



# INDIA

A COUNTRY PROFILE FROM INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS, INC.

## GEOGRAPHY

The Republic of India's 1.27 million square miles feature a varied and diverse landscape, including deserts, jungles and the world's tallest mountain system. Roughly one-third the size of the U.S, India dominates the subcontinent of South Asia.

The Himalayan Mountains extend across India's northern border, acting as a meteorological barrier for the rest of the country. Three major river systems—the Ganges, the Indus, and the Brahmaputra—flow from the Himalayas, fanning out into the rich plains below.

The Ganges Plain in the northeast is one of the most densely populated areas in the world. Half of India's land is cultivated; another one-quarter is forested.

The northern part of India is surrounded by Pakistan to the west, China, Nepal, and Bhutan to the north, and Myanmar and Bangladesh on the east. The southern section of the country juts into the Indian Ocean.

Heat dominates India's climate south of the Himalayas for most of the year. The climate can be divided into three seasons: a dry, hot season from March to June; a hot, rainy season—called the "monsoon"—through September; and a cool winter from October through February.

Across India, the arrival of the monsoon is welcomed with song and dance. The occasional failure of the monsoon can be devastating, since it brings 85 percent of the country's rainfall.

## PEOPLE & LANGUAGE

With over 1 billion people, India is the second-most populous country in the world, growing at 1.4 percent annually. India occupies only 2.4 percent of the world's land area, but supports over 15 percent of the world's population.

**India spends more money on family planning than any other government in the world.**

More than 300 languages are spoken in India, 24 of which are spoken by at least one million people. Hindi, the national language, is spoken by less than half the population. Many states or provinces have their own primary language. English is widely used in business, education, and government.

India has a richly diverse racial and ethnic mix, due to the settlers and invaders who have merged with the local population through the centuries.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic grips 3.97 million (2001 est.) in India.

## MAJOR CITY CENTERS

India's capital, the northern city of New Delhi, is home to 17.3 million. Mumbai, on India's west coast with 17 million people, and Kolkata in the east (14.3 million), are the largest cities. Other major cities include Chennai (6 million), Hyderabad (5.8 million), and Bangalore (5.7 million). Nearly 32 percent of India's people live in the country's urban areas.

## POLITICAL HISTORY

India has one of the world's oldest civilizations, dating back 5,000 years. Over the centuries, India has flourished under several empires. Around the sixteenth century, European nations began trading with India. Operating as part of the East India Company, the English gradually expanded their influence in the region, until India officially became part of the British Empire in the nineteenth century.

In the 1920s, a nationalist movement led by Mahatma Gandhi began to spread. The nonviolent revolt eventually led to India's independence, granted on August 15, 1947. The British however, divided British India by creating a Muslim homeland, the country of Pakistan, in the north.

Shortly thereafter, India became a republic in the British Commonwealth. India's government is patterned after Britain's parliamentary system. An elected president appoints the prime minister, who serves as India's executive head. India is divided into 25 states, each with its own governor, and seven union territories.

India is now seeking to strengthen its political and commercial ties

with the U.S. In addition, India has always been an active member of the United Nations and now seeks a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Recently, India contributed personnel to UN Operations in Mozambique, Kuwait, Bosnia, Angola, and El Salvador.

The war in Iraq that began on March 19, 2003 has been seen to have set a precedent for authorizing pre-emptive strikes on hostile states. The idea that India and Pakistan might adopt such a policy toward one another has caused international concern. In April 2003, spokesmen from both India and Pakistan asserted that the grounds on which the U.S.-led coalition attacked Iraq also existed in each other's countries.

India and the U.S. have had alternately cordial and strained relations through the years, although relations as of late have been friendly. Friction has arisen in the past as a result of the countries' differing world views and the U.S.'s military assistance to Pakistan.

## ECONOMY

India is a nation rich in natural resources, including diamonds,

coal, iron, ore, rubber, timber, and fertile croplands. Agriculture is still the focal point of the Indian economy, employing 62 percent of workers. India is a leading producer of rice, tea, wheat, sugar, cotton, coffee, spices, and tobacco.

The country has made great strides in industrial development the last few decades, and now ranks as one of the world's top manufacturing nations. Textile manufacturing is the primary industry.

Major exports include crude oil, engineering goods, precious stones, clothing and fabrics, handicrafts, and tea. The U.S. is India's leading trading partner.

Despite recent economic improvements, India is still hampered by a double-digit unemployment rate as well as communication and transportation bottlenecks. The per capita average annual income is \$420 in U.S. currency. India's growing middle-class, however, now 150-200 million strong, continues to expand and exert its influence in every sphere of life.

A series of economic reforms in 1991 in reaction to a severe foreign exchange crisis have had some very beneficial effects on the

Indian economy, including higher growth rates, lower inflation, and significant increases in foreign investment. Growth is constrained, however, by inadequate infrastructure, cumbersome bureaucratic procedures, and high real interest rates.

## EDUCATION

The government has touted education as the way to escape India's widespread poverty, but progress has been slow. The literacy rate is 59.5 percent overall—and nearly twice as high among males as females. Educational opportunities for women and the lower classes were limited in the past, though changes have been implemented.

Schooling is free and compulsory to age 14. Many children, however, do not attend, and many of the country's schools lack adequate facilities and resources.

For the academic school year 2002/03, over 74,500 Indian students attended colleges and universities in the U.S. Most of these students come from the higher castes and affluent backgrounds and may not adhere to many of the traditional cultural and religious practices and beliefs still prevalent throughout India.

## CULTURE

The caste system, which divides the population into distinct social categories (or castes) based on heritage, dominates India's society, even though caste discrimination is officially forbidden by the country's constitution. The system is so closely intertwined with India's dominant religion, Hinduism, that a person's career, marriage partner, and social influence are still often determined by the caste into which he or she is born. This is especially true in rural areas. In major cities, education and Western influences have broken down some of the caste barriers.

Within the caste system Brahmins, the priestly caste, rank the highest, followed by the Kshatriyas (nobility and soldiers), the Vaishyas (craftsmen and merchants), and then the Sudras (common laborers). At the bottom, totally outside the caste system, are the "out-casts."

India's society is male-dominated, with women often excluded from social functions and conversation. In fact, India is a rarity among countries in that it has a higher population of men than women. Critics attribute this fact to preferential care given to male children.

The family is the basic social unit in India, taking precedence over the individual. Large families are common, and extended families often live with or very near one another.

Marriage is highly regarded in India; few individuals of marriageable age remain unmarried, and widows are often accorded inferior status. Traditional marriages are still arranged by parents. Divorce, which is rare but becoming more common, brings shame to the entire family. As with many cultural aspects in India, these generalizations apply more to the rural majority than to urban populations.

Conformity and preserving unity are highly valued traits in India. Those characteristics, coupled with the Indian's typically fatalistic outlook—a by-product of Hinduism—combine to inhibit change and creative growth.

Another key to understanding Indian culture is to realize vast cultural differences exist between India's different regions and peoples. During the last century, though, efforts have resulted in increased uniformity.

India is home to the

world's largest film industry. Nearly every major city has at least a hundred theatres, although the increasing number of televisions in India has cut into their popularity.

Favorite sports in India include cricket, soccer, field hockey, wrestling, and horse racing. The Indian culture in general is not as entertainment-oriented as that of the U.S.

## HOLIDAYS

Regional and religious festivals dot the Indian calendar throughout the year. India's national holidays include International New Year's Day (January 1), Republic Day (January 26), Independence Day (August 15), Mahatma Gandhi's Birthday (October 2), and Jawaharal Nehru's Birthday/Children's Day (November 14).

Numerous Hindu festivals celebrate such things as seasonal changes, the triumph of good over evil, and certain deities. In addition, specific days are set aside for major Christian and Muslim holidays.

## RELIGION

Religion infiltrates

nearly every aspect of life in India, where Hinduism is practiced by 81.3 percent of the population. Born in India 4,000 years ago, Hinduism does not originate from the teachings of a particular individual or holy book.

The main tenets of Hinduism focus on the immortality of the human soul. Hindus believe in reincarnation, and that one's present station in life is the result of deeds in past lives. By living a virtuous life, an individual may be born into a higher caste the next time around. Conversely, a life of bad deeds may result in the individual returning as a fly, cat, or even a snake.

Hindus believe they must work their way up to the highest caste through successive reincarnations before they can exit life on earth and move on to a better existence. The aim of most Hindus, however, is merely to improve their condition in their next life.

Hindus believe there are many ways to God; no way excludes another. Therefore, a great deal of diversity exists within Hinduism.

Roughly 120 million Muslims live in India, one of the world's largest Muslim populations. Because of

Islam's monotheistic concepts and disdain for the caste system, Indian Muslims often find themselves at odds with the Hindu majority. Buddhism, which originated in India, claims only two percent of the population.

Sikhism, which borrows principles from Hinduism and Islam, began in India around the fifteenth century. Sikhs make up roughly two percent of the population and live mainly in Punjab state.

India's religious climate is in a constant state of flux, with new sects and religious leaders cropping up regularly.

## CHRISTIANITY

Christians in the southwest state of Kerala assert that Christianity was introduced to India by the apostle Thomas shortly after Christ's death. Others date the introduction around the fourth to sixth century.

Today, Christians constitute between two and three percent of India's population. The number of believers fluctuates widely according to geographic regions. Christian majorities actually exist in a few Indian states, such as Mizoram and Nagaland.

No area of the world, however, has such a diverse and concentrated group of unreached people. Only a fraction of Indian villages have churches. In addition, there is a nationwide shortage of pastors.

In 1984, the Indian government instituted a ban on career foreign missionaries entering the country. As a result, there is approximately one foreign missionary for every million Indians. In the last few years, however, thousands of native missionaries supported by local churches have begun to spread the Gospel.

Most Christians in India come from the lowest social classes. Those from higher castes, therefore, often view Christianity with contempt. Christians have suffered persecution and discrimination in some areas, even though, technically, India grants freedom of religion.

Evangelistic growth has been hampered by the fact that few believers witness to non-Christians, and because of the pervasiveness of Hinduism in India's culture. For many, embracing Christianity means being cut off from family and friends. Because family ties are so strong, this is a real hindrance.

## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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