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Q2(c)

Evaluate the impact of Christianity on Scheduled Tribe societies of North-East India

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · Anthropology GS 2 · 15 marks · Impact of Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and other religions on tribal societies.

8.1 Impact of Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and other religions on tribal societies.

Core demand of the question

- State what Christianity brought to Scheduled Tribe societies of North-East India
- **Give historical paths:** Baptist, Presbyterian, Catholic, revival
- Evaluate gains in literacy, health, identity and political voice
- **Evaluate losses and strains:** custom, land, intra-tribal split, and the state's security frame

Revision summary

Baptist, Presbyterian and Catholic missions, then local revivals, planted Christianity in many NE ST hills.

Gains include Roman-script literacy, women's education, peace brokering and a middle class using 371 and Inner Line.

Strains include pressure on morung and grove, denominational factions, and distance between church elite and jhum households.

The church is now indigenous social structure, not a foreign camp.

Land rights still run through custom, Inner Line, FRA and councils, not through the pulpit.

Introduction

Christianity among Scheduled Tribes of North-East India is a social conversion as much as a creedal one. It arrived with **Baptist, Presbyterian, Catholic and later independent** missions from the nineteenth century, and it now shapes Naga, Mizo, Khasi, Garo, some Adi and other hill societies. Evaluation means both the school and the split in the village.

Body

Historical paths

American Baptists among Nagas and Garos, Welsh Presbyterians in the Khasi-Jaintia and Mizo hills, and Catholics in parts of Nagaland, Manipur and Arunachal built **scripts, hymns and hostels**. **Mizo revival** (1906 and after) and the **Naga Baptist** network tied church to tribe. In Arunachal the process is later and uneven: Buddhist belts in the west, Christian growth in some central and eastern districts, still politically sensitive.

Mission was never only foreign. Local catechists, women teachers and youth associations made the church a **tribal public**.

Gains

Literacy in Roman script, especially Mizo and some Naga languages, ran ahead of many plains districts. Women entered schools earlier than in neighbouring caste societies. Church organisations provided a civil society that later fed **statehood movements** (Nagaland 1963, Mizoram peace 1986). A common Christian identity sometimes eased clan feud, as Mizo historians argue for the end of raiding. Public health and temperance campaigns, however moralising, cut some forms of ritual drinking.

Politically, churches have been brokers in peace talks. They also run schools that feed the Indian university system, producing an ST middle class that uses **reservation, Article 371A/G, Inner Line and Sixth Schedule** with confidence.

Strains

Customary law on marriage, bridewealth and clan land sits uneasily with Christian personal ethics and with a Uniform Civil Code debate. **Sacred groves and morung** lost ground where the church called them pagan; revival and cultural boards now try to restage them as heritage. Intra-tribal denominational splits (Baptist versus Catholic versus revival sects) can map onto village factions.

- **Land:** mission compounds were small; the larger issue is **non-tribal traders and plantation capital** behind the Inner Line, not the pastor. Still, a salaried church elite can distance itself from jhum cultivators.
- **The Indian state often reads hill Christianity through security:** Nagaland insurgency, Manipur hill-valley conflict, conversions debates in Arunachal. That reading hides ordinary village Christianity - Sunday school, burial, youth choir - which is now as indigenous as wet-rice.

Xaxa Committee asked that development not treat tribe as a religious problem. **Forest Rights Act** and village councils remain the land tools; church is not a substitute Gram Sabha.

Flow diagram

Mission and revival -> Script school women
Mission and revival -> Tribe as public
Mission and revival -> Custom grove split
Tribe as public -> Statehood 371 Inner Line

Conclusion

Christianity in the North-Eastern ST hills built literacy, women's schooling and a political public, and it strained custom, grove and clan. It is now a local tradition among others. Evaluation should follow village land and school, not a census panic about conversion.

Facts & figures

Mizo peace accord 1986

Ended the MNF insurgency and led to statehood; church networks were part of the social background of the settlement.

Article 371A and 371G

Special protections for Nagaland and Mizoram on land, custom and social practice, used by Christian ST majorities as much as by others.

Xaxa Committee 2014

Warned against treating tribal development as a religious contest and restated land, forest and governance as the core.

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