

Kinnaura

More than 60,000 Kinnaura people inhabit extremely high-altitude locations in the north Indian state of Himachal Pradesh.¹ The Kinnaura are the largest ethnic group in the district that gives them their name—Kinnaur District. The Kinnaura inhabit villages between 5,000 and 6,770 metres (16,400 to 22,200 ft.) above sea level, in an area described as having ‘mountainous topography, cold climate, dense forests, low rainfall and heavy snowfall’.² The Kinnaura people comprise approximately 70 per cent of the total population in the Kinnaur District. They also inhabit part of the Lahaul-Spiti District, ‘from Chauhra to Sangla and north along the Satluj River to Morang and several villages of the upper Ropa River Valley’.³ Small pockets of Kinnaura also reportedly live in the north Indian states of Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir.

The classification of the Kinnaura is complicated. Although the Indian government has granted them status as a Scheduled Tribe, there appear to be at least several different language and people groups within this group called Kinnaura.⁴ The *Ethnologue*, which attempts to list every language in the world, has several listings. In addition to the main Kinnauri language, they

list Bhoti Kinnauri (6,000 speakers), Harijan Kinnauri (6,331) and Chitkuli Kinnauri (1,060).⁵

From a religious standpoint, the Kinnaura are an extremely interesting group. Their territory forms the



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border between the Buddhist and Hindu worlds, and accordingly the Kinnaura’s religious belief is a fusion of the two. They acknowledge their strong links to Hinduism by claiming that they originated in the shadow of Lord Brahma. Another legend says that ‘they have sprung from the toe of Brahma along with the Yakshas’.⁶

Hinduism has gained in popularity in the Kinnaur District in the past few generations, as thousands of Hindus have migrated into north Himachal Pradesh. Previously, Tibetan Buddhism held sway in these remote Himalayan regions. One source notes, ‘Kinnaur is a place of curious coexistence of Hinduism and Mahayanist Buddhism. People embracing Buddhism belong to the Nyingmapa, Dukpa, Kargyutpa, and Gelukpa sects. On entering a Buddhist village, one finds a tomb and *chorten* in various [parts] of the village and also in individual houses, which are meant to ward off evil spirits.’⁷ Many Kinnaura people do not see a conflict in their mixture of faith. If asked whether or not they believe in Hinduism they reply ‘Yes’, and if asked if they follow Buddhism they also reply ‘Yes!’ Many celebrate both Buddhist and Hindu festivals. The Kinnaura also believe and practise animistic rituals in a bid to ward off evil spirits.

The confusion regarding the Hindu-Buddhist mix among the Kinnaura can be seen in figures from the 1981 census, when 31.29 per cent of Kinnaura stated they were Buddhists, compared to 68.71 per cent who said they were Hindus.⁸ This accounts for all Kinnaura people, meaning that not a single person believed in Christ at the time. A recent survey indicated there are now 140 Christians in Kinnaura District,⁹ about 100 of which are from the Kinnaura ethnic group.



Population:

63,000 (2000)
73,500 (2010)
85,700 (2020)

Countries: India

Buddhism: Tibetan

Christians: 100

Overview of the Kinnaura

Other Names: Kinnauri, Kinnara, Kinnaurese, Kinara, Kanawara, Kanaura, Kinnaura Yanuskad, Kanorug Skadd, Lower Kinnauri, Kinori, Kinner, Kanauri, Kanawari, Kanawi, Kunawari, Kunawar, Tibas Skad, Kanorin Skad, Kanaury Anuskad, Koonawure, Melhesti, Milchanang, Milchan, Milchang

Population Sources:
47,913 in India (1981 census)

Language: Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, Himalayish, Tibeto-

Kanauri, Western Himalayish, Kanauri

Dialects: 0

Professing Buddhists: 50%

Practising Buddhists: 30%

Christians: 0.2%

Scripture: Portions 1909

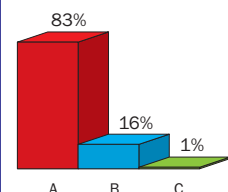
Jesus film: none

Gospel Recordings: none

Christian Broadcasting: none

ROPAL code: KFK

Status of Evangelization



A = Have never heard the gospel
B = Have heard the gospel but have not become Christians
C = Are adherents to some form of Christianity