



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

► ASIA

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate. India, covering 1,269,338 square miles (3,287,590 square kilometers), is roughly one-third the size of the United States. The Himalaya Mountains, the tallest mountain system in the world, are located on India's northern border. South of the Himalayas, the fertile Ganges Plain is India's most densely populated region. The Great Indian (Thar) Desert extends westward from the plain into Pakistan. The Deccan Plateau in the south lies between the Western Ghats and Eastern Ghats, hill regions along the coasts of peninsular India. About half of the country is under cultivation and less than one-fourth is forested.

Most of the country experiences three basic seasons: hot (March–May), rainy (June–October), and cool (November–February). Temperatures rarely go below 40°F (4°C) in January or reach above 100°F (40°C) during the summer. Variations exist according to region and elevation. Floods, droughts, and earthquakes are common.

History. The Indus Valley civilization dates back more than five thousand years. Around 1500 BC, Aryans arrived from central Asia and gradually pushed the native Dravidians southward. Buddhism flourished during King Asoka's reign in the third century BC but declined afterward. The northern Gupta Kingdom, from the fourth to sixth centuries AD, was a golden age of science, literature, and the arts. Southern India also experienced several great empires. Arab, Turk, and Afghan Muslims ruled successively from the eighth to eighteenth centuries, providing some basis for the historical animosity

between Hindus and Muslims. Following Portuguese and Dutch traders, the English eventually assumed political control of the area.

After World War I, Mahatma Gandhi led a continuing nationalist movement, advocating civil disobedience and passive resistance in a campaign to gain autonomy from Great Britain. Gandhi's goal was realized in 1947, when India was granted independence. Religious rivalry and violence led to the establishment of Pakistan as a Muslim state. India became a republic within the British Commonwealth; Jawaharlal Nehru was the first prime minister. Gandhi was assassinated in 1948. Nehru's daughter (Indira Gandhi) was prime minister twice (1966–77, 1980–4). She was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards after Indian troops stormed the Sikhs' Golden Temple in a violent clash with separatists. Recurring violence related to a Sikh movement for independence in Punjab Province subsided by the late 1990s.

Just to the north of Punjab lies Kashmir, India's most disputed and fought over territory. In 1972, Pakistan and India agreed to a cease-fire line now called the Line of Control (LOC), which divides Kashmir. One-third is under Pakistan's control; two-thirds is part of India as Jammu and Kashmir.

After Indira Gandhi's death, the powerful Congress Party gradually weakened in the face of economic troubles, a rise in Hindu fundamentalism, massive corruption, crime, and religious violence. No party won more than one-third of the seats in the 1996 parliamentary elections. The coalition fell apart in

India

1997; new elections were held in 1998. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won, though not with a majority of seats, and formed a coalition government under the direction of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

The BJP, once seen as extremist for its Hindu nationalist ideology, moderated some of its policies and worked to address India's most pressing economic and social concerns. Its nuclear test explosions in 1998 resulted in international condemnation and sanctions, even though India promises not to use nuclear weapons in a first strike. The Congress Party returned to power in May 2004 elections, and Manmohan Singh was appointed prime minister. The economy has grown significantly in recent years, supported by the development of industries such as information technology and manufacturing, but most of the population continues to rely on agriculture.

THE PEOPLE

Population. India has the world's second largest population, behind China, with 1.1 billion residents. The population is growing by 1.6 percent annually. India is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world, with hundreds of linguistic nationalities and hundreds of different castes (tribes) residing in each state. The Indo-Aryan castes comprise 72 percent of the population. Dravidians account for 25 percent. The remaining 3 percent is comprised of a number of other groups. Nationally, castes are assigned to one of four general classes by the government. These include forward classes (FC), backward classes (BC), scheduled castes (SC), and scheduled tribes (ST). Classifications are based on social, historical, and economic criteria. Individuals in each classification might be rich or poor, as class does not necessarily define wealth in today's India, but BCs, SCs, and STs can access affirmative action programs that reserve jobs, scholarships, and other benefits for castes that historically were persecuted or disadvantaged. People in the SC and ST groups have come to be collectively known as *Dalits* (downtrodden). A person's caste is a matter of lineage and cannot change, but Parliament technically has power to reassign a caste to another class. For example, if a government leader belongs to a *Dalit* class, his or her offspring can still access affirmative action unless Parliament upgrades the caste to the forward class. Caste still plays an important role in certain social interactions like marriage. Castes maintain their distinct culture and identity, and they rarely intermarry (though this is changing over time, especially in cities).

Castes are often confused with the Brahmin classification philosophy, *Chaturvarna Vyavasta* (four-class system), perhaps because the three historically dominant Aryan castes bear the same name as the three highest classes in this system. The ancient Sanskrit scholars believed any society is composed of four classes: *Brahmin* (intellectuals and priests), *Kshatriya* (rulers and warriors), *Vaishya* (merchants and artisans), and *Shudra* (workers). As they dispersed on the Indian subcontinent, the Aryans grouped most non-Aryan castes into the *Shudra* class. The Brahmin philosophy became widespread by AD 1000 because of Aryan dominance in many states, but it does not determine a person's caste.

Language. India is home to several hundred languages, of which 33 have 100,000 or more speakers. Eighteen languages have official status: Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Konkani, Malayalam, Manipuri, Marathi, Nepali, Oriya, Punjabi, Sindhi, Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu. Except for Sindhi and Sanskrit, these languages are important by state (e.g., Telugu is the language of Andhra

Pradesh state). At least 30 percent of the population speaks Hindi. Hindustani, a blend of Hindi and Urdu, is spoken widely in northern India. English is important as the language of government, business, science, education, and national communication.

Religion. Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism were born in India. The country is also an adopted home for Zoroastrianism. About 80 percent of Indians are Hindu. Officially, Hinduism is not a religion but a "way of life." Shared beliefs of various indigenous religions merged over thousands of years, so people often include images of gods from other religions in their family temples. Differences between religions usually are minor due to the historical Brahmin influence on most castes. Brahmin spread throughout India over time, adopting and adapting local religions and then writing their philosophies in Sanskrit and the local languages. Hence, Brahmanism helped shape many religious traditions. Buddhism even stems, in part, from Brahmin philosophy. Hindu concepts include reincarnation and veneration for trees and animals that can be symbols of a certain god. Among the most prominent Hindu gods in various states are Narayana, Rama, Krishna, Shiva, Durga, Jagannath, Ganesh, Venkateswara, Murugan, and Vishnu.

About 12 percent of Indians are Muslims, who follow the teachings found in the *Qur'an* (Koran) and regard Muhammad as the last messenger of *Allah* (God). The Sikh religion (2 percent, mostly in Punjab) emerged around the 16th century, drawing on principles from both Hinduism and Islam. Sikhism stresses simple teachings, tolerance, and devotion. Beginning in India, Buddhism flourished for a time but did not maintain a following there. Less than 1 percent of the population is Buddhist. Jains, though powerful in India, also comprise less than 1 percent. Jains practice a reverence for life (*ahimsa*, literally, "nonviolence"), self-denial (especially monks), and vegetarianism. Less than 3 percent of the population is Christian.

General Attitudes. Indians are religious, family oriented, and philosophical. Their rich heritage has produced numerous architectural and artistic masterpieces. Indians traditionally value simple material comforts, physical purity, and spiritual refinement. Even in hardship, one is to accept one's course in life as the will of God or fate. Abundant expressions of gratitude are reserved for real favors rather than routine courtesies.

The average Indian deeply respects the nation's founder, Mahatma Gandhi, and his ideals, which included humility, nonviolence, self-denial, and religious harmony. Yet Indians sadly acknowledge that Gandhi's principles are hard to find in practice in today's India. Indians are equally troubled by the fact that the government has not adequately addressed basic needs: sanitation, health care, education, and housing. In addition, tensions between Hindus and Muslims, social classes, rural and urban areas, and traditional and modern values make it difficult for India's people to seek common ground amid their diversity. Nevertheless, as citizens of the world's most populous democracy, Indians are pressing forward to find balance amid continual social change.

Personal Appearance. Women generally wear a *saree* (a long length of fabric draped in variations that can represent socioeconomic status and religious affiliation) or a colorful pantsuit with a knee-length shirt. Women also wear considerable jewelry. Hindu women may have a *bindi*, or red dot, on their foreheads. Traditionally a sign of femininity, gracefulness, and marital status, the *bindi* has become for many an optional beauty aid, and its color frequently matches the wearer's outfit.

After marriage, the *bindi*, accompanied by white powder on her upper forehead (or vermilion powder in the part of her hair), signifies the woman's husband is alive; widows do not wear a *bindi*.

Men wear Western-style suits or more traditional clothing, such as the *dhoti* (large piece of cloth wrapped around the waist). As with women, this varies with region and religion. Sikhs wear turbans and specific items with religious significance, while Hindus and Muslims may wear a long shirt with pants, sometimes accompanied by a jacket or a vest.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings. The *Namaste* is India's traditional greeting. One presses the palms together (fingers up) below the chin and says *Namaste* (in the south, *Namaskaram*). For superiors or to show respect, a slight bow is added. Out of respect for women's privacy, men usually do not shake hands with or touch women in public. However, Indian men will shake hands with Westerners, and educated women may do so as a courtesy. "Hello" and "Hi" are acceptable greetings among equals, but people address superiors with more formal terms such as "Good morning" or its equivalent. It is polite to use titles such as *Professor*, *Doctor*, *Mr.*, *Shri* (for men), *Shreemati* (married women), *Kumari* (unmarried women), or the suffix *-ji* with a last name to show respect. Indians usually ask permission before taking leave of others.

Gestures. Excessive hand gestures or verbal articulation is considered impolite. People beckon with the palm turned down; they often point with the chin. It is impolite to sniff or handle flowers displayed at bazaars. Grasping one's own ears expresses repentance or sincerity. One's feet or shoes should not touch another person, and if they do, an immediate apology is necessary. Whistling is very impolite. Women do not wink or whistle; such behavior is considered unladylike. Public displays of affection are inappropriate. Footwear is removed before entering a temple, mosque, or Sikh shrine. When entering a Sikh shrine, all people cover their heads. Women also cover their heads in temples.

Visiting. Visits in the home between friends or family are often unannounced. The need for prior arrangements is increasing in large cities. It is impolite to say "no" to an invitation; if one cannot attend, one more likely says, "I'll try." Among traditional Indian families, women may not be involved in social functions. At certain gatherings, guests adorned with a garland of flowers remove and carry them as an expression of humility. Guests repay hosts' hospitality by giving gifts, such as flowers, specialty foods (fruits, sweets) from other areas of the country, or something for their children.

Many Indians do not wear shoes inside the home. Most guests at least remove shoes before entering the living room. Hosts offer their guests water, tea or coffee, and fruits or sweets. It is polite for a guest initially to refuse these refreshments but eventually to accept them. Visitors often indicate they are ready to leave by saying *Namaste*. In temples, saffron powder, holy water from the Ganges River, and sometimes food are offered to visitors as *prasad*, or blessings from the gods; refusing these gifts is discourteous.

Eating. Eating habits vary sharply between traditional and modern settings. Modern (most often urban) families eat together and follow many Western customs. Traditional families may eat their food with the right hand instead of utensils. Also, women may eat after other members of the family and any guests. When people drink from a communal cup, their

lips must never touch it. A gesture of *Namaste* can indicate one has had enough to eat. Some Hindus object to having their food handled by members of different castes.

LIFESTYLE

Family. The basic social unit in India is the family, which takes precedence over the individual. Families generally are large, and extended families often live together or near each other. The elderly are respected and cared for by their families. The father is head of the household. A middle- or upper-class father expects to provide financially for his children until they finish their education and take a job—regardless of how long it takes. Few women work outside the home. However, a growing number of urban women are part of the workforce, making important professional contributions to Indian society. Rural women are responsible for the children and household. Daily tasks include helping in the fields and obtaining drinking water and firewood.

Housing. Types and styles of housing vary according to climate, economic standing, and cultural and religious affiliations. In major cities such as Bombay and New Delhi, there are not enough homes for the millions of residents, some of whom have migrated from rural areas to find work or further their education. Because land is also in short supply, a number of high-rise apartment buildings have been constructed in the suburbs. An urban household typically consists of a married couple, their children, and the husband's parents and unmarried sisters. Rural households usually comprise several family units—parents, their sons, and the sons' wives and children.

Dating and Marriage. Western-style dating is not common in India. Traditional marriages are still arranged by parents, often with the consent of the bride and groom. Marriage is sacred to most Indians and is considered to endure beyond death. Chastity is the most treasured virtue of womanhood. Weddings are cause for great celebration, expense, and feasting. Ceremonies are often elaborate and vary widely from state to state. In many, the bride and groom exchange garlands and/or words before they circle around a fire three to seven times to solemnize the marriage. Bright clothing, jewelry, and flowers are part of nearly every type of ceremony. Giving a dowry (money, land, etc.) to the groom is still common for the bride's parents, even though the practice is illegal.

Life Cycle. Hindu families hold a *namakaran* (naming ceremony) 28 days after a birth; the father whispers the baby's name into the right ear. At four to six months of age, the child is given his or her first solid food, usually *daal*, a mushy mixture of pulses. Before a girl turns one, her ears and nose are pierced. In northern India, *mundan*, or the shaving of a boy's head for the first time, is another important ritual.

When an Indian Hindu dies, the body is burned on a funeral pyre. Cremation is thought to be the quickest way of releasing a spirit. The body's ashes are typically collected, put in a pot, and then placed in a river. A death is followed by a period of mourning, when the immediate family observes dietary and other restrictions. The eldest son often shaves his head. Indian Muslims bury their dead soon after death.

Diet. Diet depends on culture and region. For example, rice is a staple in the south, while wheat bread (*roti*) is a staple in the north. Indian meals are usually very spicy. Onions are used in most dishes. Different types of curry (eggs, fish, meat, or vegetables in a spicy sauce) are popular. Betel leaves and nuts commonly are eaten after meals to aid digestion. Vegetarianism is widely practiced, often for religious reasons. All castes

India

have different food laws and customs, as does each religion. Hindus consider cows to be sacred and will not eat beef. Muslims do not eat pork or drink alcohol.

Recreation. The favorite sports in India are cricket, soccer, and field hockey. Women generally do not play sports. India's motion picture industry (popularly known as "Bollywood") is one of the world's largest, and cinemas are well attended. Every major city has numerous modern theaters, some equipped with elevators and restaurants.

The Arts. Indians appreciate a variety of dance and music styles, which vary by region. Common instruments in Indian classical music include the *sitar* (a stringed instrument), *tabla* (hand drums), and *sarod* (a type of lute). A popular dance form is the *kathakali*, a mimed dance that traditionally lasts all night. Makeup and costumes are elaborate. The dances enact myths and stories through movement, hand gestures, and expression. The epic Sanskrit poems the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* greatly influence national and regional literature. These poems' characters and stories are also incorporated into music, dance, and theater. Traditional Indian handicrafts includes jewelry, textiles, pottery, and painting. The Taj Mahal is an architectural treasure renowned worldwide as symbol of India.

Holidays. India's national holidays include International New Year's Day (1 Jan.), Republic Day (26 Jan.), Independence Day (15 Aug.), and Mahatma Gandhi's Birthday (2 Oct.). Numerous spring and harvest festivals are common between January and March, celebrated with dancing, feasting, and many colorful events. For *Holi*, which marks the end of the cold season, people toss colored water and powder on each other. *Baisakhi*, the New Year in northern India, also starts Punjab's harvest season. The New Year is celebrated elsewhere by other names on different dates (as set by various calendars). Muslims celebrate *Id-ul-Fitr* at the end of *Ramzaan*, the month of fasting. Snakes are venerated during the summer festival of *Naag Panchami* because of their association with Hindu gods. The Hindu lord Krishna's birth is celebrated in August or September during *Jan mashtami*. Held under different names in various regions, *Dussehra* celebrates the triumph of good over evil. *Diwali* (Festival of Lights) celebrates the triumph of light over darkness. Thousands of lights decorate stores and homes during this time of goodwill. Christians celebrate Christmas and Easter.

SOCIETY

Government. A democratic republic, India is divided into 28 states and seven union territories. A prime minister (currently Manmohan Singh) is head of government. A president (currently Pratibha Patil) has mostly ceremonial duties. India's Parliament has two houses: the *Rajya Sabha* (Council of States) and the *Lok Sabha* (House of the People). No more than 250 members, elected by the legislatures of each state, serve in the *Rajya Sabha*. All but two of the 545 members of the *Lok Sabha* are directly elected by the people. All citizens may vote at age 18.

Economy. India is primarily an agricultural nation. It is a leading producer of peanuts, rice, cheese, tobacco, wheat, cotton, milk, sugarcane, and rubber. Other important crops include grains, oilseed, jute, tea, and coffee. Export earnings come mainly from tea, coffee, iron ore, fish products, and manufactured items. Textiles are a principal domestic product and also

POPULATION & AREA

| | |
|--------------------|------------------------|
| Population | 1,129,866,154 (rank=2) |
| Area, sq. mi. | 1,269,338 (rank=7) |
| Area, sq. km. | 3,287,590 |

DEVELOPMENT DATA

| | |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Human Dev. Index* rank | 128 of 177 countries |
| Adjusted for women | 112 of 156 countries |
| Real GDP per capita | \$3,452 |
| Adult literacy rate | 73% (male); 48% (female) |
| Infant mortality rate | 56 per 1,000 births |
| Life expectancy | 62 (male); 65 (female) |

a profitable export. India is rich in natural resources, including coal, iron ore, natural gas, diamonds, crude oil, limestone, and important minerals. High-technology industries lead the way for industrial growth. Tourism is also increasingly vital. Serious gaps between the urban wealthy and the roughly 350 million poor highlight India's stark social contrasts and future challenges. More than half of Indians are subsistence farmers. The currency is the *rupee* (INR).

Transportation and Communications. Roads in urban areas are generally well developed, but those in rural regions may be unpaved and impassable in heavy rains. Buses, often crowded, serve as the main source of public transportation in cities. People also travel by motor scooter, tricycle-driven ricksha, and *tanga* (a covered horse-drawn cart). Taxis are plentiful but rates are not standardized. Traffic travels on the left side of the road. Trains connect major cities.

Many people own televisions, especially in urban areas. Radios are more affordable and widespread. Newspapers are plentiful. Domestic telephone service is expanding. Indians without phones in their homes can easily access public calling offices (PCOs) in towns and villages throughout India. Cellular phones are common in urban areas.

Education. Education is a primary concern in India. Schooling is free and compulsory from ages six to fourteen, although facilities are often inadequate. While initial enrollment of school-age children in primary school approaches 100 percent, approximately 40 percent (especially girls) drop out after a few years. Twenty percent of all school-age children graduate from secondary school, and less than 10 percent enter higher education. Government programs are trying to meet the increasing need for education. India has more than 250 universities and 3,000 colleges.

Health. The people of India face health challenges stemming from poverty, natural disasters, malnutrition, and poor sanitation. Diseases such as cholera, malaria, typhoid, polio, and hepatitis endanger many, especially rural inhabitants who lack access to preventive medical care. Healthcare workers are trying to teach people better hygiene, nutrition, and family planning. Education may also be the key to India's rising rate of HIV infection.

AT A GLANCE

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