

India

India is the second most populous country in the world, the seventh largest country by geographical area, and the world's largest democracy. It is a pluralistic, multilingual and multiethnic society, with a strong and ancient culture and set of traditions. In recent years it has become one of the world's fastest growing major economies, however, it continues to face the challenges of poverty, illiteracy and corruption.

History

The Indus, a highly sophisticated and urbanised civilisation, dominated the north western part of the subcontinent between 2600 and 2000 BC. From that period on, India functioned as a virtually self-contained political and cultural territory, giving rise to a distinctive culture and set of traditions, primarily associated with Hinduism. Islam first arrived in India in the early 8th Century AD, and by the 13th Century, much of the subcontinent was under Muslim rule.¹

At the end of the 16th Century, Portugal successfully discovered a new sea route from Europe to India, leading to direct Indo-European commerce, and the quick establishment of trading posts along the west coast of India. Beginning in the early-18th Century, India was gradually annexed by the British East India Company.

Dissatisfaction with company rule led to the Indian Rebellion of 1857, after which the country was directly administered by the British Government.² During the first half of the 20th Century, a nationwide struggle for independence began, culminating in the peaceful protests led by Mahatma Gandhi. Independence was granted in 1947, along with the partition of the subcontinent into the dominions of India and Pakistan (including East Pakistan, now Bangladesh).

There had been a growing call for Muslim separatism from the end of the 19th Century. Muslims comprised only 20% of the subcontinent's population, and felt threatened by the Hindu dominance that independence would bring. As a pre-requisite of independence, each Princely State was given the choice of remaining a part of India, or seceding to the new dominion of Pakistan. The partition displaced up to 12.5 million people, and up to a million are estimated to have died in the ensuing violence.³ On 26th January 1950, India became a republic, and a new constitution came into effect.⁴

Geography & Climate

India is the largest country in South Asia. It shares borders with Pakistan, Bhutan, China, Nepal, Bangladesh and Burma. India's climate varies significantly, ranging from arid desert in the west, alpine tundra and glaciers in the north, and humid tropical regions in the south west and island territories. The climate is strongly influenced by the Himalayas and the Thar Desert, both of which drive the monsoons. The Himalayas prevent cold Central Asian air from blowing in, keeping the subcontinent warmer than most locations at that latitude, while the Thar

Quick Facts⁴



- Official Name: Bharat (Hindi), Republic of India (English)
- Capital: New Delhi
- Official Languages: Hindi, English
- Population: 1.21 billion
- Total Area: 3,166,414 km²
- Independence: 15th Aug 1947
- GDP: US\$1.538 trillion
- GDP Per Capita (PPP): US\$3500

Desert attracts moisture-laden south west monsoon winds that provide the majority of India's rainfall. India has three major seasons: winter, lasting from November to February; summer, from March to June; and monsoon, lasting from June to October. Weather conditions in India are unstable, and droughts, floods, cyclones and other natural disasters are not uncommon (see text box)⁵.

Demographics

India remains one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world. Along with its many religions and sects, India is home to innumerable castes and tribes, as well as more than a dozen major, and hundreds of minor languages. Hinduism is the country's largest religion, but religious minorities, including Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains, account for one fifth of the population.⁶ Collectively, the minority population of India is larger than the populations of every country in the world, except for China, the US and India itself. India's population grew at 1.76% per annum during the last decade, down from 2.13% per annum during the previous decade. More than 50% of the population is under 25 years old, and there are 940 females to every 1000 males.⁷

British policies of divide and rule, and enumeration of the population into rigid categories, strongly contributed towards the hardening of caste identities.⁸ Though the importance of caste is decreasing, it still plays a major socio-economic role in society, especially in more rural areas. A caste, generally designated by the term 'jati', refers to the strictly regulated social community that a person is born into. In general, people are expected to marry within their jati, follow a particular set of rules of behaviour in terms of occupation, kinship and diet, and interact with other jatis according to their position in the social hierarchy. Among Hindus, the 2000 or more jatis are usually assigned to one of four large caste clusters, called varnas, each of which has a traditional social function. Brahmans were priests and top the social hierarchy, followed by Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (originally peasants but later merchants), and Sudras (artisans and labourers). A fifth group, the Panchamas, were traditionally excluded from the caste system, as their occupations and ways of life were seen as being too impure. This group have been referred to as the 'untouchables', but more recently they have adopted the term Dalit ('oppressed') to describe themselves.⁹

Climate



- Much of Northern and North Eastern India is subject to a humid, subtropical climate, with hot summers, but often cold winters
- A long stretch of Central India, and much of North Western India experience tropical semi-arid and tropical desert climates, with hot, dry summers and large quantities of rain during the monsoon
- Most of Central and Southern India experiences a tropical wet or wet and dry climate, with high temperatures throughout the year
- In the Himalayas the temperature falls by 0.6°C for every 100m rise in altitude, creating a variety of different climates. The Northern side of the mountains is generally arid, cold and windswept, while the Southern side is protected from the cold winds, but can experience heavy rainfall. All areas experience heavy snowfall during the winter months

The Indian government has officially documented castes and sub-castes, primarily to determine those deserving positive discrimination in education and jobs. The government breaks castes into four main groups:

- Scheduled Castes generally consist of 'Dalit' people and make up 16% of the population of India, approximately 190 million people.
- Scheduled Tribes generally consist of tribal groups and make up approximately 7% of the population, approximately 85 million people.
- Other Backwards Classes officially make up 41% of the population of India, though there is substantial debate on the actual number of OBC people in India, with other estimations of 32% and 52%.¹⁰
- Forward Castes denotes people, communities and castes that do not currently qualify for reservation benefits. Again, there is substantial debate over the number of forward caste members, with estimates ranging from 15% to 39%.¹¹ Forward castes are not necessarily wealthy however, and some estimates put the number of Brahmans (one of the highest castes in Indian society) living below the poverty line at 55%, 10 percentage points higher than for Indian society as a whole.¹²

Culture & Language

India's cultural traditions date back to 8000 BC, and the country has a recorded history of over 2500 years. The Indian culture began taking a distinctive shape in the 11th Century BC, when the foundations were laid for Hindu philosophy, mythology, literary tradition, beliefs and practices. Indian religions form one of the most defining aspects of Indian culture, and major religions practiced in India include Hinduism, Sikhism, Islam, Christianity, and Jainism.

Many Indian festivals are religious in origin. The biggest include:

- **Diwali** – Popularly known as the 'festival of lights', it is an important five day festival in Hinduism, Jainism and Sikhism, that occurs between mid-October and mid-November. It commemorates the return of Lord Rama from his 14-year exile.
- **Ganesha Chaturthi** – The birthday of the deity Ganesha, who is widely worshipped as the god of wisdom, prosperity and good fortune. The festival occurs between mid-August and mid-September, and lasts for ten days.
- **Holi** – A spring festival occurring in late-February or March, and celebrated by Hindus. The festival is famous for the throwing of coloured powder.
- **Durga Puja** – Worshipping the Hindu goddess Durga, the festival is celebrated in September or October.
- **Eid** – A three day Muslim festival marking the end of Ramadan, the month of fasting.
- **Vaisakhi** – An ancient harvest festival celebrated across North Indian states in April.

There are hundreds of different languages used in India, belonging to four different language families: Indo-Iranian, a subfamily of Indo-European and spoken by three-quarters of Indians, Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic, and Tibeto-Burman, a subfamily of Sino-Tibetan. There are also several independent languages that fit into none of these groups but the overwhelming majority of Indians speak Indo-Iranian or Dravidian languages. By far the most widely spoken Indian language is Hindi, used in one form or other by approximately 60% of the population. English remains the language of business, academia, and government, and along with Hindi, is the lingua franca of India.¹³

Economy

India's economy is the world's tenth largest by nominal GDP, and fourth largest by purchasing power parity. Over the past two decades it has been one of the world's fastest growing major economies, experiencing average annual growth rates of almost 6%. The country has a rapidly growing middle class, and has made great strides in fields such as information technology. However, in terms of income and GDP per capita, it remains one of the world's poorest countries.¹⁴

Since independence, India has promoted a mixed economic system, where the government plays a major role as a central planner, regulator, investor, manager and producer. Since 1951, the government has based its economic model on a series of five-year plans influenced by the Soviet model. Widespread state intervention and regulation caused the Indian economy to be largely closed to the outside world. With the collapse of the Soviet system in the early 1990s, India adopted a series of free-market reforms that emphasised foreign trade and investment, fuelling its economic growth. The country's highly trained and well educated workforce made India one of the global centres of the technology boom that began in the late 20th Century, and helped produce some of the world's highest annual growth rates.¹⁵

The majority (52%) of India's labour force remains in the agricultural sector, although it now only makes 16.1% of GDP, and is still declining. Manufacturing remains a major component of the national economy, with 14% of the labour force and 28.6% of the GDP, but the majority of growth has been in trade, finance, and other services, which, collectively, make up 55.3% of GDP and 34% of the labour force.¹⁶ The recent financial crisis combined with the global food crisis and a poor monsoon, has resulted in a slower rate of economic growth, and a rise in unemployment and debt.

Politics

India is a parliamentary republic divided in 28 states and 7 union territories, with a multi-party system of governance. The President of India is the head of state, elected indirectly by an electoral college into a largely ceremonial role, while the Prime Minister is the head of government, and exercises most executive power. India has a Westminster-style parliamentary system, comprising of the upper house called the Rajya Sabha (Council of States), and the lower house called Lok Sabha (House of People). States have their own elected governments, while union territories are governed by an administrator appointed by the president. Each state has a presidentially appointed governor, who can assume certain broad powers when directed to by the central government. Indian democracy has only been suspended once, between 1975 and 1977, but nevertheless Indian politics is often described as chaotic, and more than one-fifth of members of parliament face criminal charges.¹⁷

The lack of homogeneity in the Indian population has created political divisions based on religion, region, language, caste, and race. This has led to a large number of political parties catering to the agendas of these groups. The country has six national parties and more than forty regional parties. The two largest parties are the centre-left Indian National Congress, and the centre-right Bharatiya Janata Party. Since independence, India has maintained cordial relations with most nations. However, it has had a tense relationship with Pakistan since partition, and the two countries have been to war four times, in 1947, 1965, 1971, and 1999. The status of the disputed region of Kashmir has been the main cause of all these wars apart from 1971, which followed a period of civil unrest in the former East Pakistan, now Bangladesh.¹⁸

Places of Interest



Taj Mahal

A regular feature in lists of the wonders of the modern world. The Taj Mahal is a mausoleum built in the mid-17th Century in memory of the emperor's third wife. It is widely considered to be one of the most beautiful buildings in the world, and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.



Rajasthan

The state attracts tourists to its historical forts, palaces, art and culture. The palaces of Jaipur, lakes of Udaipur, and desert forts of Jodhpur, Bikaner & Jaisalmer are among the most popular tourist destinations in India.



Goa

A Portuguese colony until 1961, the state of Goa is famous for its excellent beaches, places of worship, and its world heritage architecture. It is also renowned for its food and culture, both of which are very different to the rest of India.



Kerala

The state of Kerala is especially well known for its ecotourism industry. One of the states most prominent tourist destinations are the backwaters, a chain of lakes and lagoons that are easily navigable by houseboat.



Varanasi

Situated on the banks of the Ganges, it is regarded as a holy city by Hindus, Buddhists and Jains, and is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. It has been a cultural and religious centre of North India for millennia.



Golden Temple

Located in the city of Amritsar, it is the spiritual and cultural centre of Sikhism. Completed in 1604, it is one of the most visited pilgrimage centres in India.

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- ¹ Encyclopædia Britannica, 'India', *Britannica Online Encyclopædia*, 2011, <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/285248/India>>.
- ² E. Thorpe & S. Thorpe, *The Pearson CSAT Manual 2011*, (New Delhi, Saurabh Printers Ltd, 2011).
- ³ BBC, 'From Empire to Independence: The British Raj in India 1858-1947', *BBC History*, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/modern/independence1947_01.shtml>.
- ⁴ CIA, 'The World Factbook: India', *CIA World Factbook*, 2011, <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/in.html>>.
- ⁵ *Maps of India*, 'India Climate', 2009, <<http://www.mapsofindia.com/india-climate.html>>.
- ⁶ See 4
- ⁷ *Census of India 2011*. <<http://www.censusindia.gov.in>>.
- ⁸ Kevin Hobson, 'The Indian Caste System and the British: Ethnographic Mapping and the Construction of the British Census in India', *IMC*, 2003, <<http://india.indymedia.org/en/2003/02/3317.shtml>>.
- ⁹ See 1
- ¹⁰ A. Ramaiah, 'Identifying Other Backward Classes', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 6 June 1992, pp.1203-1207.
- ¹¹ Sheela Bhatt, 'What More Do the Upper Castes Want?', *Rediff News*, 16 May 2006, <<http://in.rediff.com/news/2006/may/16inter2.htm>>.
- ¹² Francois Gautler, 'Are Brahmins the Dalits of Today?', *Rediff News*, 23 May 2006, <<http://ia.rediff.com/news/2006/may/23franc.htm?q=tp&file=.htm>>.
- ¹³ See 1
- ¹⁴ IMF, 'World Economic Outlook Database', *IMF Data*, 2011, <<http://www.imf.org/external/ns/cs.aspx?id=28>>.
- ¹⁵ See 1
- ¹⁶ See 4
- ¹⁷ *The Economist*, 'A Special Report on India: The Democracy Tax is Rising', 11 December 2008, <http://www.economist.com/node/12749771?story_id=12749771>.
- ¹⁸ See 1