



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

India, covering 1,269,219 square miles (3,287,263 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, with Jawaharlal Nehru as the first prime minister. Gandhi was assassinated in 1948. Nehru's daughter (Indira Gandhi) was prime minister twice (1966–77, 1980–84). 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 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 has promised 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. Terrorist attacks by gunmen from Pakistan in November 2008 left almost two hundred people dead in Mumbai, straining already-tense relations with neighboring Pakistan. Another attack, which took place in the state of Maharashtra in early 2010, killed 16 people, further deepening concerns about national security.

THE PEOPLE

Population

India has the world's second-largest population, behind China, with nearly 1.2 billion residents. The population is growing by 1.4 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* (down-trodden). 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. 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.

Indian society is divided along four main lines: rural-urban, male-female, wealthy-poor, and the various castes. Differences are usually manifested in terms of social freedoms and access to educational and economic opportunities. Generally, urban dwellers, males, the wealthy, and those from the higher castes hold more respected positions in society and have more access to opportunities. While improvement has been made in many areas and government efforts seek to mitigate the discrepancies between groups, these divisions remain in place and pervade most aspects of Indian society.

Language

India is home to several hundred languages, of which 33 have 100,000 or more speakers. Twenty-two languages have official status: Assamese, Bengali, Bodo, Dogri, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Konkani, Maithili, Malayalam, Manipuri, Marathi, Nepali, Oriya, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Santhali, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu. Except for Sindhi and Sanskrit, these languages are important by state (e.g., Telugu is the language of the state of Andhra Pradesh). Indian law defines English as a "subsidiary official language." It is used in government, business, education, and national communication. About 41 percent of the population speaks Hindi, the country's most widely spoken language.

People who do not share a common first language generally communicate in either Hindi or English. Linguistic tensions sometimes arise because speakers of India's other languages often feel marginalized by the dominance of Hindi.

Religion

Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism were born in India. The country is also an adopted home for Zoroastrianism (called Parsiism in India). A variety of religions exist side by side in India, and it is not uncommon to find Christian churches, Muslim mosques, and Hindu temples all on a single block. About 81 percent of Indians are Hindu. Officially, Hinduism is considered 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, which can be symbols of a certain god. Among the most prominent Hindu gods in various states are Narayana, Rama, Krishna, Shiva, Durga, Jagannath, Ganesh, Murugan, and Vishnu.

About 13 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 economically and politically 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. 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. Many Indians are highly superstitious, often turning to holy men, believed to mediate between heaven and earth, for guidance and blessings.

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 socio-economic 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 red 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, dress varies with region and religion.

Sikhs wear the “five ks”: *kesh* (uncut hair), *kanga* (a wooden comb worn in the hair), *kaach* (undershorts), *kara* (an iron bracelet), and *kirpan* (a ceremonial sword). Sikhs generally wear turbans. Hindus and Muslims may wear a *salwar kameez* (a long shirt worn over pants), sometimes accompanied by a jacket or a vest. Young people often follow Western fashion trends.

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*). When greeting superiors or to show respect, a slight bow is added. Younger people may greet an elder by touching the person's feet as a sign of respect and to seek blessings.

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 Indian women may shake hands 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. In urban southern India, people may address men as *Sar* (a title stemming from the English *Sir*) and women as *Madam*. 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 generally do not greet strangers. Doing so would be considered suspicious. Indians beckon with the palm turned down; they often point with the chin. Particularly in the north, the right hand is used for passing objects, eating, and shaking hands, as the left is traditionally reserved for personal hygiene. 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. Such visits are sometimes seen as a chance for the hosts to prove that they are able to entertain well even on short notice. 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 (such as fruits or 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 or with banana leaves instead of utensils. It is not considered rude to ask for a utensil if desired. At special celebrations, such as weddings, people may eat using banana leaves. People wash their hands before and after eating, and napkins are generally not provided at the table. 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 family is the basic social unit in India and generally takes precedence over the individual. Urban families are generally small, usually with an average of two children. Rural families are usually somewhat larger. Extended families often live together or near each other, and bonds between members of the extended family are strong. The extended family serves as a social safety net, and individuals can expect support in times of need. In recent years, these extended family networks have been weakened as people move to urban areas in search of economic and educational opportunities. In these situations, the nuclear family becomes the focus.

An urban household typically consists of a married couple, their children, and the husband's parents and unmarried siblings. A growing number of urban households include only a nuclear family. Rural households are usually made up of several family units—parents, their sons, and the sons' wives and children. As each male in the family marries, he and his family are given a bedroom.

The father or oldest male in the home is head of the household. His decisions are heeded and respected by the rest of the family. The oldest female is generally in charge of managing the household and the kitchen. Daughters-in-law do most of the cooking and household chores and may be assisted by maids. Middle- or upper-class parents expect to provide financially for their children until they finish their education and take a job—regardless of how long it takes. Some parents may continue to support their children even

after they marry. In poor families, economic circumstances may force children to start working early to help support the family, often at the expense of attending school. Sons do not generally move out of the family home, as their wives move in with them after marriage. Daughters rarely move out until marriage. The exception is children who leave home to attend a university or to seek better employment opportunities.

The elderly are respected and cared for by their families. The advice of older family members is generally sought out and usually heeded by the younger generations.

A growing number of women seek higher education and work outside the home. This trend is particularly strong in urban areas but is also felt to a lesser degree in rural areas. Despite these changes in the status of many women, women in general lag behind men in terms of access to education and economic opportunities. Women are also more likely to be malnourished and to be victims of violence. While traditionally women did not work outside the home, instead caring for children and the household, women today often have full-time jobs while still maintaining responsibility for the children and household. A growing number of couples share household chores.

Housing

Indians enjoy spending time in their homes and working to improve them. Home ownership is an important goal for most people. Special Hindu housewarming rituals (*griha pravesh*) are associated with moving to a new home. Mango leaves are strung across the entrance, and a priest performs a *puja* (religious ritual) in order to ensure that no evil befalls the new residents. Astrological charts are consulted in order to choose the best day on which to move to a new home.

Building materials and styles of housing vary according to climate, economic standing, and cultural and religious affiliations. In major cities such as Mumbai 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. Urban slums often stand in the shadow of high-rise apartment buildings. People living in slums live in shelters constructed from whatever materials can be found, often sheets of plastic or aluminum siding. Conditions are crowded, dangerous, and insecure, as these communities may face demolition at any time. Residents lack access to adequate sanitation facilities and clean drinking water.

A growing trend is enclosed communities in which building maintenance, landscaping, and cleaning are the responsibility of a centralized unit. In these communities, the homeowners contribute monthly fees for these services. In cities and suburbs, apartments are the norm. The roofs of homes and apartment buildings are often flat, providing an open space for water tanks, gardens, and clotheslines. When the weather is hot, people in rural areas sometimes sleep on the roofs to take advantage of the cool breeze. Urban children may use this open space to fly kites and play. Most homes are cooled by air conditioning units or fans. Central air conditioning is rare. India's warm climate makes central heating unnecessary in most areas.

Rural homes are usually made from bamboo, mud brick,

stone, concrete, or red bricks. Roofs may be thatched or made from the same materials as the rest of the home. The kitchen is usually separate from the rest of the house, as smoke from a cooking fire is believed to pollute the home. As the availability of gas and kerosene increases, many in rural areas are choosing these methods over cooking on open fires. Kitchens that use gas or kerosene are often located inside the home. People may also cook on outdoor earthenware stoves powered by firewood or kerosene. Some rural areas do not have access to running water; instead, people rely on wells. Women in these areas are generally responsible for traveling to and from the well to provide water for the household. Air conditioning is not common in rural areas, so when the weather is warm, people prefer to spend most of their time outside. Rural families also usually have a garden where they grow produce for their meals. Properties are generally not fenced, and it is considered important to maintain a good relationship with one's neighbors.

Home decoration varies, but most families prefer traditional paintings and artwork. A statue of the god Ganesh is often placed near the entry of Hindu homes in the belief that doing so will bring prosperity to those living in the home. Hindus may also keep potted basil plants (which are considered sacred and are believed to have medicinal properties) and a small altar in their homes. Wall-to-wall carpeting is unusual. Instead, floors are covered with rugs. While most homes have access to electricity and plumbing, power outages are frequent and droughts are common.

Dating and Marriage

Western-style dating is not common in India but is gaining popularity in larger cities. Despite the rarity of dating, Indian youth generally find the idea fascinating, and media portrayals of dating and romance are popular.

Most Indian marriages are arranged by the couple's parents, usually through friends, acquaintances, ads in newspapers, or matchmaking websites. Caste and ancient lineage (called *gotra*) are important considerations when arranging a marriage. In some cases, parents may check the potential couple's horoscopes in order to determine a favorable match. Young people generally provide some input when it comes to arranged marriages and have the right to accept or reject a partner. Though relatively uncommon, some people choose their own spouses. They generally meet at work, at school, or at social gatherings. When a young couple wishes to become engaged, they approach their parents, who arrange the marriage. Indian Muslims maintain a strict separation between men and women from a young age. Therefore, it is extremely rare for a Muslim marriage not to be arranged.

Marriage is viewed as a union of both two individuals and of two families. Marriage is sacred to most Indians and is believed to endure beyond death. Chastity is considered extremely important for women. While traditionally people married young, often in the late teens, couples today usually marry later. The average urban Indian marries between the ages of 25 and 30. The age can be considerably younger in rural areas. Hindu engagement traditions differ throughout the country. In northern India, engagements are finalized in the

roka ceremony. The families meet, and the couple publicly agrees to marry. The occasion is celebrated with food, music, dancing, and exchanging of gifts. After this ceremony, a wedding date is chosen, and the couple is free to court and get to know one another. In western India, at an engagement ceremony (*sagaai*), the bride's family arrives with a *matli* (a steel container full of sweets and gifts) to be given to the groom and his family. In southern Indian families, the bride and groom are not required to attend the engagement function. The commitment is made between their families. The most important ritual in finalizing these engagements consists of each family giving the other a *tattu* (a plate of coconut, flowers, turmeric, betel nuts, and betel leaves).

It is common for the bride's parents to give a dowry (such as money, land, or gifts) to the groom, even though the practice is illegal in India. Today the dowry may be less of a financial burden than in the past and is often only ceremonial. The bride's family often gives gifts to the groom's family, such as clothes for the wedding and household items for the bride to use after marriage.

Weddings are cause for great celebration, expense, and feasting. Dates and times for Hindu weddings are carefully chosen based on auspicious astrological timing. Most wedding ceremonies are religious in nature. Ceremonies are often elaborate and vary widely from state to state and from caste to caste. 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. After the wedding, many families hold a reception, usually at an outdoor area of a hotel. Guests celebrate with food and dancing and present the couple with gifts needed to establish a home. After the ceremony or the party, the bride bids good-bye to her family in the *vidai* ritual.

Muslim weddings are finalized with a *nikah* ceremony, in which the groom or a representative proposes to the bride in front of at least two witnesses, stating the details of the *mahr* (a formal statement specifying the amount the groom is to pay the bride). Although the couple is already engaged, the symbolic second proposal is part of the ceremony. The bride and groom repeat the Arabic word *Qabul* (I accept) three times. The couple and two male witnesses then sign the marriage contract, making the marriage legal according to civil and religious law.

After the wedding, the bride moves in to her husband's family's home. It is extremely rare for newlyweds to move into their own apartment, unless the couple does not live in the same city as the husband's parents. In Hindu families, mango leaves are draped over the entrance, and the bride enters the home stepping first with the right foot, which is considered lucky. Once inside the home, she is welcomed by her mother-in-law, who performs the *ghar nu Lakshmi* ceremony, which includes an *aarti* (a Hindu rite meant to invoke divine blessings). An *aarti* may include reciting mantras in praise of various deities, praying, and rotating clockwise a *thali* (plate) that holds a *diya* (a small bowl of oil in which a wick burns). In Gujarati families, the couple plays a game called *aeki beki* soon after the bride is welcomed. A ring and several coins are placed in a container filled with a

mixture of water, vermillion, and milk. Whoever finds the ring four out of seven times is said to rule the household.

Polygamy is practiced only by Indian Muslims, whose religion permits a man to marry up to four wives. However, few Muslims practice polygamy today, and even fewer among the younger generations. Divorce is relatively rare, most likely due to the cultural and religious importance of marriage. In the case of divorce, Indian law stipulates that a man must continue to provide financial support to his ex-wife and any children they have. Divorced men generally find it easier to remarry than divorced women do.

Life Cycle

For Hindus, life is seen as a spiritual journey, and each step is celebrated with a ceremony or ritual, called a *samskara*. Before a child is born, special ceremonies are often performed in order to ensure the health of the mother and child. Female friends and relatives give gifts to the pregnant woman at a *godh bhara*i (similar to a baby shower). Elderly women may bestow blessings on the pregnant woman.

In some cases, soon after the child is born, the father touches the baby's lips with a spoon dipped in honey, curd, and *ghee* (clarified butter). The sweet mixture is intended to welcome the newborn with the sweetness of the world. An infant's first visit to a Hindu temple is an important milestone. A baby's first haircut (*mundun*) is a sacred event that occurs in the baby's first or third year. According to Hindu beliefs, the hair present at birth represents unwanted traits from a person's past lives. In order to ensure a new beginning and to encourage the hair to grow back thicker, the head is shaved. The *mundun* is marked by feasting, family gatherings, and religious offerings. Christian babies are baptized and christened within the first few months of life. Baptism may include immersing the child or sprinkling water over the head. At a christening, a priest anoints the child with oil and the parents state the given name.

Hindu families hold a *namakaran* (naming ceremony) 28 days after a birth; the father or another close relative whispers the baby's name into the right ear. A priest chants mantras praying for a long and healthy life for the newborn and then determines the most auspicious letters to start the baby's name, based on the position of the planets (*nakshatra*) when the child was born. As part of the naming ceremony, the family seeks blessings for the newborn by holding a feast, distributing alms to the poor, and giving gifts to the priest who performs the rituals. Before a girl turns one, the family chooses an auspicious date on which to pierce her ears and nose. Muslims celebrate a male baby's circumcision, which takes place soon after birth, with a party for friends and relatives.

A crucial event in the lives of most upper-caste Hindu males is the *Upanayana* ceremony, an initiation ceremony that takes place between the age of six and twelve. This ceremony marks the transition from childhood to adulthood and brings with it adult religious responsibilities. This ritual is seen as a new birth. At the ceremony, a Hindu priest gives the boy a sacred thread to be worn over the left shoulder at all times. For members of lower castes, a similar ritual takes place before marriage.

In southern India, a young woman's first menstruation is cause for celebration. Some Hindu families hold a party, printing invitations and decorating the home. Guests come to celebrate with the family, bringing gifts for the young woman. Married women in the community may gather to celebrate with the young woman, giving her gifts and distributing *kumkum* (vermillion powder) and *haldi* (saffron powder), both believed to bring good luck and prosperity. This event is considered a way of announcing to the community that the girl is ready for marriage, although in most cases a girl does not marry for a few more years. In their mid-teens, Muslims of both genders take on religious responsibilities. Prayers, fasting, and other principles are required, and girls begin wearing the *hijab* (head covering).

Sometime between the ages of six and twelve, Buddhist boys become temporary monks, usually for between two weeks and three months. They stay at the temple and learn about Buddhism from the older monks. To mark their change in status, they shave their heads and wear saffron-colored robes.

At the age of 60, Hindus may offer special prayers, called *shanthi*, meaning "peace." These prayers are seen as a way of giving thanks for all the graces granted throughout one's life and as a way of ensuring a smooth transition to the afterlife.

When an Indian Hindu dies, a procession of mourners accompanies the body as it is taken to be burned on a funeral pyre. Cremation is thought to be the quickest way of releasing a spirit. A close relative of the deceased (usually the oldest son) performs the last rites and lights the funeral pyre. Infants are usually buried rather than being cremated. The body's ashes are typically collected, put in a pot, and then scattered over one of Hinduism's holy rivers. A death is followed by a period of mourning, when the eldest son may shave his head and the immediate family observes dietary and other restrictions. After the funeral, mourners take purifying baths. A few days later, close family members gather for a meal and often give gifts to the poor or donate money to charities in remembrance of the deceased.

Indian Muslims bury their dead as soon as possible after death. The body is washed and taken to a nearby mosque, where prayers for the deceased are performed. The burial is attended by males only. Buddhists may hold ceremonies at the family home for several days prior to the funeral. In honor of the deceased, an altar is constructed where the family makes offerings of food, displays photos of the deceased, and burns incense.

Diet

Diet depends on culture and region. For example, wheat bread (*roti*) is a staple in the north, while rice is the staple food in the rest of the country. In the south, rice shows up in common foods such as *idly* (a steamed mixture of ground rice and lentils), *dosai* (similar to a crepe, made from ground rice and lentils), *uthapam* (flatbread made from ground rice and lentils), *idiyapam* (rice noodles), and *pongal* (rice porridge).

Indian meals are usually very spicy. Onions are used in most dishes. Coconut is a common flavoring, particularly in southern India. Different types of curry (vegetables, eggs, fish, and meat 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 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

Indians do not wait for a holiday in order to celebrate. They celebrate a variety of life events, from major events like the birth of a child to more everyday occasions like purchasing a new car.

The favorite sports in India are cricket, soccer, and field hockey. Professional cricket teams and players have large followings, and fans gather to watch important games. In rural areas, people more often play traditional sports. These sports usually do not require expensive equipment, which can be hard to obtain or afford. People enjoy *kabaddi* (a team sport that combines elements of rugby and wrestling) and *gili danda* (similar to cricket but played with a stick). Bullock cart racing is also popular in rural areas.

Sports are generally more popular among men, but many women enjoy badminton, tennis, ping-pong, and field hockey. The most common recreation activities for women include shopping, watching movies, socializing with friends, and gathering for potluck-style dinners. Children enjoy activities like swimming, playing musical instruments, and dancing.

India's motion picture industry (popularly known as "Bollywood") is one of the world's largest. The growth of the country's middle class has brought with it an increased demand for entertainment, and cinemas are well attended. Most people also enjoy watching television, and all but the poorest Indians own a television. While Western media is available and influences Indian media, most people prefer Indian-made movies and television.

People often get together on the weekends for movies, picnics, and family gatherings. Most people take a family vacation once a year, often to the beach or a rural area. It's also common to visit family. The wealthy may vacation in different parts of the country or abroad.

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 include jewelry, textiles, pottery, and painting. The Taj Mahal is an architectural treasure renowned worldwide as symbol of India.

Holidays

Holidays are eagerly awaited in India. No holiday celebration is complete without informal gatherings of family and friends.

Dates are determined according to a number of different calendars. The 365 days on the Indian National Calendar correspond with days on the Gregorian calendar (which most of the Western world uses), but the years begin on 22 March. Civil holidays are set according to the national calendar, while Hindu holidays are determined by the Hindu calendar. Each year a *panchang* (a Hindu astrological calendar) is published, which people use to determine the most auspicious dates on which to schedule important events.

Many of India's most important holidays are religious. While there is much religious diversity in India, religious holidays can be unifying events, as people of different religions commonly celebrate one another's holidays. The Hindu holidays of Diwali and Holi are celebrated by most people, irrespective of religion. Similarly, Hindus participate in the Muslim *Eid al-Fitr* celebrations and Christian Christmas traditions. 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.).

The New Year is celebrated on a variety of dates, depending upon the calendar being used. In northern India, the New Year is called Baisakhi and marks the beginning of the Punjab region's harvest season. On this day, Hindus visit temples and Sikhs visit *gurdwaras* (places of worship) to express gratitude for the harvest and to pray for prosperity in the future. Colorful fairs are held, where people enjoy folk dancing, singing, acrobatic performances, and concerts with folk instruments. In southern India, the New Year is called Ugadi. People clean their houses and decorate with mango leaves in preparation for the holiday. People put a lot of care into choosing gifts for friends and relatives. On Ugadi, people visit nearby temples to offer prayers and chant mantras. International New Year (1 Jan.) is celebrated with parties.

Republic Day is an important patriotic holiday honoring those who have given their lives for the country. It commemorates the day in 1950 when India became a republic. Celebrations begin with the president awarding medals to members of the armed forces. Citizens attend patriotic parades and performances. Independence Day celebrates India's independence from Britain, achieved in 1947. Indian flags are flown on this day, and children often fly kites in the colors of the Indian flag. The prime minister also gives a televised speech.

The Hindu festival *Diwali* (Festival of Lights) celebrates the triumph of light over darkness. Thousands of lights decorate stores and homes during this time of goodwill. Special emphasis is placed on the Hindu goddess Lakshmi, associated with happiness and prosperity. Preparations begin weeks in advance, with people cleaning their homes and decorating with lights.

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.

Numerous spring and harvest festivals are common between January and March and are celebrated with dancing, feasting, and many colorful events. One of the most important

of these festivals is *Holi*, or the Festival of Colors, which marks the end of the cold season. To celebrate, people toss colored water and powder on each other. Bonfires are also lit, and people gather to reenact the story from Hindu mythology of King Prahlad's triumph over his evil aunt Holika. In some parts of India, effigies of Holika are burned on the fire. Ashes from Holi bonfires are thought to bring good luck. The four-day harvest festival Pongal is celebrated in southern India to give thanks for the year's harvest. In northern India, Lohri celebrates the harvesting of crops and the end of winter. At both holidays, people often go sightseeing, take shopping trips, and visit temples to seek blessings for a good and prosperous future.

Mahatma Gandhi's Birthday, also called Gandhi Jayanti, is celebrated to honor the leader of the independence movement, who many consider the father of modern India. Tributes are held throughout the country, especially at Raj Ghat (a memorial devoted to Gandhi), and statues of Gandhi are decorated with garlands. Reverent celebrations include prayer services and scripture readings associated with a variety of religions to commemorate Gandhi's respect for different beliefs and groups. An important part of most celebrations is the singing of one of Gandhi's favorite songs, "Raghupati Raghava Raja Ram."

Held under different names, Dussehra celebrates the triumph of good over evil in the mythological story of Hindu Lord Rama's victory over the demon king Ravana. Customs vary by region, but the 10-day celebration generally includes activities such as worshipping the goddesses Durga, lighting fireworks, burning effigies, singing, and dancing.

Christmas is celebrated by Indians of all religions and is seen as a time of unity. Many people hold holiday parties for friends and family sometime during the holiday season. People exchange well-wishes and gifts. On Christmas Day, most families have a special meal, and Christians attend church.

SOCIETY

Government

A democratic republic, India is divided into 28 states and 7 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* (People's Assembly). No more than 250 members serve in the *Rajya Sabha*. The majority are elected by the legislatures of each state, while up to 12 are appointed by the president. Of the 545 members of the *Lok Sabha*, 543 are directly elected by the people and two are appointed by the president. The voting age is 18.

Economy

While India is primarily an agricultural nation, its economy is changing quickly. Just over half of the labor force is engaged in agricultural work, but the majority of economic growth is concentrated in services. India 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 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 exist between the urban wealthy and the poor. Obstacles to economic growth include outdated or nonexistent infrastructure, lack of educational opportunities, and insufficient economic opportunities for the population. Approximately 25 percent of the population lives in poverty. 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. A growing number of people are able to afford cars, and the influx of cars on the road has resulted in increased pollution and traffic. People also travel by motor scooter, tricycle-driven rickshaw, and *tanga* (a covered horse-drawn cart). Taxis are plentiful, but rates are not standardized. In rural areas, bull-drawn carts are a common mode of transportation. Traffic travels on the left side of the road. Trains connect major cities.

Televisions and radios are common throughout the country. Newspapers are plentiful. Domestic telephone service is expanding. Indians without phones in their homes use public calling offices (PCOs) throughout India. Cellular phones are common and are now found in even the most remote villages. Internet use is growing quickly.

Education

Education is a primary concern in India, and the country has one of the largest education systems in the world. Indians see education as an investment in the future and the key to improving their lives. Families place a strong emphasis on education starting at a young age. Parents are often very involved in their children's education, helping with homework and receiving frequent progress reports. For these reasons, competition is high at all levels of education. A number of "reserved seats" in education and also government positions are set aside for members of historically disadvantaged castes. These reservations have increased competition for the remaining seats.

Literacy rates and access to education are split along social divisions. Levels of education and literacy are higher in urban areas than rural, higher in males than in females, higher among the wealthy than among the poor, and vary between castes. Government programs are trying to meet the increasing need for education and improve all branches of the education system. High levels of poverty force many children to start working early, at the expense of attending school. In rural areas, the lack of nearby schools and the cost of school supplies often make it difficult for families to send their children to school.

Public schooling is free and compulsory from ages 6 to 14,

although facilities are often inadequate. Private schools are available, but the cost is too high for most families. In order to proceed to each level of education, students must pass qualifying exams, which may be both written and oral. Primary school ends at age 14 or 15. Secondary school is divided into two levels (secondary and upper secondary), each lasting two years. In secondary school, students choose an area in which to specialize, such as mathematics, biology, arts, or business. Students must pay tuition to attend secondary school. About 90 percent of children are enrolled in primary school. This rate drops significantly by secondary school, where 49 percent of girls and 59 percent of boys are enrolled. Approximately 14 percent of the population is enrolled in higher education. India has more than 250 universities and 3,000 colleges.

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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. The wealthy have private insurance and access to private clinics. Those who cannot afford private care rely on government-run hospitals, which are often short on staff, drugs, and equipment.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

Embassy of India, 2107 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 939-7000; web site www.indianembassy.org.

POPULATION & AREA

Population	1,173,108,018 (rank=2)
Area, sq. mi.	1,269,219 (rank=8)
Area, sq. km.	3,287,263

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	119 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	122 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$3,200
Adult literacy rate	73% (male); 48% (female)
Infant mortality rate	49 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	66 (male); 68 (female)

*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).