has also influenced the infant and child mortality rate among the Khasis to remain very high. According to the NFHS India (IIPS 2000) report, the state of Meghalaya has the highest infant mortality rate (IMR) in India. During the focus group discussion and in-depth interviews it was found that every Khasi woman (irrespective of her educational status) strongly supported the pronatalist taboos and considered them as essential to maintain their cultural identity. For example, the belief that every child comes into the world with two hands and a bag of rice, was

found to be quoted by a majority of Khasi women. This particular belief means that the child has the capacity to survive in any circumstances. Preventing births thus implies having less faith in the Khasi belief system. Khasi believes that those, who for no great and weighty health reason indulge in abortion, will invite the fury, and curse of God (Fieldwork Survey 2000). The following quotes by Khasi women during the in-depth interviews support the assertion that revival of cultural norms is very much a conscious effort among the Khasi community. These quotes were the responses of the women to the interview question on reasons for having a large family size.

### **Respondent 1**

*We are proud of our culture and matrilineal system which we want to protect at any cost. But if we do not produce more children, the outsiders will outnumber us and in this process we will not only lose our culture but also our land too. (Fieldwork Survey 2001)*

The respondent expressed her fear of cultural extinction and at the same time the fear of non-tribes occupying their land. Referring to ‘outsiders’ she not only meant the migrants from Bangladesh and Nepal but also non-tribal people from other states within India. Her response also indicates that she believed in the concept of ‘power through quantity’ for the Khasis to retain majority in their homeland.

### **Respondent 2**

*I want to feel lucky and blessed by having a big family. Nowadays people are materialistic and they do not count any more on the fact that ‘one is being blessed’ if they have a big family. This is not a good sign for my community that is fighting for survival in this materialistic world. It does not matter whether I have enough clothes to wear or possess luxurious things, but I want a happy, secure and strong family and for me true happiness comes through a big family. (Fieldwork Survey 2001)*

Respondent 2 considered the ‘materialistic world’ as a threat to her culture. Her reference to the ‘materialist world’ implied a conflict between traditional and modern ways of life. According to her the happiness, security and strength of the family comes through having more members in the family. The two words ‘secure’ and ‘strong’ underline some kind of perceived fear (it can either be cultural/social or economical) in her mind which could arise from a small family size. The fear

of identity being lost was also indicated in her saying that her community was fighting for its survival.

### **Respondent 3**

*I have never used family planning methods as I consider it a way of destroying our matrilineal system. My clan will grow from generation to generation without practising family planning. A big family only makes the house happy and secure.* (Fieldwork Survey 2001)

Respondent 3 considered family planning as a threat as she feared that stopping births might lead to a collapse of their kinship system. A Khasi mother wants at least one daughter born to her so that she can pass on the lineage to her daughter. Using family planning methods might expose them to the risk of not having a daughter. Her stand against family planning was very firm and she believed that her clan would be safer in the absence of family planning.

### **Respondent 4**

*I want to see my clan grow bigger and bigger. I want to produce more children so that the matrilineal system remains strong and safe.* (Fieldwork Survey 2001)

Respondent 4 expressed her support for a large family for very similar reasons to those expressed by previous respondents. According to her the clan would be safe when it is big in size. Although she did not specifically mention the reasons for feeling unsafe if she did not produce more children, it is quite clear from her words that quantity plays an important role in keeping the matrilineal system strong.

### **Respondent 5**

*In the absence of people like me who go for a bigger family with lots of children, our Khasi clan would have died a long way back. I am proud that by having more children I am making our community strong and powerful.* (Fieldwork Survey 2001)

Respondent 5 expressed her social responsibility to protect the clan from any possible extinction. She felt that every Khasi woman should shoulder this responsibility by producing more children and should feel proud of their decision to do so.

**Respondent 6**

*I do not want any advice from the government to restrict my family size. I do not have any faith in them. (Fieldwork Survey 2001)*

The expression of this respondent indicates some kind of negative experience she had with the Government administration. Although she did not express any antagonism against family planning, her loss of faith in the government had made her disobey their authority in these matters.

**Respondent 7**

*Why should I stop producing children by committing a sin like abortion or contraception. I respect my culture, which does not allow these practices. (Fieldwork Survey 2001)*

Respondent 7 considered that stopping births through abortion and contraception means showing disrespect to her cultural beliefs. Her stand against these acts highlights the crucial influence of culture on the reproductive decision-making process in Khasi society.

The responses from the in-depth interviews discussed above clearly indicate the conscious choice of a large family size where the choice is mainly driven by the question of cultural survival. A majority of the respondents mentioned above emphasised their faith and respect for the culture as the main reason for having a large family size. The repeated mention of three words – safe, secured and strong by the respondents, asserts the presence of a perceived fear in their mind – the fear of a take-over by other cultures. This perceived fear has resulted in their determination to rationalise their decisions according to cultural beliefs. It is important to mention here that these individual choices regarding reproduction were basically a reflection of the community's choice. In other words individual decisions were very much controlled or influenced by social institutions like the Darbars, Student Organisations, community and religious leaders and more importantly by a group of highly educated Khasi women (which was observed during the fieldwork).

The overall focus of this paper was to highlight the importance of a very crucial but rarely researched area of the study: the impact of cultural revival on demographic outcome. The cultural norms related to reproduction in a society tend to dominate the behaviour and decisions of the members of that society at the pre-transitional stage of the fertility transition. The control of

fertility behaviour is so important to society as a whole that it is never left solely in the hands of the individual couples. This is what Freedman calls societal levels of fertility (Freedman 1963, Freedman 1972). These levels are related to variations in cultural norms about reproduction, and these, in turn, are related to the nature of the society. Normative solutions in the form of a set of rules for behaviour are developed in a society to face recurrent and common problems. These behaviours eventually become a part of the culture and the society indoctrinates its members to conform more or less closely to the norms by explicit or implicit rewards and punishments. In a pre-transitional society, these norms, related to reproduction, were mostly observed to be pro-natalist. Once society moves forward from a pre-modern stage, the members of the society become less and less conservative in following these reproductive norms. It is generally agreed that education is one of the most crucial factors that enable a society to break the cultural barriers and take a more rational approach in the reproductive decision-making process. The rational approach normally represents a shift from a pro-natalist ideology to an ideology supporting smaller family size. But this mechanism depends mainly on the nature of the social transition. A society, which is facing a social transition dominated by conflicts and fear of identity, the forces like women's education can in fact have a very unconventional impact on the reproductive decisions and reproductive behaviour.

Like many other tribal communities in India, the social transition of the Khasis was initially imposed by the colonial power and then imposed by successive independent governments. Three basic factors – wrong policies in the name of development (which dislocates and denies the traditional land rights, self determination and sovereignty rights of the indigenous peoples), huge in-migration (both legal and illegal) to the state and religious conversion have created an identity crisis among the Khasis. They have a perceived fear of losing their cultural identity and also their land to the outsiders. This fear has resulted in a strong feeling for cultural revival, especially among traditional Khasis. They want to reinforce their cultural values by strictly adhering to their traditional norms. The Khasis, traditionally being a strong pro-natalist society, do not want to use contraception and abortion. Preventing births through contraception and abortion is considered to be committing sins in Khasi traditional beliefs. In the wake of cultural revival these beliefs have become more important as cultural securities. A higher preference for a girl child to continue with the Khasi matrilineal system was also found to be a highly motivating factor in their decision to go for a bigger family size. The concept of competitive breeding – number power to remain majority, was observed as another dimension that has contributed to some extent to high fertility

among the Khasis. Higher educated women were much more involved in the movement for the Khasi revival with their increasing support for Khasi traditional beliefs and norms.

The observed reproductive behaviour strongly supports the underlying assumption of the minority group hypothesis. Although the Khasis are not minorities in their homeland, the fear of becoming a minority in the near future has led to a situation where they consider acculturation as not acceptable. As stated by the minority group hypothesis the Khasis are concerned with group preservation and quantitative strength. Resistance to assimilation tends to enforce the persistence of traditional patterns of family life conducive to high fertility in spite of technical and economic conditions that might otherwise lead to lower fertility.

As mentioned above, some of the unconventional reproductive behaviour in Khasi society is basically an outcome of the misdirected policies of social transition (a transition characterised by exploitation and forceful assimilation of tribal communities to the mainstream society) where the community feels extremely marginalised. It highlights the importance of formulating a more integrated approach to tribal development policies. The discussion in the next section critically analyses the existing tribal development policies as well as the population policies in India and explores the possibilities for an integrated policy leading to a successful outcome within a short period of time.

## **10. Policy Implications**

The findings discussed above have implications for the policies of tribal populations of India. In particular, the findings of this study suggest two specific policy implications:

1. An urgent need for a decentralised policy approach for tribal community development.
2. A specific population policy for the tribal communities based on ethics of voluntarism with support for not only for the economic and health needs of the community members, but also for addressing critical issues like socio-cultural norms, land rights, migration and most importantly, gender power relations.

## **10.1 A Decentralised Policy Approach for Tribal Development**

Various studies undertaken by the Agro-Economic Research Centre for North East India have strongly recommended that improved coordination and deeper understanding among the various government departments associated with different types of development activities are important pre-requisites for the success of development programmes in tribal areas (Saikia and Borah 1990). These studies have also suggested that development programmes for the tribal community should be area specific. A single development programme adopted for the tribal communities of the whole country is not appropriate for all the separate tribal areas. The vast differences in the physical geography of different tribal regions and the variations in the socio-cultural structure from one tribe to another should be taken into consideration in all development programmes. The existing top-down approach to policy for tribal welfare needs to be reversed to a bottom-up decentralised approach where the people at the grassroots level get opportunities to actively participate in formulating and implementing policies. Involving common people and local organisations in the formulation and implementation of policies will not only be successful in developing more effective programmes, but also in getting their wide acceptance by the community. A study conducted by Burman (1990) showed that use of the traditional social institutions among the tribal communities of Northeast India greatly increased the chances of successful policy implementation. However, while a decentralised approach, especially at the policy implementation stage would definitely increase confidence among community members, there is nevertheless, a need to be cautious about such an approach. In a society where women are traditionally not permitted to participate in politics at any level (as in Khasi society), allowing traditional institutions to implement development projects can in fact sideline women from the development process and can lead to their exploitation. A change in the Khasi tradition of not allowing women in to politics is an urgent need before empowering these traditional institutions to implement various development projects. In other words, while decentralisation of power would definitely strengthen community participation in the development process, we need to take a cautious approach to make sure that in the future the relevant community organisations have equal representation of males and females and the rich and the poor.

## **10.2 A Population Policy for Tribal Communities based on the Ethics of Voluntarism**

The development of a policy response to the pro-natalist behaviour of the Khasis has to be culturally sensitive and based on ethical approach. The ethical basis of the Indian population policy is that of voluntarism which should address not only the economic and health needs of the community members, but also critical issues like socio-cultural norms, migration and most importantly gender power relations. But India's population programmes have fallen far short in terms of integrating their objectives with the socio-cultural needs of the people, especially in tribal communities where members are increasingly feeling threatened by a perceived 'identity loss'. As Sen et al. (1994) discusses, the overemphasis on fertility distorts the ethical basis of population programmes. The population programmes have been confronted with the dilemma of 'target oriented goals' and the maintaining of their 'ethical base', but at the end there should not be any compromise in addressing the programme objectives on an ethical basis (Sen et al. 1994). Without such a commitment, there will be a growing demographic disparity in India, which like economic disparities will end up as a matter of grave concern for planners and policy-makers:

This demographic disparity leading to demographic imbalance may cause considerable social turbulence and may even pose a threat to political stability. Demographers must look far beyond demographic statistics and anticipate the consequences of a demographic imbalance between different regions and states in India as well as between different religious communities, castes and tribes (Bose 1996).

Although India has implemented various population programmes in the last fifty years, surprisingly it has not had a national population policy until as recently as the year 2000. In spite of the fact that India was the first country in the world to officially begin a national family planning programme, it was largely an urban clinic-based programme rather than a policy with long-term objectives. During all the years prior to the release of a comprehensive national population policy, various statements of national-level population policy were advanced, but never adopted. When the National Health Policy was adopted in 1983, Parliament called for a separate policy on population, but it was never actually formulated (Sen 2000). The backlash generated by the coercive programme of mass sterilisation during the mid-1970s created a fear among the politicians of being associated publicly with the subject of population for at least the next two decades. Statements of National Population Policy were made in 1976. In 1993 the Karunakaran Report (Report of the National Development Council (NDC) Committee on

Population) proposed the formulation of a National Population Policy to take a long term holistic view of development, population growth and environmental protection (Government of India 2000, p.30). Accordingly the policy statements of 1976 were placed on the table. However, Parliament never really discussed or adopted them (Planning Commission 1992 in Government of India 2000, p.30). But before the 1994 Cairo International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), the Government of India appointed an expert group under the chairmanship of the renowned scientist Dr. M.S. Swaminathan to develop a draft national population policy. The draft called for a radical shift to a policy that would be 'pro-poor, pro-woman, and pro-nature'. The draft also argued for a more bottom-up and needs-based approach that would be implemented by a new and powerful National Commission on Population (Sen 2000). The draft was again never formalised and no policy document was adopted. But after the ICPD the Government in 1996 formally abolished contraceptive targets. In 1997 (the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of India's Independence) the Cabinet approved the draft but again the document could not be tabled in either House of Parliament (Government of India 2000, p.31). In the year 2000, National Population Policy was finally passed by the National Parliament.

Fortunately, the 'National Population Policy (NPP) 2000' seems to be attempting to move in a more humane direction (Sen 2000). The NPP 2000 has rightly emphasised a more ethical approach by downplaying to some extent the 'incentive/disincentive approach' that existed in earlier population programmes. Empowerment of women gets special mention in the action plan of the NPP 2000. The strategic themes of the National Population Policy emphasise the role of *panchayats* (local governing bodies at the village level) and *zila parishads* (local governing bodies at the district level) in promoting a gender sensitive, multi-sectoral agenda for population stabilisation, that will think, plan and act locally with support nationally. Moreover, the NPP also recognises the need for *panchayats* to be headed by women to identify area-specific unmet needs for reproductive health services, and prepare needs-based, demand-driven, socio-demographic plans at the village level aimed at identifying and providing responsive, people-centred and integrated, basic reproductive and child health care (Government of India 2000).

While these strategic themes in NPP 2000 can be welcomed without any hesitation, their implementation is highly questionable. Sen (2000) states that the strategic implementation of policy objectives appeared to be going against the spirit of Cairo 1994. For example, the plan to reward *panchayats* and *zila parishads* for exemplary performance has no safeguards built-in to

prevent ground-level coercion of poor women (or men) towards unwanted and/or unsafe sterilisation, intrauterine device (IUD) insertions or other methods (Sen 2000). The situation can become worse if similar performance-based incentive/reward schemes to the local organisations (like the *durbars* in the Khasi community) are implemented in tribal areas with the objective of increasing the population (the NPP indicates the need for a pro-natalist policy in some tribal areas). In the wake of the fear of minoritisation and the subsequent cultural pressure on women by local organisations and other community members to strictly follow the pro-natalist cultural norms in most of the tribal societies, such incentive/reward schemes will further the exploitation of human rights, especially the reproductive rights of women. The present study has submitted that the lack of an 'enabling environment for empowerment' (Dixon-Muller 2001, pp.97-98, discussed in chapter Seven) has made Khasi women submissive to cultural and religious norms. To create the enabling environment, policies therefore should be formulated not only to transform individual behaviour, but also to transform the socio-cultural environment itself (Dixon-Muller 2001, p.104).

As in Khasi society, the question of cultural identity or cultural survival is a growing concern for most of the tribal communities of Northeast India. A population policy for tribal communities in Northeast India needs to address this issue with the utmost care and suitability.

## **11. Closing Remarks**

The analysis carried out in this study suggested some solutions to the existing rationality debate on reproductive decision-making processes in transitional societies. It incisively highlighted that the fertility outcome in a tribal society can be a reflection of a complex reality – a reality which is very different from the mainstream society characterised by the dynamics of a conventional and straight forward demographic process. This clearly demonstrates the need for fresh approach in future demographic research on tribal communities. The study has also highlighted important policy implications and discussed these implications in the light of the recently adopted National Population Policy (NPP) of India. The tribal communities in Northeast India are still in a transitional phase – not just in terms of the demographic transition, but also in terms of a social transition. At the same time they are also facing a crisis of identity in the wake of so called modernization in mainstream society. In such a situation any policy aimed at increasing the welfare of these vulnerable groups should focus on creating an environment where they can feel

more secure. Such an environment can be achieved through a decentralised, bottom-up, holistic policy approach with the provision of built-in safeguards to protect the rights of individuals as well as of the community. These policy initiatives will be useful not only to Indian population policy makers but also to policy makers in many other countries where indigenous communities are confronted with an identity crisis due to globalisation. The study therefore, concludes that this exploration into the influence of culture and religion on reproductive decision-making process and reproductive behaviour in tribal communities in Northeast India has wide applicability in understanding the fertility dynamics in other transitional societies and hence in the formulation of appropriate population policies.

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