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'Trishul vs Cross': Hindutva, Church, and the politics of secularism in Christian-majority states of North-east India

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Abstract

Between 2014 and 2022, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) made a determined bid to establish its electoral and discursive dominance in regions beyond its traditional strongholds in Northern and Western India. In the North-east, in the Christian-majority states of Mizoram, Meghalaya, and Nagaland, it encountered fierce hostility from the Church which exercised a hegemonic control over the religious, social, and political life in these states. This article focuses on the political tussle between the BJP and the Church in this time period and attempts to explore the deeper ideological contestations and competing narratives underlying this struggle and their implications for the Indian political discourse. These include contestations over the very conceptualization of secular democracy in India and the role of religion in it; different understandings of religious conversions and freedom of conscience; and the conflicting agendas around the categories of 'tribe', 'indigenous people'/'adivasi', and 'janjati'/'vanvasi'.

Keywords: Secularism; Religion; Hindutva; Electoral politics; Identity

Following its victory in the 2014 general elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) embarked upon a project of establishing its discursive dominance in India through an overarching grand narrative of nationalism whose key elements were development, national power, and Hindutva.[1] By adroitly combining the constitutional and the contentious, the party posed a formidable ideological challenge to earlier ideas and values. The party's ideological ascendancy, combined with impressive electoral successes, was successful in crafting a new hegemony in much of India. But as Palshikar[2] argues, it faced significant challenges in India's 'geographic peripheries' such as Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Kashmir, and the North-eastern states.

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[1]S. Palshikar, 'Toward hegemony: The BJP beyond electoral dominance', in *Majoritarian state: How Hindu nationalism is changing India*, (eds) A. P. Chatterji et al. (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2019), p. 105.

[2]Ibid., p. 214.

India's North-east, a distinct region bounded on all sides by foreign countries, is connected to the rest of the country only by a narrow corridor. In 2022, it comprised eight states, each with its own mix of distinctive culture, traditions, languages, history, and religious and ethnic composition. However, all of them suffered from similar developmental and connectivity challenges as well as illegal immigration from Bangladesh, insider-outsider problems, and ethnic conflicts accompanied with demands for autonomous/separate ethnic homelands resulting in the region's 'durable disorder'.[3]

The BJP was a marginal player in most of the North-east till the 2014 parliamentary elections. But after the elections, it saw a marked rise in its vote-share in state assembly elections in all these states except Sikkim, an exceptional state in the region as well as in the country, where politics had traditionally been dominated only by regional parties since its merger with India in 1975 (see Table 1). It owed this success largely to its two-pronged strategy involving both governmental performance and astute political manoeuvres. There was, on one hand, a fast-tracking of infrastructural and developmental projects, a more efficient delivery of public services and promises of 'corruption-free good governance'; and on the other, crafting of strategic alliances with regional parties, poaching of leaders from other parties, and regular visits and rallies by the Prime Minister Modi and other national leaders. The Modi government's 'Act East Policy', which envisaged this region as a land bridge between India and South-East Asia, and its ambitious focus on the long-standing problem of connectivity to effect what Modi calls 'transformation by transportation'[4], enhanced the party's acceptability among the people of the region. The party also benefitted from the grassroots work being done in various fields in the region for many decades by its ideological parent, the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS), and its allied organizations (collectively known in India as the *Sangh Parivar* or the *Sangh* Family). A major turning point for the BJP was the formation in 2016 of North East Democratic Alliance (NEDA), a partnership with regional political parties, facilitated by the fact that the contemporary politics in the region, unlike in the post- independence period, was no longer marked by antagonism towards the Indian state but rather by competition among various groups for 'privileged relations with that state and access to its resources'.[5] For the BJP, such an alliance helped it expand beyond its traditional bastions and also furthered its agenda of making India 'Congress-*mukt*' (Congress-free) by ensuring that the Congress party was kept away from power such as in Meghalaya where the BJP with just 2 seats became part of the ruling coalition while the Congress with the largest number of seats was relegated to the opposition benches. Even in Sikkim, where the two dominant regional parties together polled more than 98 per cent of votes in 2014 assembly elections and 95 per cent in 2019, the BJP after the 2019 assembly polls took in defectors from one party and

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[3]S. Baruah, *Durable disorder: Understanding the politics of Northeast India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[4]ANI (Asian News International), 'Modi unveils vision for northeast: Transformation by transportation', *The Week*, 22 February 2018, available at https://www.theweek.in/news/india/2018/02/22/modi-unveils-vision-northeast-transformation-transportation.html, [accessed 10 February 2022].

[5]Jelle J. P. Wouters (ed.), 'Introduction', in *Vernacular politics in Northeast India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 6.

Table 1: BJP's Electoral Performance in Assembly Elections Pre-2014 and Post-2014

State	Pre−2014			Post−2014		
	Year	Vote Per Cent	Seats	Year	Vote Per Cent	Seats
Arunachal Pradesh	2014	31	11	2019	50.8	41
Assam	2011	11.5	5	2016	29.5	60
Manipur	2012	2.1	0	2017	36.3	21
Meghalaya	2013	1.3	0	2018	9.6	2
Mizoram	2013	0.37	0	2018	8.04	1
Nagaland	2013	1.8	1	2018	15.3	12
Tripura	2013	1.5	0	2018	43	35
Sikkim	2014	1.4	0	2019	1.6	0

Source: Data from Election Commission of India (eci.gov.in).

then formally joined the other in the government, leaving just one opposition member in the state assembly.

Even so, as Table 1 shows, compared with Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, and Tripura, the party's gains were much less impressive in Mizoram, Meghalaya, and Nagaland. This difference could be explained by the presence of relatively stronger regional leaders and parties in these three states but a more compelling explanation might be that the overwhelming majority of people in Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland were Christian (see Table 2) and the Church dominated the civil society and the government in these states in a manner not very different from established churches in pre-modern Europe. As a result, these states, often called 'Christian states', presented a similar challenge to the Hindu nationalist BJP even though there were significant political and cultural differences among them. While the oldest separatist movement in the region continued to defy a 'final' settlement in Nagaland despite protracted negotiations, an accord in 1986 brought peace to Mizoram even as ethnic tensions persisted as smaller groups resisted assimilation into the dominant 'Mizo' identity.[6] Meghalaya, on the other hand, was dominated by three matrilineal 'tribes' (Khasi, Garo, Jaintia) and political mobilization here mostly invoked cleavages such as 'tribal' vs 'non-tribal', 'indigenous tribal' vs 'non-indigenous tribal', and Garo vs Khasi.[7]

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[6]Roluahpula, 'Unsettled autonomy: Ethnicity, tribes and subnational politics in Mizoram, North-east India', *Nations and Nationalism*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2021, pp. 412–426; Also see N. K. Das, 'Sovereignty question and cultural discourse: Interrogating Indo-Naga Framework Agreement in relation to Naga Movement', *Explorations ISS*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2018, pp. 39–69; S. Thakur and R. Venugopal, 'Parallel governance and political order in contested territory: Evidence from the Indo-Naga ceasefire', *Asian Security*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2018, pp. 1–19.

[7]C. Guenauer, 'Diversity and difference: The art of electioneering in Meghalaya', in *Geographies of difference: Explorations in Northeast Indian studies*, (eds) M. Vanenhelsken et al. (New York: Routledge 2018); Duncan McDuie-Ra, 'Embracing or challenging the "Tribe"? Dilemmas in reproducing obligatory pasts in Meghalaya', in *Landscape, culture, and belonging: Writing the history of Northeast India*, (eds) N. Bhattacharya and Joy L. K. Pachau (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 66–88.

Table 2: Percentage of Christians in Total Population in North-east States

State	1901	1951	2001	2011
Arunachal Pradesh	–	–	18.72	30.26
Assam	2.00	3.70	3.74	0.41
Manipur	0.02	11.84	37.31	41.29
Meghalaya	6.16	24.66	70.25	74.59
Mizoram	0.05	90.52	86.97	87.16
Nagaland	0.59	46.05	89.97	87.93
Tripura	0.08	0.82	3.20	4.35
Sikkim	0.23	0.22	6.68	9.91

Source: censusindia.gov.in

Pursuing the same strategy as in other North-east states, the BJP managed to make some inroads into these three states especially among the ethnic and religious minorities, but, unlike other states in the region, here its formidable election machinery and ideological agenda faced active hostility from the Church and its networks which exercised a hegemonic control over the society. This article focuses on this political tussle between the Church and the BJP in these three states between 2014 and 2022 and attempts to explore the ideological contestations and competing narratives and agendas underlying this struggle and their implications for the Indian political discourse.

Church vs BJP

The political involvement of dominant churches in these three states (Presbyterian Church in Mizoram; Baptist Church and Catholic Church in Garo Hills region of Meghalaya; Presbyterian Church and Catholic Church in Khasi Hills and Jaintia Hills regions of Meghalaya; and Baptist Church in Nagaland) ranged from negotiating ceasefires and peace accords with separatists through initiatives such as the Christian Peace Committee in Mizoram, the Forum for Naga Reconciliation, and the Church Leaders Forums in Meghalaya, to issuing and enforcing 'commandments' and 'moral guidelines' during elections and vetting the candidates and manifestos, to demanding laws on issues such as prohibition of liquor, etc. For instance, the Mizoram People's Forum (MPF), formed in 2006 as an election watchdog, worked directly under the dominant Presbyterian Church to enforce a number of rules relating to political campaigning, including electoral promises that parties could make, restrictions on door to door canvassing, number and size of flags and banners to be used, and even allocation of sites for rallies which typically began with Christian prayers. The churchgoing voters were also sensitized about these guidelines and any violation by the parties or voters would lead to 'exemplary punishment'.[8] The Election Commission of India was

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[8]V. Bijukumar, 'Church and political action in Mizoram', in *Politics and religion in India*, (ed.) Narendra Kumar (New Delhi: Routledge, 2020), p. 89.

routinely pressured not to hold polls or counting of ballots on Sundays and in the run up to the 2018 assembly elections, it was even forced, through street protests and threats, to remove the state's Chief Electoral Officer as punishment for transferring a Mizo officer out of the state for allegedly undermining voting arrangements meant for the displaced Bru people.[9] The Nagaland Baptist Churches Council (NBCC) with its 'clean elections' programme and the Garo Baptist Convention in Meghalaya played a similar role in their respective states. During the 2013 Nagaland Assembly elections, the NBCC even requested pastors to be present at the polling booths to offer prayers before the start of polling to discourage 'corrupt' practices.[10]

Such political engagement was in addition to the Church's active propagation of religious and moral values and dominance in the areas of education, health, youth and women's organizations, and social services such as old age homes and drug de-addiction centres.[11] It also took upon itself the role of defining and protecting heavily Christianized 'ethnic' identity and culture even though the ethnic identity and the Christian identity, at times, conflicted with each other as in the yearly Hornbill Festival in Nagaland.[12] As Singh puts it, the dominant churches 'don both religious and political colours' and 'like chameleons' seamlessly moved from one domain to the other.[13]

The Church justified its role in politics to the faithful through Biblical verses and 'political awareness' campaigns such as '*Ram chu Lalpa ta ani*' (Land belongs to God).[14] However, as Bijukumar[15] argues, the legitimacy for the Church's political activism came from its religious authority and it, therefore, established an 'ecclesial citizenship' in parallel to the political citizenship, making the Church a 'state within a state'—a position which was further enforced by the fact that while the 'tribals' were exempted from paying income tax to the Indian Government, the Church collected one-tenth of their income as tithes.[16] Such intertwining of religion and state also marginalized religious minorities. In Mizoram, the ethnic and religious 'others'—the Brus, the Hmar, the Chakmas, and the Gorkhalis—had to face systematic persecution ranging from

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[9]R. Karmakar, 'Mizoram NGOs want Chief Electoral Officer removed', *The Hindu*, 6 November 2018, available at https://www.thehindu.com/elections/mizoram-assembly-elections-2018/mizoram-ngos-want-chief-electoral-officer-removed/article25434198.ece, [accessed 20 July 2022].

[10]N. Mitra, 'Churches preach moral values to ensure clean polls in Nagaland', *The Times of India*, 29 January 2013, available at https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/Churches-preach-moral-values-to-ensure-clean-polls-in-Nagaland/articleshow/18232444.cms, [accessed 18 July 2021].

[11]H. Zohmingwaia, 'Social capital and religion: The contribution of Church in Mizoram', *SJMS*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2020, pp. 59–68; Joy L. K. Pachuau, *Being Mizo: Identity and belonging in Northeast India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014); L. Bhatia, 'Contradiction and change in Mizo Church', in *Margins of faith: Dalit and tribal Christianity in India*, (eds) R. Robinson and J. M. Kajur (New Delhi: Sage, 2010); M. Oppitz et al. (eds), *Naga identities: Changing local cultures in Northeast India* (Gent: Snoeck Publishers, 2008).

[12]T. Keditsu, 'Prohibition and Naga cultural identity: Cultural politics of Hornbill Festival, Nagaland', *SubVersions: A Journal of Emerging Research in Media and Cultural Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2014, pp. 22–34; A. Longkumer, 'Who sings for the hornbill? The performance and politics of culture in Northeast India', *The South Asianist*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2013, pp. 87–96.

[13]N. William Singh, 'Politics of divine edict and reverse secularism', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 47, no. 5, 2012, p. 23.

[14]R. S. Khawbung, 'Demystifying secularism in contemporary State of Mizoram', *Senhri Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2018, p. 25.

[15]Bijukumar, 'Church and political action', p. 89.

[16]Singh, 'Politics of divine edict', p. 24.

denial of seats in professional colleges to physical violence and, in the case of the Bru, even ethnic cleansing and forced displacement to refugee camps in the neighbouring Tripura.[17] The Young Mizo Association (YMA), created by the Church to replace the traditional youth dormitory (*zawlbuk*) to promote 'good Christian life', had been in the forefront of campaigns against non-Mizos, from serving Quit Mizoram Notices to carrying out their headcounts, demanding deletion of their names from electoral rolls, and even protesting against the displaced Bru exercising their franchise through postal ballots from Tripura.[18] 'Those who refuse to convert to Christianity … are conveniently turned into a common enemy'.[19] The Gorkhalis, most of whom were Hindu, lacked even a cremation site and had been demanding it since many decades, forcing the poor among them to bury their dead in nearby cemeteries.[20] Similarly in Meghalaya, the predominantly Hindu minor tribes of Hajong, Koch, Rabha, Boro-Kachari, and Mann complained of being excluded and made to feel 'unwanted' due to 'tribal majoritarianism'.[21] The hegemony of dominant churches was such that churches of other Christian denominations were also routinely destroyed and their adherents were often expelled from villages.[22] Within the evangelical Church itself, since it lacked the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church, pastors were splintered along tribal lines and they, at times, added to ethnic conflicts and tensions by 'reaching into a mythical past for justification of essential differences between tribes', despite attempts at creating a unified Christian community.[23]

In such a situation, the BJP's victory in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections was followed by growing friction between it and the Church in these states over a number of issues, such as appointment of long-time workers of RSS as Governors, use of a *Bharat Mata* (Mother India) image by Nagaland Governor P. B. Acharya in an official Republic Day brochure in 2015, rumours of beef bans and of alleged moves to delete the term 'secular' from the Preamble to the Constitution, declaration of 25 December as Good Governance Day to commemorate former Prime Minister Vajpayee's birth anniversary, etc. The party's plan to immerse the ashes of the former Prime Minister Vajpayee after his cremation in Nagaland's biggest river Doyang was condemned by the NBCC as an insult to their way of life and its venue had to be shifted to an unnamed river due

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[17]Bijukumar, 'Church and political action', p. 92; S. Mazumdar, 'Brus (Reangs) in Mizoram: The unresolved crises', *Refugee Watch*, vol. 47, 2016, pp. 71–81; Paritosh Chakma, 'Mizoram: Minority report', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 44, no. 23, 2009, pp. 20–21.

[18]Bijukumar, 'Church and political action', p. 91; Also see N. William Singh, 'Quit Mizoram notices: Fear of the other', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 49, no. 25, 2014.

[19]S. B. Chakma and S. Gogoi, 'The Bru-Mizo conflict in Mizoram', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 53, no. 44, 2018, p. 59.

[20]N. William Singh, 'The Gorkhalis of Mizoram', *Himal South Asian*, 8 August 2012, available at https://www.himalmag.com/gorkhalis-mizoram/, [accessed 14 August 2021].

[21]*Northeast Today*, 'Unrepresented tribes and the politics of exclusion in Meghalaya', 6 December 2019, available at https://www.northeasttoday.in/2019/12/06/unrepresented-tribes-and-the-politics-of-exclusion-in-meghalaya/, [accessed 23 July 2021].

[22]Abraham Lotha, *The paradox of religious nationalism in the production of Naga identity*. Paper presented at a Workshop in Gottingen University 2011.

[23]S. Fernandes, 'Ethnicity, civil society and the Church: The politics of evangelical Christianity in Northeast India', in *Evangelical Christianity and democracy in Asia*, (ed.) D. H. Lumsdaine (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 144.

to protests, even though a similar event in Mizoram met with no opposition.[24] The Church was particularly concerned about the promotion of yoga through celebrations of *Yoga* Day and *yoga* guru Baba Ramdev's visits to set up his *Patanjali* Institutes in these states. In Nagaland, the NBCC periodically issued circulars directing the believers to refrain from *yoga* citing its roots in Hinduism which made it contrary to Christianity. In Mizoram, the state government either did not celebrate the *Yoga* Day (as in 2018) or kept it very low key. The fear seemed to be that if *yoga* 'heals', then this could sow seeds of doubt in the minds of local Christians and make them wonder 'was it the Christian god or the Hindu god' and they 'will start developing a soft corner' for the Hindus, which was 'how hinduising starts'.[25]

Unsurprisingly, therefore, the Church during the 2018 assembly elections in these three states came out openly to impose a 'Church veto' against the BJP, prompting the media to label the contest as '*Trishul* vs Cross'. In Nagaland, the NBCC issued an open letter appealing to the politicians and the voters not to 'surrender' their Christian principles and faith 'for the sake of money and development into the hands of those who seek to pierce the heart of Jesus Christ to bleed and allow God to weep'.[26] On the Sunday before the polling day, special prayers were held in 2500 churches across the state 'for wisdom to vote wisely'.[27] A BJP candidate was expelled by his church, even as no such action was taken against those who had joined other political parties. The Meghalaya churches, too, appealed to the voters to elect 'right candidates' while expressing apprehensions about beef bans, restrictions on foreign funding, and the denial of a visa to Paul Msiza, President of the Baptist World Alliance, to attend an event to celebrate 150 years of the Baptist Church in Meghalaya.[28]

These fears were further fanned by other regional parties as well as the 'secular' national parties. The Congress manifesto for Nagaland tried to appeal to Christian sensibilities by repeatedly referring to the BJP and the RSS as 'devilish' and 'evil'.[29] The Naga People's Front (NPF) called upon the voters to reject the BJP 'to protect the Christian faith, culture and identity', even though it had been in an alliance with the

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[24]R. Karmakar, 'After protests, Vajpayee's ashes immersed in Nagaland's unnamed river', *The Hindu*, 27 August 2018, available at https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/after-protests-vajpayees-ashes-immersed-in-unnamed-river-in-nagaland/article61499804.ece, [accessed 23 July 2021].

[25]A Christian pastor quoted in A. Longkumer, '"Nagas can't sit lotus style": Baba Ramdev, Patanjali, and Neo-Hindutva', *Contemporary South Asia*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2018, p. 412.

[26]*The Naga Republic*, 'An appeal letter written by NBCC General Secretary to all the political parties in Nagaland', 9 February 2018, available at https://www.thenagarepublic.com/files/appeal-letter-written-nbcc-general-secretary-political-party-presidents-nagaland/, [accessed 20 July 2021].

[27]M. Bannerjee, 'Ahead of polls, why the Church is jittery in Christian-majority Nagaland', *NDTV*, 14 February 2018, available at https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/ahead-of-polls-why-the-church-is-jittery-in-christian-majority-nagaland-1812716, [accessed 15 July 2021].

[28]Baniateilang Majaw, 'Meghalaya Polls: not just political but religious battle, too', *The Deccan Herald*, 23 February 2018, available at https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/panorama/meghalaya-polls-not-just-political-but-religious-battle-too-642067.html, [accessed 2 August 2021].

[29]*Financial Express*, 'Nagaland elections: BJP offers free Jerusalem trips to voters, check what Congress offers', 17 February 2018, available at https://www.financialexpress.com/elections/nagaland-assembly-elections-2018/nagaland-election-2018-bjp-offers-free-jerusalem-trip-to-voters-check-congress-counter-offer/1069597/, [accessed 25 July 2021].

BJP for nearly 15 years, until its split in 2017.[30] 'Once the Congress comes to power, the church will become strong and soon India will become a Christian country. All heathens will then follow the path shown by the lord', Nagaland Congress vice president Khutovi Sema reportedly told a gathering in the presence of a party central observer.[31] The Congress in Meghalaya labelled parties allying with the BJP as 'Judas' for betraying Congress and the Christians and appealed to voters not to sell their soul to the devil.[32]

The BJP's response to such attacks was to project itself as 'a secular party that encompasses but also moves beyond exclusively "Hindu" sentiments'.[33] This secular presentation could be seen in the party's Nagaland manifesto, in which it described itself as 'a pro-people, people-centric pro-active development centred secular party' with its ideology of Integral Humanism based on 'the harmonious coexistence of all communities and faiths within the country and with the global community'.[34] As evidence, it promised to send for free groups of 50 (to be chosen by a lucky draw) of senior Christian pilgrims to Jerusalem to match the Congress promise of a subsidy for such pilgrimages. In Meghalaya, the BJP made the Union Minister K. J. Alphons, a Christian from Kerala, as poll in-charge to play down its anti-Christian image, repeatedly reassured the people that beef would not be banned in the state, and even offered development funds to Christian institutions which were publicly rebuffed by them. In Mizoram, the party leaders had to repeatedly emphasize their Mizo Christian identity and reiterate the party's commitment to Article 371G which conferred special protection to the state. To placate the Church which supported prohibition of liquor, BJP promised, if elected, to ban sale of all liquor produced outside Mizoram while allowing the locally made liquor for economic reasons.

Following the elections, for the first time since Mizoram gained statehood in 1987, there was a Bible reading, Christian prayer, and devotional singing in the swearing-in ceremony of the new government. Instead of protesting against this clear violation of secular norms, the BJP put in more effort to change its image and build good relations with the Church through a number of initiatives such as forming a 'missionary cell' with a 24×7 helpline to help Mizo missionaries in distress anywhere in the country, building the state's highest cross, free trips to the Holy Land, etc.

Church and Hindutva in North-east India: Underlying Contestations and Narratives

Elections in the region generally were all about local issues, clan and tribal rivalries and contests over status, land, and property and not about parties, manifestos, and

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[30]See, '2018 Assembly election: Campaign trails', *Nagaland Post*, 19 February 2018, available at https://nagalandpost.com/index.php/2018-assembly-election-campaign-trails/, [accessed 19 July 2021].

[31]As quoted in J. Mazumdar, 'BJP battling vicious communal campaign launched by the Church and Congress in Nagaland', *Swarajya*, 25 February 2018, available at https://swarajyamag.com/politics/bjp-battling-vicious-communal-campaign-launched-by-the-church-and-congress-in-nagaland, [accessed 26 July 2021].

[32]Majaw, 'Meghalaya polls'.

[33]A. Longkumer, 'Playing the waiting game: The BJP, Hindutva, and the Northeast', in *Majoritarian state: How Hindu nationalism is changing India*, (eds) A. P. Chatterji et al. (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2019), p. 291.

[34]*Financial Express*, 'Nagaland election'.

ideologies.[35] However, deeper ideological contestations and conflicting narratives and agendas underlay this political struggle between the BJP and the Church in the region which might have significant implications for the national political discourse as well. It could be analysed as a struggle for hegemony and the critical sites where these contestations were happening include the very conceptualization of secular democracy in India and the role of religion in it; the meaning of religious conversions and the freedom of conscience; and the legitimization/delegitimization of particular categories as loci for identity-formation and political mobilization by local communities. This struggle involved not just the BJP, which as a political party functioned under many legal and political constraints, but the entire *Sangh Parivar* whose grassroots work in various spheres by highly motivated volunteers played a crucial role in creating an ideological support base for the BJP in the region and elsewhere in India.

Religion, secularism, and democracy: Shifting perspectives

Analysing census and other data, Lankina and Getachew try to explain sub-national variations in democratic governance and development in India in terms of human capital legacy of colonial era missionaries, especially in the field of literacy.[36] However, as Jean and John argue, an integral part of this 'evangelical enterprise was the effort to reform the indigenous world: to inculcate in it the hegemonic signs and practices—the spatial, linguistic, ritual, and political *forms*—of European culture'.[37] Using Christian concepts to define religion, the European colonists and missionary ethnographers separated 'religion' of the colonized from their culture and political economy and created new categories of 'world religions' and 'tribes' having 'no religion'/'animism' to describe non-European traditions while simultaneously ranking them in a hierarchical system with modern Western Christianity occupying the apex.[38] For example, the Hindu 'religion', according to Monier-Williams, contained many 'root-ideas' which underlie all religions but as 'distorted, perverted, caricatured, and buried under superstition, error and idolatory' while these ideas 'find their only true expression and fulfilment—their only complete satisfaction—in Christianity'.[39] With Enlightenment, Christianity was attacked but also 'glorified' as the religious formation most aligned with modernity and secularism.[40] The 'secular-religion divide', argues

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[35] Jelle J. P. Wouters, 'Polythetic democracy: Tribal elections, bogus votes, and political imagination in the Naga uplands of Northeast India', *Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2015, pp. 121–151.

[36] T. Lankina and L. Getachew, 'Mission or empire, word or sword? The human capital legacy in postcolonial democratic development', *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 56, no. 2, 2012, pp. 465–483.

[37] Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of revelation and revolution: Christianity, colonialism, and consciousness in South Africa, Vol. I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 311.

[38] G. Fitzgerald, 'Introduction to decoloniality and the study of religion', *Contending modernities*, 24 February 2020, available at https://contendingmodernities.nd.edu/decoloniality/introdecolonial/, [accessed on 21 July 2021]; David Chidester, *Empire of religion: Imperialism and comparative religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); Tomoko Masuzawa, *The invention of world religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

[39] Monier Monier-Williams, *Modern India and the Indians* (London: Trubner and co., 1879), p. 234.

[40] Nelson Maldonado-Torres, 'Secularism and religion in the modern/colonial world system: From secular postcoloniality to postsecular transmodernity', in *Coloniality at large*, (eds) M. Morana et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 370.

Maldonado-Torres, in many ways replicated the earlier 'Christian-pagan divide' and helped continue 'the logics of imperial Christendom'.[41] Thus, in colonial India, conversion to Christianity was framed as a conversion to modernity by situating Christianity 'beyond religion' as modern and rational in contrast to the 'superstitious' and 'backward' Hindu 'religion', forcing the Hindu intellectuals to counter this by efforts to 'make Christianity religious' and, in that sense, equivalent to Indian religions.[42] Even after independence the ex-colonies continued to suffer from a 'coloniality of power' defined in terms of the social, political, economic, spiritual, and epistemic Eurocentrism that dominated all dimensions of life.[43] Consequently, in developing countries, a positive impact of 'evangelical political activism' was posited on democratization and democratic politics.[44] In post-colonial India, in the case of the Catholic Church also, it was argued that the Church articulated 'a secular, even radical politics as its primary mode of religious engagement', thus making its political activism 'compatible with democracy, citizenship, and even secularism'.[45]

It is in this context that one could understand the NBCC asking BJP 'to declare itself a secular party', even as it itself dominated both the government and the social life in Nagaland.[46] It also explained why the Church's election 'commandments' were regarded positively by most scholars, government officials including electoral officers, and the national media. Debates on secularism in India hardly ever took into account this phenomenon which Singh calls 'reverse secularism' and which, he argues, resembled 'the church's role in eighteenth century Europe when religious doctrine got mixed up with political administration'.[47]

The Hindutva ideologues had for long been critical of 'Nehruvian secularism' for keeping Hindus divided while appeasing minorities and allowing their consolidation as vote banks, thus preventing their 'integration with the national mainstream'.[48] Rejecting it as 'pseudo- secularism' they championed instead uniform civil code and 'positive secularism' which would ensure equal rights to all but not 'appease' any group. Lately, the critique also took a 'decolonial' turn with efforts to show how the parameters of discourse on secularism and religion in India had been shaped

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[41]Ibid., p. 382.

[42]H. Israel and J. Zavos, 'Narratives of transformation: Religious conversion and Indian traditions of "life writing"', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2018, pp. 356.

[43]Anibal Quijano, 'Coloniality of power, eurocentrism, and Latin America', *Nepantla: Views from South*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2000, pp. 533–580; R. Grosfoguel, 'Decolonizing post-colonial studies and paradigms of political economy: Transmodernity, decolonial thinking, and global coloniality', *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2011.

[44]D. H. Lumsdaine, 'Evangelical Christianity and democratic pluralism in Asia: An introduction', in *Evangelical Christianity and democracy in Asia*, (ed.) D. H. Lumsdaine (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 10.

[45]Aparna Sundar, 'Thinking beyond secularism: The Catholic Church and political practice in rural South India'. *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, 2012, p. 1, available at https://isidore.science/document/10.4000/samaj.3368, [accessed 20 February 2022].

[46]K. Acharyya, 'Ahead of polls, Nagaland Baptist Church Council says BJP must declare itself secular, answer questions on Hindutva', *Firstpost*, 22 February 2018, available at https://www.firstpost.com/politics/ahead-of-polls-nagaland-baptist-church-council-says-bjp-must-declare-itself-secular-answer-questions-on-hindutva-4362485.html, [accessed 20 July 2021].

[47]Singh, 'Politics of divine edict', p. 23.

[48]J. Nandakumar, *Hindutva for the changing times* (New Delhi: Indus Scrolls Press, 2019), p. 10.

by European coloniality founded on 'Christian onto-epistemology and theology' and which continued to subvert the 'Indic consciousness' even after decolonization.[49] At the same time, Hindutva was being positioned as 'Hindu modernity' which stood not for a Hindu theocratic state or social orthodoxy but for a modern industrial economy and a democratic state based on equality, individual rights, freedom of speech, and religion.[50] Although the State or *Rajya* was not Hindu, the nation or *Rashtra* was Hindu or united by Hindutva or 'Hinduness', defined as 'a way of life people practise in India' which recognized 'the divinity within each human being' but also accepted that religion was a 'personal matter'.[51] Secularism in such a framework had become irrelevant, argues the senior RSS ideologue J. Nandakumar in a recent interview,[52] as the nation had moved 'way beyond secularism' since it believed in universal acceptance rather than the Western concept of tolerance. As Arvind Sharma puts it, 'while mainstream Hinduism tries to *modernise Hinduism*, Hindutva tries to *Hinduise modernity*'.[53] It could be understood as a renewed project to 'make Christianity religious' while situating Hindutva 'beyond religion' as the distinctive onto-epistemological framework of all Indians regardless of religious affiliation.

Religious conversions: Different frameworks

According to Ngursangzeli and Biehl, 'following the legacy of missionaries who evangelized and planted churches in the region', the churches in the North-east were very 'mission-minded and set the task of evangelisation as one of their priorities'.[54] Even the separatists in Nagaland engaged in proselytization activities, reproducing the rhetoric of 'civilizing mission' without attempting any critique of the colonial past of the Christian Mission or grappling with the inherent contradiction between their professions of support for the unique Naga culture and its radical disruption and refashioning by the American Baptists in accordance with their own standards and values.[55] In fact, the vision which motivated them and the Church was the establishment

[49]J. Sai Deepak, *India that is Bharat: Coloniality, civilisation, constitution* (New Delhi: Bloomsbury India, 2021).

[50]Abhinav Prakash Singh, 'Hindutva is Hindu modernity', *The Hindustan Times*, 31 August 2021, available at   https://www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/hindutva-is-hindu-modernity-101630406266372.html, [accessed 22 February 2022].

[51]Arun Anand, 'Dharma, Hinduness, Rashtra – A glossary on Hindutva-Hinduism debate & what it means for RSS', *The Print*, 18 November 2021, available at https://theprint.in/india/dharma- hinduness-rashtra-a-glossary-on-hindutva-hinduism-debate-what-it-means-for-rss/767275/, [accessed 3 February 2022].

[52]A. Banerjee, 'Secular a western concept, not needed in constitution: RSS leader', *The Quint*, 4 January 2020, available at https://www.thequint.com/news/politics/secular-a-western-word-dont-need-in-constitution-rss-leader-j-nandakumar, [accessed 3 February 2022].

[53]Arvind Sharma, 'Dharma files: Mainstream Hinduism aims to modernize Hinduism but Hindutva tries to Hinduise modernity', *Firstpost*, 28 November 2021, available at https://www.firstpost.com/india/dharma-filesmainstream-hinduism-aims-to-modernise-hinduism- but-hindutva-tries-to-hinduise-modernity-10171371.html, [accessed 3 February 2022].

[54]M. Ngursangzeli and M. Biehl (eds), 'Editorial introduction', in *Witnessing to Christ in North-East India* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2016), p. 2.

[55]John Thomas, *Evangelising the nation: Religion and the formation of Naga political identity* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2016), p. 125.

of an independent Christian state whose God-given task would be to 'export the Word' to the neighbouring non-Christian countries as part of a cosmic design.[56] It showed the dominance of a more fundamentalist version of Christianity, often backed by resources from the USA and East Asia, over other ways of doing theology.[57] Similarly, in Mizoram, the 'Western evangelical exclusive theology' dominated and the focus of the Mission remained on 'conversions, saving souls, and church planting'.[58] For this reason, even the BJP state unit of Mizoram chose to set up a 'missionary cell' to help any Mizo Christian missionary in distress in any part of India in order to build a relationship with the Church. Given the RSS's hostility to missionary work, the move confounded both the Church as well as the party's traditional supporters. While some Christian groups saw it as an attempt to collect data on missionaries or to undermine the unity of the Church in the region, some Hindu Right groups apprehended a creeping 'minorityism' in the party and dilution of its core ideology.

The fear of foreign intervention through Christianity undermining Indian nationalism and territorial integrity in North-east India was not limited to Hindutva groups but was shared by Nehru and many other Indian nationalists as well.[59] The former, however, understood the threat from Christianity (and Islam) at a much deeper level as severing the converts from their cultural roots in Hindutva or the distinct way of life and outlook of the people of Bharat in which, according to the highly influential RSS ideologue, diversity was not perceived as difference but as merely outwardly different life forms in which one Spirit (*Chaitanya*) manifested.[60] Hindutva, according to this view, was not a religion but an ethico-spiritual worldview which held that the goal of every soul was to ultimately merge with the Supreme, for which different people might take different paths.[61] Each path was equally valid and none could claim 'exclusive possession of spiritual truth or the only method to reach God; a method or a message can only be one among the many'.[62] In this framework, the indigenous religions of the 'tribals', or *vanvasis* (forest dwellers)/*janjatis* (folk people) as they were referred to by the RSS, are part of this greater civilizational framework or Hindutva and their deities and reverence for nature and mother earth aligned with traditions of sacred geography and *Bhu devi* (Earth goddess) in other parts of the country, all eventually fusing together in veneration of *Bharat Mata* (Mother India). In contrast, the Church and its agencies, Vaidya argues, 'first create disillusion, then opposition, then fragmentation in the society, which would ultimately lead to separatism'.[63] The Hindu nationalists also blamed this proselytization for eliminating indigenous cultural and religious diversities and

[56]Edna Fernandes, *Holy warriors: A journey into the heart of Indian fundamentalism* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2006); A. Longkumer, 'Bible, guns and land: Sovereignty and nationalism amongst the Nagas of India', *Nations and Nationalism*, vol. 24, no. 4, 2018, p. 1110; Lotha, 'The paradox of religious nationalism'.

[57]Thomas, 'Evangelising the nation', p. 185.

[58]Lawmsanga, *A critical study on Christian mission with special reference to Presbyterian Church of Mizoram* [PhD thesis] (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 2010), p. ii.

[59]A. Longkumer, 'The power of persuasion: Hindutva, Christianity, and the discourse of religion and culture in Northeast India', *Religion*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2017, pp. 203–227.

[60]Manmohan Vaidya, 'Striking at the roots', *Organiser*, 23 March 2021.

[61]Ibid.

[62]Nandakumar, 'Hindutva for the changing times', p. 6.

[63]Vaidya, 'Striking at the roots'.

for replacing the indigenous culture of the converted local communities with an inauthentic Western culture based on a disenchanted and exploitative attitude towards nature and hedonistic consumerism.[64]

To counter the Christian missionaries, the RSS set up *Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram* (VKA) in 1952 to work among the 'tribals' in a similar manner and in 1964, on the eve of the visit of Pope Paul VI to India, *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP) was formed to serve as a united front of various Indic traditions against the threat of conversions. Since the 1990s, growing political strength of the Hindu Right combined with more aggressive forms of evangelism deployed by the Pentecostals had turned this competition for conversions and 'reconversions' more intense and even violent particularly in the 'tribal' areas.[65]

In North-east India with its huge diversity, remoteness, and strong Christian missions, the *Sangh Parivar* used '*seva*' conceived in the Hindu tradition as 'selfless service' and consciously promoted by the RSS leaders as superior to other forms of charity as an apolitical framework to establish itself in the region.[66] Its affiliates, such as *Seva Bharati Purvanchal, Vivekananda Kendras, Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, Vidya Bharati, Van Bandhu Parishad, Ekal Vidyalaya*, operated hundreds of schools, hostels, coaching centres, vocational centres, clinics, and medical camps in the region. Since 'healing' had been a major factor in conversions of 'tribals' in India,[67] special focus was given to organizing free medical camps even in remote villages through *Dhanvanthri Seva Yatras* (named after the Hindu god of medicine), training of *Arogyarakshaks* and *Arogyamitras* (healthcare volunteers), providing mobile medical vans, ambulances, and setting up *yoga* centres. The RSS volunteers in their activities emphasized links with the region going back to the epic *Mahabharata* to assert a composite territorial integrity of Bharat and her *sanatan* (eternal) culture and way of life. The BJP and the *Sangh Parivar* had also, since 2014, sought to re-imagine the region as *Ashta Lakshmi* or eight forms of Goddess of Wealth. The term was first used by Modi in an election rally in Manipur in 2014 and had since then been used in numerous political speeches, interviews, and RSS journals as well as official documents including the Presidential address to the Parliament.[68] Another analogy for the region frequently invoked by Modi in his speeches was that of *Ishan Kon* (north-east corner) of a building which in *Vastu Shastra* (traditional Hindu system of architecture) is considered its most auspicious part and absolutely crucial to

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[64]Ram Madhav, *The Hindutva paradigm* (New Delhi: Westland Publications, 2021), p. 157; Longkumer, 'The power of persuasion'.

[65]S. Sahoo, *Pentecostalism and politics of conversion in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Chad M. Bauman, *Pentecostals, proselytization and anti-Christian violence in India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Iris Vandevelde, 'Reconversion to Hinduism: A Hindu nationalist reaction against conversion to Christianity and Islam', *South Asia – Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2011, pp. 31–50; Peggy Froerer, 'Emphasizing "others": The emergence of Hindu nationalism in a central Indian tribal community', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2006, pp. 39–59.

[66]M. Bhattacharjee, 'Building a "Hindu Rashtra" through "Seva"', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 56, no. 3, 2021, pp. 1–10.

[67]David Hardiman, *Missionaries and their medicine: A Christian modernity for tribal India* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008).

[68]P. Kalita, 'Pranab Mukherjee: Northeast country's Ashtalakshmi', *The Times of India*, 1 February 2017, available at https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/pranab-mukherjee-northeast-countrys-ashtalakshmi/articleshow/56902890.cms, [accessed 22 July 2021].

the wellbeing of its inhabitants. Such visualizations not only sought to draw the region into a Hindu religious framework, but also attempted to change the perception of the region in the rest of the country from a remote dependent region to one which was a significant contributor to India's growth and prosperity.

A significant plank of the RSS strategy had been its outreach to many smaller communities in the region and to valorize their specific customs and traditions and their heroes such as Jadonang (1905–1931) and Rani Gaindinliu (1915–1993) of Nagaland, Tirot Sing (1802–1835) of Khasi Hills, and Sambhudan Phonglo (1850–1883) of North Cachar Hills, who had struggled against the British raj. The Heraka movement, led by Jadonang and later Rani Gaidinliu, had been supported by the RSS from the 1980s onwards, as it offered an alternative conception of Naga nationalism based on indigenous Naga culture and religion as opposed to the Naga separatist movement which was heavily suffused with Christianity and Western culture. The Congress, too, used it to exploit the religious (Heraka vs Christianity) and the ethnic (Zeliangs vs the Nagas) divide but it was driven more by electoral calculations, unlike the *Sangh Parivar*'s ideological support for the movement.[69] Rani Gaindinliu had opposed conversions to Christianity for which she was labelled 'a witch, demon possessed, sorcerer, magician and cannibal'.[70] The Zeliangrong Heraka Association, which spearheaded the movement, worked through *Hingdepaupeus* (preachers) to prevent conversions and to motivate their people who had converted to return back to the fold.[71] University chairs and museums were set up in Rani Gaindinliu's name by the BJP government and her birth centenary celebrations in 2015 were inaugurated by Modi himself, despite opposition from many Christian groups who insisted that the traditional Naga religion had nothing to do with Heraka or Hinduism. Similarly in Meghalaya, the RSS helped the Seng Khasi movement of the Khasi and the Lei Synshar Cultural Society (LSCS) in Jaintia Hills and, in Mizoram, the Buddhist Chakmas and the much persecuted Reang-Bru community to counter Christian proselytization.

The ground level work of the RSS and its affiliates in the region could be seen as part of their wider approach of co-opting communities beyond their traditional social base such as the Scheduled Castes, other backward castes, 'tribals' and minorities using a strategy of symbolic inclusion, political representation, and responding to their aspirations for development through social services and targeted programmes.[72] In the North-east states, they worked with communities who had resisted conversions to support them and to preserve their indigenous culture and religions so that they stay within the Indian civilizational framework. For those already converted to 'non-indigenous' religions, RSS volunteers worked to implement a model of 'assimilation' based on an understanding that every citizen of India, irrespective of religion, had a

[69]Subir Bhaumik, 'Ethnicity, ideology and religion: Separatist movements in India's North-east', in *Religious radicalism and security in South Asia*, (eds) S. Limaye et al. (Honolulu: Asia-Pacific Centre for Security Studies, 2004), p. 239; S. Dangmei, 'Tribes in North-east India: mapping the evolving Heraka identity', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2013, pp. 27–30.

[70]A. Niumai, 'Rani Gaidinliu: an iconic woman of Northeast India', *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2018, p. 360.

[71]R. Karmakar, 'Rani Gaidinliu: A Naga queen and BJP's spin machine', *The Hindustan Times*, 14 June 2015, available at https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/rani-gaidinliu-a-naga-queen-and-bjp-s-spin-machine/story-kfQG1IggxU6j4Frs7haBFK.html, [accessed 22 July 2021].

[72]B. Narayan, *Republic of Hindutva* (New Delhi: Penguin/Viking 2021).

common cultural duty to the nation (*rashtra dharma*), to the society (*samaj dharma*), and to one's ancestors (*kula dharma*), which need not interfere with one's personal right to follow any religion of one's choice (*vyakti dharma*).[73] Basically, what was proposed was not conversion to 'Hinduism' but an altogether different solution in which Christianity could continue as a personal belief system but allowed a return to one's ancestral territorial and civilizational roots in matters of culture and national identity.[74] Notably, there were local voices too who had expressed the need to search for their roots and reclaim their traditional culture rather than pursue the 'Euro-American ideas and models' they had adopted as a result of colonization and conversion.[75] Since conversion in Christianity is construed as 'deliberately turning one's life around' and decisively breaking with the past,[76] it was nothing short of demanding a different form of Christianity which was in harmony with the pre-Christian cultural ways of being and living of the converted. In many ways the expectation was for Christians to become 'Hindu-Christian' by accepting, like freedom-fighter and thinker Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (1861–1907) who called himself a 'Catholic-Hindu', that they shared with other Indians 'a particular mental and behaviour orientation to the world, a unitive attitude to life'.[77] Such conversions would be no different from those which often happened between indigenous alternatives in many traditional societies including India and which had been described in the Chinese context as 'additive' or not requiring complete abandonment of old beliefs and involving 'pantheon interchangeability' rather than a radical alteration in one's cosmology or core values.

Thus, Hindutva was deliberately articulated not in terms of any specific scripture or religious dogma but by placing the land and culture of India at its core to co-opt all indigenous faith systems while excluding Christianity and Islam on two grounds: first, as not being faith traditions 'of the soil' and second, as being proselytizing religions making exclusive truth claims. They were to be accepted as personal faiths only which, apart from questions about freedom of religion that it raised, was also problematic given the close relationship between religion and culture since religious concepts, as Geertz puts it, 'spread beyond their specifically metaphysical contexts to provide a framework of general ideas' which greatly shape social-structural and psychological processes.[78] Moreover, despite its propagation as cultural nationalism, on the ground the distinction between culture and religion often got blurred and it became, at times, a religious project engaged in creating a homogeneous Hindu culture to serve a unifying national identity. At the same time, it would not be right to see the people of the region as passively receiving 'a monolithic, outside essence' and not being active

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[73]S. Gurumurthy, 'Guruji's non-conflicting formula for assimilation', *Organiser*, 9 July 2021, available at http://www.organiser.org/guruji-3174.html, [accessed 22 July 2021].

[74]A. Longkumer, 'The power of persuasion'.

[75]Tezenlo Thong, '"To raise the savage to a higher level": The westernization of Nagas and their culture', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 46, no. 4, 2012, pp. 893–918; C. Chasie, 'Nagaland in transition', *India International Centre Quarterly*, vol. 32, no. 2/3, 2005, pp. 253–264.

[76]Richard V. Peace, 'Conflicting understandings of Christian conversion: A missiological challenge'. *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2004, p. 8.

[77]Julius Lipner, 'On "Hindutva" and a "Hindu-Catholic", with a moral for our times', *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1992, p. 7.

[78]Clifford Geertz, *The interpretations of cultures: Selected essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 123.

participants engaged in 'creative adaptation'[79] because the RSS outreach in many ways responded to their aspirations for education, health, and a good life, while maintaining continuity with their traditional religiosity and value systems. Nevertheless, there remained an inherent contradiction between declaring religion as a personal matter and such programmes as '*gharwapasi*' (returning home/reconversion) of *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP). Such activities of the VHP were also politically inconvenient for the BJP as it sought and needed the support of religious minorities to win elections, necessitating arbitration by the RSS to effect behind the scenes compromises between the two organizations.[80]

The conflict over religious conversions, however, went beyond Hindu nationalists and secular liberals and there existed, according to Claerhout and De Roover, a fundamental incompatibility in the understanding of 'propagation' of religion and 'freedom of conscience' between most Indians and that of devout Christians.[81] The majority of Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, and Buddhists, including many Congress leaders and Supreme Court judges, accepted 'propagation' of religion as the *human* dissemination of a tradition's tenets and practices and hence subject to reasonable restrictions to protect the individual's 'freedom of conscience'. For the Christian missionaries, on the other hand, conversion involved the soul and the *divine Grace* or *intervention* of the 'one true God' and, therefore, any restriction on the freedom of conversion amounted to denial of 'freedom of conscience' and a violation of God's will.

'Tribe', 'Adivasi'/'Indigenous people', 'Vanvasi'/Janjati': Competing narratives

Contestations over categorizations such as 'tribal' and 'indigenous people' formed a significant sub-text in the political struggle between the BJP and the Church in the North-east region. Terminologies carry certain assumptions and understandings which structure identities, political mobilizations, and demands as well as the response of the state.

As per the 2011 Census, a very high proportion of the population in Mizoram (94.5 per cent), Nagaland (89.1 per cent), and Meghalaya (85.9 per cent) were classified as Scheduled Tribes (ST), a legal designation that made them eligible for certain preferential policies. The category 'tribe', founded on nineteenth century social evolutionist and race theories by the colonial and missionary ethnographers, has now been widely discredited in anthropology the world over. But in India it retained constitutional validity and wide acceptability in State policies, political mobilizations, social justice movements, 'revival' movements, missionary activism, and academia. The communities themselves had internalized the 'tribal' identity and discourse and demanded autonomy/separation and other special rights on the basis of this 'tribal' difference.[82] The Indian anthropologists had been slow to deconstruct it due to various reasons,

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[79]Richard Eaton, 'Comparative history as world history: Religious conversion in modern India', *Journal of World History*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1997, p. 244.

[80]Walter Anderson and Shridhar D. Damle, *The RSS: a view to the inside* (New Delhi: Penguin 2018), p. 174.

[81]S. Claerhout and J. De Roover, 'Religious freedom and the limits of propagation: Conversion in the Constituent Assembly of India', *Religions*, vol. 10, no. 157, 2019, pp. 1–23.

[82]Sanjukta Dasgupta, 'Imagining the "Tribe" in colonial and post-independence India', *Politeja*, vol. 2, no. 59, 2019, pp. 107–121.

an important one being that it played a crucial role in many 'resistance movements' against the Indian State as well as against efforts to create a larger Hindu unity by the RSS and its affiliates who preferred the more culturally neutral terms '*janjati*' (folk people) and '*vanvasi*' (forest dwellers) instead. This was because the category 'tribe' was constructed in India not in opposition to the 'civilized' European as elsewhere but in opposition to the 'Hindu' as defined by the colonial administrators and Orientalist scholars in terms of 'caste' despite considerable evidence of assimilation.[83] Employing primitivism as an 'imperial ideology of rule', the colonial state separated the 'tribes' from the 'mainstream' 'Hindu' society thus reproducing 'the basic hierarchical logic of the colonizer/colonized divide within the colonized society itself'.[84] In North-east India, communities were further classified as belonging to either plains or hills disregarding their frequent back and forth movements and were 'fixed' in their 'abodes proper' or supposedly natural habitats through a frontier regime.[85] Disrupting their customary interactions, the 'savage' hill 'tribes' were isolated from the 'civilized' plains people by an inner line and ruled indirectly through political agents, spies, and missionaries backed by brutal military means. Despite criticism by the nationalists, the postcolonial Indian State continued with many colonial 'tribal' policies and the colonial ethno-spatial reordering of the region by providing protection and autonomy to groups only within their exclusive 'tribal homelands'. As a result, an escalating politics of ethno-territoriality had been instituted here in which new groups constantly mobilized for ST status, the groups recognized as ST agitated for autonomous councils and Inner Line regulation, and those having these protections demanded full-fledged statehood.[86]

Recent historiography has refuted the 'tribe-caste' binary and has shown it to be a myth founded on colonial racial ethnology with the support of local elites who used it to cement their 'high' status and to claim parity with the Europeans.[87] Drawing on diverse historical sources, historian Sumit Guha argues for understanding pre-colonial South Asian history not in terms of a static changeless society but as a flux where not only did community formation happen simultaneously in the plains, deserts, mountains, valleys, forests, etc. in continuous interaction involving both cooperation and conflict but also where 'neither the composition nor the location of a particular community was fixed'.[88] He calls for discarding the colonial categories 'caste' and

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[83]Carol Upadhya, *Anthropology, Adivasi movements and politics of indigenousness*, Paper presented at The Conference of Indian Sociological Society, December 1996; A. Béteille, 'The concept of tribe with special reference to India', *European Journal of Sociology*, vol. 27, no. 2, 1986, pp. 296–318.

[84]Uday Chandra, 'Liberalism and its other: The politics of primitivism in colonial and postcolonial India', *Law and Society Review*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2013, p. 145.

[85]S. Baruah, 'Politics of territoriality: Indigeneity, itinerancy and rights in North-East India' in *Territorial changes and territorial restructurings in the Himalayas*, (ed.) J. Smajda (Delhi: Centre for Himalayan Studies and Adroit Publishers, 2013), p. 70; Y Jilangamba, 'Frontier regime and colonial rule', in *Landscape, culture, and belonging: Writing the history of Northeast India*, (eds) N. Bhattacharya and Joy L. K. Pachuau (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[86]Baruah, 'Politics of territoriality', p. 73.

[87]Prathama Banerjee, 'Writing the Adivasi: Some historiographical notes', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2016, pp. 1–23; Sumit Guha, *Environment and ethnicity in India 1200–1991* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[88]Sumit Guha, *Environment and ethnicity in India 1200–1991* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 28.

'tribe' and replacing them with a single term (such as *khum*) for all stable hereditary groups as was the norm with indigenous as well as foreign observers before the British rule.[89] In contrast, sociologists such as Virginius Xaxa, chosen by the Congress-led central government to head a high-level committee on 'tribal' communities in 2013, insist that the 'tribes' were 'self-contained units' who lived 'outside of Indian society' until the colonial regime brought them under the same politico-administrative structure as the 'non-tribals' for the first time.[90] As a result, Xaxa argues, the 'tribes' lost their sovereignty to two forms of colonialism, one by the British and the other by the 'non-tribals'/'Hindus' with whom they do not share any 'religious ideas, values, institutions and cultural practices'.[91] This idea of tribal exceptionalism was also entrenched in state classificatory policies due to which demands by local communities for recognition as Scheduled Tribe to access affirmative action programmes led not just to performative 'tribality' but also often resulted in organized efforts to undo hybrid and syncretic identities through 'religious purification programs to eliminate Hindu influence from their contemporary practice'.[92]

Both the Hindu nationalists and the Christian missionaries had critical stakes in these debates and policies. It was their 'representation of caste as a vulnerability of Hindu society' combined with limited success in converting 'upper-caste' Hindus that led the Christian missionaries in the latter half of the nineteenth century to focus on 'lower' castes and 'tribals'.[93] Even after independence, the Christian missionaries continued to assert the radical alterity between 'tribe' and 'caste' to argue that the 'tribals' could not be Hindu and justified their conversion to Christianity as a means to preserve their 'tribal' identity against assimilation into Hindu society at the lowest levels of the caste hierarchy.[94] As opposed to this, the Hindu nationalists rejected the idea of 'tribal' distinctiveness and attempted to assimilate '*vanvasis*' and '*janjatis*' into the larger Hindu identity while claiming to protect their traditional culture and faith and demanded denial of ST status and concomitant advantages to those who had converted to Christianity for abandoning their ancestral beliefs and customs.

The category 'tribal', according to Duncan McDuie-Ra, was 'central' to keeping the North-east states distinct from the rest of India and yet, he cautions against its complete deconstruction calling it 'highly contentious and undesirable (not to mention, dangerous)' as the legitimacy of the constitutional special provisions for the

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[89]Guha, 'States, tribes, castes'.

[90]V. Xaxa, 'Tribes and national identity: Location of exclusion and marginality', *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2016, p. 227.

[91]Ibid., p. 225–227.

[92]T. Middleton, 'States of difference: Refiguring ethnicity and its "crisis" at India's borders', *Political Geography*, vol. 35, 2012, p. 19.

[93]H. Israel and J. Zavos, 'Narratives of transformation: Religious conversion and Indian traditions of "life writing"', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2018, p. 355; Hardiman, 'Missionaries and their medicine'.

[94]F. S. Downs, *History of Christianity in India, Vol. 5, Part 5* (Bangalore: The Church History Association of India, 1992), p. 4; V. Xaxa, 'Tribes, conversion and the Sangha Parivar', *Jnanadeepa*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2000, pp. 23–35.

region especially the Sixth Schedule hinged on this 'tribal' distinctiveness.[95] Instead, he suggests alternative ways of conceptualizing the North-east states while retaining the 'tribal' category, one of which is as *Zomia borderlands* on the lines of Van Schendel and James Scott.[96] The latter work had received much attention in the region in recent years but Scott's distinction between the 'state-resisting' hills people and the 'state-governed' valley subjects had also been critiqued for ultimately reifying the hills-plains binary essentialized by the colonial ethnography and policies.[97] Rather than evading the state as posited by Scott, the hills people could equally be understood as historically engaged in 'deliberate attempts to access state resources' through trade and raids[98] and, in the present, as 'longing for the state, a modernising state that is'.[99]

Indigeneity was somewhat implicitly assumed in the special constitutional provisions for the 'tribal' communities even though no group was recognized as indigenous by the Indian constitution in the North-east or elsewhere. However, in the last few decades the categories 'indigenous people' in North-east India and '*adivasi*' (original settler) in other parts of the country had emerged as critical sites for identity-construction and political mobilization in order to incorporate the tribal movements into the worldwide Indigenous Peoples movement while maintaining the tribe-caste distinction.[100] In North-east India, with the colonial framework of autonomy still in place, the discourse of indigeneity exacerbated ethnic tensions and xenophobic efforts to exclude 'outsiders' or 'settlers' who in most cases were economically and politically weaker than the groups claiming the indigenous status.[101] A recent example was Nagaland government's moves since 2019 to prepare a community-based Register of Indigenous Inhabitants of Nagaland (RIIN) which, once finalized, would not allow any new Indigenous Inhabitant Certificate (issued since 1977 to all permanent residents irrespective of ethnicity as exemption from Inner Line permit and for other benefits) to be issued except to the babies born to the 'indigenous inhabitants'.[102]

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[95]Duncan McDuie-Ra, 'Embracing or challenging the "Tribe"? Dilemmas in reproducing obligatory pasts in Meghalaya', in *Landscape, culture, and belonging: Writing the history of Northeast India*, (eds) N. Bhattacharya and Joy L. K. Pachuau (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 76.

[96]Willem Van Schendel, *The Bengal borderland: Beyond state and nation in South Asia* (London: Anthem Press, 2005); James C. Scott, *The art of not being governed: An anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

[97]N. K. Das, 'Myth of 'ungoverned' uplands and an "acephalous tribe": Reappraising Zomia theory in ethnographic milieu of Northeast India', *IASSI-Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2014, pp. 25–38; Jelle J. P. Wouters (ed.), 'Introduction', in *Vernacular politics in Northeast India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 1–54.

[98]Jelle J. P. Wouters, 'Vernacular politics in Northeast India'.

[99]B. G. Karlsson, 'Evading the state: Ethnicity in Northeast India through the lens of James Scott', *Asian Ethnology*, vol. 72, no. 2, 2013, p. 328.

[100]V. Xaxa, 'Tribes as indigenous people of India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 34, no. 51, 1999, pp. 3589–3595; D. J Rycroft and S. Dasgupta (eds), *The politics of belonging: Being Adivasi* (New York: Routledge, 2011); B. G. Karlsson, 'The social life of categories: Affirmative action and trajectories of the indigenous'. *Focaal*, vol. 65, 2013, pp. 33–41.

[101]H. Srikanth, 'Territoriality, indigeneity and rights in the North-East India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 49, no. 20, 2014, pp. 41–46.

[102]R. Karmakar, 'Why does Nagaland want to draw up a list of all indigenous inhabitants?' *The Hindu*, 7 June 2019, available at https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/nagaland-census-nagaland-want-to-

The concept of indigeneity itself has been criticized as just another way to call some communities 'primitive' based on 'obsolete anthropological notions and a romantic and false ethnographic vision'.[103] Studies have also exposed 'the dark side' of transnational indigeneity activism as it further marginalized the poorest among these communities.[104] More importantly, its applicability in the Indian context with its long history of migrations and assimilation was highly problematic as many such groups claiming this status were relatively recent formations or recent settlers in their present homeland.[105] The Indian Government as well as the *Sangh Parivar* rejected the term insisting that all Indians were indigenous in an effort at forging 'national unity in the guise of collective national indigenousness' which had also been attempted by many African countries where the politics of indigeneity could lead to ethnic frictions and hate.[106] As Karlsson points out, claiming rights on the grounds of indigeneity rests on maintaining a permanent distinctiveness based on self-identification whereas the constitutional provisions for Scheduled Tribes were conceived as temporary measures to assist certain disadvantaged groups, chosen by the state using its own criteria, to 'catch-up with' and eventually integrate with the rest of the population.[107] Moreover, claiming and demanding rights including the right to self-determination under international law as a 'colonised' and 'oppressed' community strengthened separatism especially in North-east India and legitimized Western interference in India's internal matters.[108]

The discourse of indigeneity was, however, actively promoted by the Church, its allied groups, and some NGOs and activists on the ground that internationalization of 'tribal' concerns 'empowered' these groups vis-à-vis the Indian state and other powerful interests. While some middleclass indigeneity activists were engaged in 'a quest for a radical bourgeois self' and authenticity[109] and some understood it as 'strategic essentialism', for the Church its roots went back to the nineteenth century missionaries who saw 'aboriginal tribes' as the original inhabitants of India who had been conquered and driven into forests and mountains by the hypothetical Aryan race.[110] The 'aborigines' as a result, they believed, had retained a child-like innocence and

draw-up-a-list-of-all-indigenous-inhabitants-how-will-the-process-evolve/undefined, [accessed 25 July 2021].

[103] Adam Kuper, 'The return of the native', *Current Anthropology*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2003, p. 395.

[104] Alpa Shah, 'The dark side of indigeneity: Indigenous people, rights and development in India', *History Compass*, vol. 5, no. 6, 2007, p. 1825.

[105] Willem Van Schendel, 'The dangers of belonging: Tribes, indigenous peoples and homelands in South Asia', in *The politics of belonging: Being Adivasi*, (eds) D. J. Rycroft and S. Dasgupta (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 25; J. J. Roy Burman, 'Adivasi: A contentious term to denote tribes as indigenous peoples of India', *Mainstream*, vol. 47, no. 32, 2009; A. Béteille, 'The idea of indigenous people', *Current Anthropology*, vol. 39, no. 2, 1998, pp. 187–192. Crispin Bates, '"Lost innocents and the loss of innocence": Interpreting Adivasi movements in South Asia', in *Indigenous peoples of Asia*, (eds) R. H. Barnes et al. (Michigan: Association of Asian Studies, 1995), pp. 109–119.

[106] Alan Barnard, 'Culture: The indigenous account', in *Shifting perspectives in tribal studies*, (ed.) M. C. Behera (Singapore: Springer, 2019), p. 41.

[107] B. G. Karlsson, 'The social life of categories', p. 37.

[108] Roy Burman, 'Adivasi'.

[109] Uday Chandra, 'Going primitive: The ethics of indigenous rights activism in contemporary Jharkhand', *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, vol. 7, 2013, p. 12.

[110] Guha, 'Environment and ethnicity', p. 10.

purity which made them more open to the Gospel, unlike the 'caste Hindus' with their conservative traditions who resisted conversion. Aboriginality, according to Dasgupta, was 'a powerful trope' which structured the missionary understanding as they sought to convert the 'authentic' aboriginals by separating their distinctive myths and customs from the contaminating 'Hindu' influence which was blamed for any backsliding or failure to convert.[111] The same discourse of difference and oppression continued in more contemporary missionary narratives[112] to delink 'Hinduism' from 'tribal' spiritual traditions even as efforts were made to establish an affinity between them and the Christian faith by selectively representing 'the past in a specific form … a past that conforms to Christian ideals'.[113] In this discourse the nineteenth century Aryan invasion theory was often uncritically reproduced as if it was an established fact even though considerable archaeological evidence had called it into question.[114]

In its efforts to counter these Church narratives and the transnational indigenous rights advocacy networks, the *Sangh Parivar* focused mainly on 'indigenous religions', defined as spiritual traditions and practices rooted in a particular soil through ideas of sacred geography, nature worship, the divine feminine, and Mother Earth to situate 'Hinduism' in this category.[115] For the Hindu nationalists, the country is not just a piece of land or a political state but a sacred mother, 'the One Mother who, through the ages', to borrow the evocative words of Tagore, 'has been nourishing her children from her eternal store of wisdom and truth, preserving them from destruction, drawing them nearer one another, and to Herself'.[116] This sacred mother or *Bharat Mata*, they argued, gave birth to and nurtured the unique culture (Hindutva) and value system (*dharma*) which had come to define the land and the people of Bharat. All citizens of India, irrespective of religion, who tried to live by this 'moral and ethical code and who are proud of their ancestors who successfully traversed the same spiritual landscape since time immemorial', according to the RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat, are 'Hindus'.[117] In this Hindu nationalist framework, following centuries of colonization by foreign minorities (first Islamic and then the British), true independence required addressing certain historical wrongs as well as reassertion and rejuvenation of indigenous culture, values, and way of life. Religion in this understanding was merely a *panth* (sect) or a particular mode of worship which was personal to the individual while *dharma* or the moral values underlying the cultural and spiritual heritage of the land transcended religion

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[111]Sangeeta Dasgupta, '"Heathen aboriginals", "Christian tribes", and "animistic races": Missionary narratives on the Oraons of Chhotanagpur in Colonial India', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 50, no. 2, 2016, p. 455.

[112]See for example, Robert Eric Frykenberg, 'Avarna and Adivasi Christians and missions: A paradigm for understanding Christian movements in India', *International Bulletin of Mission Research*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2009, p. 17.

[113]Lanusangla Tzudir, 'Appropriating the Ao past in a Christian present', in *Landscape, culture, and belonging: Writing the history of Northeast India*, (eds) N Bhattacharya and Joy L. K. Pachuau (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 292.

[114]Kundan Singh, 'Colonial roots of the Aryan invasion/migration theory and the contemporary archaeological evidence in western sources', *Indian Historical Review*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2021, pp. 251–272.

[115]A. Longkumer, *The Greater India experiment: Hindutva and the northeast* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021).

[116]Rabindranath Tagore, *Greater India* (Madras: Everymans Press, 1921), p. 32.

[117]As quoted in Ram Madhav, 'The Hindutva paradigm', p. 251.

and ought to form the basis of social, political, and economic life in India.[118] This line of reasoning was not too far from that advanced by many scholars and indigenous thinkers that the categories 'religion' and 'secular', forged in a particular Christian European context, failed to encapsulate indigenous worldviews and seriously distorted their histories and present realities.[119]

Thus, for the *Sangh Parivar* framing the discourse of Hindutva as a wider all-India indigeneity served both to redefine the categories of 'religion' and 'secular' to incorporate 'indigenous' ideas of sacrality as well as to position Hindus as a global minority seeking to protect their particular way of life from the globally dominant Christianity (and Islam). It also justified a special role for 'Hinduism', being the largest such indigenous tradition, to support not just indigenous traditions in the region but all over the world. To this end, the RSS sought to forge global networks among all 'pagan' communities through its organizations such as the Nagpur-based International Centre for Cultural Studies (ICCS) and the Research Institute of World's Ancient Traditions Cultures and Heritage (RIWATCH), Arunachal Pradesh.

Conclusion

The North-east region, with just 25 seats in the lower House of India's Parliament, received a disproportionately high amount of political and policy attention from the BJP and its government at the centre between 2014 and 2022, including from Prime Minister Modi himself who visited the region more than 30 times. Much more than political calculations or strategic imperatives vis-à-vis China, the region, with its colonial legacy of identity politics, historical marginalization and alienation, separatism, and Christian missionary activities, represented for the BJP a formidable ideological test case for its idea of cultural nationalism. Here, the party's traditional Hindutva concerns such as the Ram Temple, cow protection, uniform civil code, Sanskrit, and so forth, did not resonate with the local population. Therefore, negotiating with the region's endemic issues demanded from the party and the RSS much greater accommodation with and adaptation to local ethnic, linguistic, and religious sensibilities and sentiments even as they sought to systematically subsume these local identities within an overarching narrative of Hindutva. Rather than just a political project, it was a long-term ideological programme to win over the people of the region through development, *seva*, and symbolic encompassment so as to emotionally bind them with the rest of India through a 'national consciousness' based on their understanding of the shared cultural and spiritual legacy of the land.

While the BJP successfully expanded its base in many states in the North-east, in the three 'Christian States', it encountered fierce hostility from the dominant churches which directly through 'edicts' and indirectly, through a variety of affiliated organizations, controlled the public sphere and the government. The party tried to

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[118]Ibid. p. 144.

[119]C. Colorado, 'Reconciliation and the secular', *Social Compass*, vol. 67, no. 1, 2020, pp. 72–85; Chidester, 'Empire of religion'; Richard King, 'Colonialism, Hinduism and the discourse of religion', in *Rethinking religion in India*, (eds) Esther Bloch et al. (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 95–113; Timothy Fitzgerald (ed.), *Religion and the secular: Historical and colonial formations* (London: Routledge, 2007).

present itself as truly 'secular' against the 'communal' attacks of other 'secular' parties and the Church and simultaneously tried to placate the Church through such steps and promises which it had itself labelled as 'minority appeasement' in other parts of the country. In its 2019 manifesto, the BJP, along with promises of 'accelerated development' and 'enhanced connectivity' in the region, made a commitment to the North-eastern states to protect their 'unique linguistic, cultural and social identity'.[120] However, the party's (and the *Sangh Parivar*'s) understanding of this 'cultural and social identity' was, in many ways, fundamentally at odds with that held by the very powerful and well entrenched Church in these three states.

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[120]*Sankalp Patra: Lok Sabha 2019*, BJP, 2019, p. 26, 8 April 2019, available at https://www.bjp.org/manifesto2019, [accessed 25 January 2023].