TOP TEN THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT INDIA IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

By Itty Abraham

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1. India is Like Europe, But Also Not Like Europe

Most Americans have heard of India, but might struggle to describe it. A suitable analogy would be the European Union. The EU is composed of a mosaic of twenty-seven countries that have some things in common, for example, proximity and climate, as well as institutions such as parliament and a currency; but also some dissimilarities, such as language and food. European countries come in all sizes, from Lichtenstein to Germany. India, similarly, is composed of twenty-nine constituent elements known as states, as well as eight union territories that are directly ruled from the capital, New Delhi. Union territories tend to be small, sometimes less than half a million people, while many Indian states are larger than most countries of the world. India's largest state, Uttar Pradesh, has over 200 million people, more than the populations of Germany, France, and Spain combined. India has a single currency, the rupee, and a national parliament, as well as elected legislatures in each of the states. Over twenty languages are recognized as "official," including English. Another 400-odd dialects are spoken. Most Indians, like most Europeans, are polylingual and find it normal to switch between languages depending on context. Like Europe, India is enormously diverse while somehow retaining a commonality of feeling that never allows the visitor to forget where they are.

What is very different between the EU and India is the proportion of people to land. India has 1.3 billion people in a territory of some 3.3 million square kilometers (approximately 1.3 million square miles). The EU includes roughly half a billion people in a region of 4.5 million square kilometers (approximately 1.7 million square miles). India is, in other words, a lot more densely populated than Europe. India is also a lot poorer on average than the EU, but has its fair share of billionaires as well (roughly the same as Germany's 114). What is notably different is each region's demographic profile and gender balance. The average EU person is a forty-three-year-old woman, the average Indian a twenty-nine-year-old man. Unlike Europe and the rest of the world, India has many more men than women (115 male babies born for every 100 girls), a grim statistic it shares with only one other country, China. This unequal ratio points to a structural bias against women in India, a reflection of widely held social attitudes that still prefer male children over females.

2. Not All Indians Are Vegetarians

There is a common impression that most Indians are vegetarians. Far from it. Indians eat all manner of meats, including beef and pork, with mutton—the name given to goat meat in India—the most expensive meat in a typical food market. Chicken has become increasingly popular in recent decades, with industrial broiler farms becoming more common, leading to greater supply and lower cost, even if at the expense of taste, as many would argue. American-style fast food restaurants, including the bright red splash of a Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet, are now common sights in most Indian cities. Of course, for religious reasons, Hindus may choose not to eat beef and Muslims pork. As with linguistic diversity, food habits vary considerably by region. Broadly speaking, Northern Indians prefer wheat, while the south is a rice-dominated area. In the heavily Christian-populated northeast zone of the country abutting Burma/Myanmar and Tibet, pork is extremely popular. In the south, it is not uncommon to

A Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet in the City Centre Mall in Kolkata, West Bengal, India.
Source: © ZUMA Press, Inc./Alamy.

cook food in coconut oil, while in (eastern) Bengal, mustard oil is a must in every kitchen. Fish and seafood are widely eaten on the coasts. Each region of India claims to have its own indigenous mango, the most popular fruit in India. Disagreements about which mango is the best variety have torn friends and families apart for centuries. Being "pure" vegetarian was long associated with being upper caste, especially Brahmin. That association remains true today, even as the ranks of vegetarians have swelled due to modern urban concerns about health, looks, and global peer pressure.

3. Curry and Early Globalization

Most people associate Indian food with colorful spices and hot curries. While this is certainly true today, it is worth recalling that before the New World was "discovered," Indian cuisine did not have the fiery blast that comes with the green chili pepper (*capsicum annuum*). The Portuguese were the first to introduce the chili to India in the sixteenth century, along with other New World vegetables such as potatoes and tomatoes, foods that are now considered absolute staples of Indian cooking. There were always plenty of spices to go around, from pepper and asafetida to ginger and garlic, so premodern Indian chefs didn't lack for options, but the taste and look of the final product would have been quite different as a result. The Portuguese are also responsible, we are told, for linking the name "curry" with Indian cuisine. According to historians, on hearing the Tamil word *kari*, or sauce, they began to call all Indian food curry, which soon evacuated the word of any precise meaning. Once invented, however, curry powder, essentially a curated mix of dried spices, seems to have traveled rather quickly around the world. An eighteenth-century English recipe for pilau or pilaf (referring to meats cooked together with rice) required the use of cloves, cinnamon, and whole peppers, suggesting that Indian food

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and its ingredients were well-known and available enough to become part of European home cooking by that time, at least for the well-to-do.

4. How Older Indians Think, How Younger Indians Behave

There is a significant generational divide in India today. The division can be dated roughly to 1980, with those born before that date being "older" and those born after described as "younger" for the purpose of this essay. This shorthand captures far-reaching differences in the ways that different generations of Indians think—of themselves, their country, and their possible futures.

Older Indians grew up in a country that was fully engaged in freeing itself from the memory and legacies of colonial rule. Even for those born after independence from Great Britain in 1947, the shadow of colonial rule still fell over the country in numerous everyday ways: in the names of roads and towns, content of school curricula, the legal system, the uniforms of the police and army, and much more. Paths to social mobility were still shaped by colonial mores. For the tiny middle class, status was wrapped up in attending a small number of schools and colleges, living in one of the four major metropolitan areas, and joining a narrow set of exclusive social clubs and professions. Even as the country was presenting itself as a new and different kind of place on the world stage, representing a radical postcolonial sensibility, domestic structures of power still hewed to standards that looked to the past and overseas. The common sense of a natural social hierarchy joined comfortably with an antipopular ethos in the minds of Indian postcolonial elites, justified in terms of a meritocracy legitimated by national examinations and international standards. The state and public service was broadly respected and even admired, although most politicians were probably not considered of the same class as those in the elite civil services who worked for them. Rapid social change and conservative moral discourse went hand in hand. India's poverty was an embarrassment to this older generation. When they looked overseas, they felt Indian modernity lagged behind, making it their job to catch up to the world in the shortest time possible. Not everyone was sure this could be done.

This older generation has given way to a younger one, just as India's most popular sport, cricket, has changed radically between 1980 and today. Over this period, cricket, formerly a languid and lengthy (three- to five-day) event for largely male fans broadcast over the radio, transformed into a highly entertaining three-hour thriller played under lights for a global television audience. The extent of change might be compared to the symbolic distance between traditional sumo wrestling and the WWE. Needless to say, the money involved was qualitatively transformed as well. T-20 cricket, as the shortest form of the game is called, is now a multibillion-dollar global business.

During these years, the idea and self-image of India and Indians changed irreversibly as well. Beginning in the early 1990s, India's world went through a radical change. With the end of the Cold War, long-standing international relationships, especially with the Soviet Union, ended. A staid, state-centric, inward-looking, and risk-averse economic model collapsed. Globalization was the new watchword, and there was no plan in place of how to deal with it. To the surprise of many, India coped remarkably well with this new world order, coming out of the last decade of the twentieth century as a great power in the making. In short order, India had become a global powerhouse in services, especially in information technology-related, entertainment, and pharmaceutical sectors, building a huge generic drug industry that sold cheap medicines to the world. What had changed as well was the attitude of young Indians who now saw the world as their oyster.

The generational transition is epitomized by Mahendra Singh Dhoni, a virtuoso athlete born in 1981 who would go on to become India's most successful cricket captain ever. Dhoni was born in a small town in middle India, well outside the metro glitter, to an undistinguished lower-middle-class Hindu family. His cricketing ability and a bit of luck took him at a young age to the national team, and from that point on, he never looked back. Building on his substantial sporting accomplishments, Dhoni became both hugely wealthy and a national icon who came to represent an entire generation of young Indian men. These were youth who had grown up in second- and third-tier cities, and lacked the kind of cultural capital that would have been necessary for success in earlier generations, including fluency in English. What they had was a surfeit of ambition and confidence, while being secure enough in their vernacular identities to offer a new model of Indian masculinity for the twenty-first century.

Growing up in a country that was booming for the first two decades of their lives, the market rather than politics dominates their imaginations. They feel no responsibility for Indian poverty. For this generation, the nation is supreme, while the state is seen to suffer from an acute and permanent case of venality. Nationalism trumps patriotism, and institutions are less important than loyalty to individual personalities. There is broad indifference to the collective commitments of the past, especially if these are not also means to wealth and power. This generation believes it belongs to one of the most important countries of the world and fully expects India to become a member of the UN Security Council before long.

When it becomes apparent that India isn't the best at everything it does—whether every four years at the Olympics or currently with the coronavirus pandemic—it comes as a shock. On every front today—political, economic, domestic, external—the country is facing the most

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complex crises this generation has ever known, with no end in sight. It is an open question whether young India is up to the challenge.

5. The World's Largest Democracy

Indians are fond of describing themselves as the "world's largest democracy." (They acknowledge the US as the world's oldest one.) This description is certainly true if we consider the sheer scale of an Indian election—an electorate of nearly one billion people casting votes in over one million polling booths using four million voting machines overseen by eleven million election officials. No other country even comes close. But when we turn from the enormously impressive election logistics to the quality of Indian democracy, a different tale emerges. India's formal democratic record has been almost uninterrupted since the secular republic was announced in 1950, a record that compares very well to most postcolonial states. When the Constitution was passed, many observers criticized contemporary Indian leaders for expanding the electorate to include all citizens, regardless of educational level or income. But for this leadership, political equality was an irrevocable commitment and a foundational principle of the struggle for independence from colonial rule. Their faith was not betrayed. India's population, including the illiterate, poor, and marginalized, took to elections with enthusiasm. Participation has remained consistently between 50 and 70 percent for the last seven decades.

6. What Indians Expect from Politics

Although faith in government remains remarkably high, expectations of what government can and will do have changed a lot. If in the past there was an idea that the proper role of government was to act as a brake or regulator of the worst excesses of capitalism and social difference, that view is entirely discredited today. It is widely acknowledged that there is one set of rules for the well-connected and another for everyone else. No one seems to care that politicians inevitably become richer upon being elected while those around them benefit from rent-seeking opportunities that come in the wake of public office. Everyone knows that access to resources is directly correlated with the ability to shape outcomes—whether economic, legal, or judicial—to one's advantage. The government responds with alacrity to those who make the loudest noise, who also tend to be the already-privileged. Public protest is common, but not from those facing the everyday injustices of a deeply unequal and hierarchical society. Strikes, boycotts, marches, and protests are the everyday tactics of the well-established, not excluding professionals such as lawyers and doctors.

At the same time, and dating back to the origins of the republic, there is a continued if weakened expectation that "have-nots" must be cared for by the state. As India has become wealthier overall, welfare payments to the poor have increased in scope and size, eliminating the most egregious outcomes of poverty such as mass starvation. The economist Amartya Sen points out that the practical effects of a democratic system are such that while extraordinary deaths from famine have been eliminated, excess deaths due to the "slow violence" of everyday poverty are still very much in place.

7. Miserable Mass Media

A critical institution in the maintenance of a liberal democracy is a free media. In the days when the media meant print—daily newspapers and magazines—journalists used to be highly respected members of the public sphere. The annals of Indian journalism have no shortage of accounts of governments and public figures being toppled through rigorous and brave reporting. With time and technology, however, two simultaneous trends are visible. One is the proliferation of media outlets—as with elsewhere, the mix has shifted from print to electronic and digital modes; the number of TV channels has risen to close to 1,000—and the other is the consolidation of what were once multiple media groups serving different regional and linguistic markets into a smaller and more concentrated national oligopoly. This means that while a greater proportion of the Indian population now has access to mass media than ever before (or the reverse, depending on your point of view), the diversity of opinions expressed via these channels has shrunk significantly. TV news is driven by ratings and has become coterminous with entertainment following the Fox News model. What attracts eyeballs are extreme views expressed at top volume, ideally involving scandals joining celebrities with national security and illicit money. Challenging the government is far less common for fear of retaliation; few would disagree that, when compared to the past, this is now a cowed industry that panders to power.

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8. Lowering of the High Court

The Indian judiciary, too, has declined in public prestige and standing, although it remains a vital last bastion of restraint on executive power. While once justices of higher courts were widely considered paragons of virtue (even if they were not), now even the Supreme Court cannot free itself of the stench of corruption, political expediency, and compromise. The judiciary in India reflects society, it does not lead it; just as social norms have steadily coarsened and expectations of public probity plummeted in recent decades, so too has the standing of the judiciary. Money talks everywhere, and nowhere more than in the courtroom, given the high stakes involved. As Indian society has drifted steadily rightward, less tolerant of religious and ethnic minorities and more accepting of an exclusivist majoritarian Hindu identity as the national standard, judicial rulings have followed suit. This only comes as a surprise because of a lingering feeling, drawn from the older generation, that state institutions and the media transcended parochial interests and spoke to society's better natures. We would have been less surprised had we consulted those long consigned to the margins of Indian society: Dalits, once called Untouchables; Tribals; and Muslims.

9. Struggles for Justice

For those who have seen the growth of the Black Lives Matter movement since 2014, beginning in Ferguson, Missouri, and becoming in 2020 the greatest expression of antiracial feeling in the US since the civil rights movement, social movements that seek to mobilize India's Dalits and Tribals will seem all too familiar. In fact, there are direct connections between these movements dating back to 1972, when radical intellectuals and writers named their burgeoning movement Dalit Panthers, inspired by the example of the Black Panther movement in the US. "Dalit" is the

Screen capture of a segment debating Bollywood "corruption" from the September 22, 2020, Republic TV broadcast of *The Debate with Arnab Goswami*. Republic TV is an Indian right-wing news channel launched in May 2017. Source: "Bollywood Muck & Stink Exposed: Celebrities Under Scrutiny" from *The Debate With Arnab Goswami* on YouTube at https://tinyurl.com/ycnctxhr.

The oldest community of Punjabi-Mexican-Americans is said to be found in Yuba City, California.

A Punjabi–Mexican–American couple, Valentina Alarez and Rullia Singh posing for their wedding photo in 1917. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at https://tinyurl.com/y5kx5bwf.

name claimed by the millions of people who are considered to belong to the lowest rung of the social hierarchy: so low that they are considered outside caste, "human disposal machines for the impurity of others," as one scholar puts it in horrifying language. If Dalits may be compared with African-Americans seeking equality and justice, the condition of Tribals in India is similar to once-sovereign Native American nations repeatedly dispossessed of their lands by missionaries, colonizers, settlers, and the military. Tribals are descendants of India's indigenous people, also dispossessed and forced into ever-shrinking forest reservations, although their sovereignty has never been recognized in law. Some Tribals have taken recourse to arms in response to their social and economic marginalization, to which the Indian state has reacted with violence of its own.

India may be a secular democracy in name, but it is also an extremely unequal and unfair place to live in if you are not wealthy, from the highest castes, the upper classes, or a straight man. The historical direction of change has been from pluralism and openness to illiberal authoritarianism. To be sure, India's massive size, diversity, and inefficiency of its security forces make it hard for any government to be effectively and evenly repressive. But for those who confront state power directly, there is very little recourse to the tacit and explicit protections that make the term "liberal democracy" meaningful in practice.

10. India and the United States

Moving beyond comparison, while Indians are a common sight in the US today, their presence in large numbers is relatively recent, dating back to the revision of US immigration rules in 1965. But the presence of India in the New World is not new. In the early eighteenth century, a generous donation from the governor of Madras (now Chennai) would lead to the Collegiate School in New Haven being renamed Yale University in honor of its colonial benefactor. The *Smithsonian Magazine* reports that nearly a century later, an elephant was shipped from India to Salem, Massaschusetts, and eventually sold in New York City for $10,000, a staggering amount for the times. These anecdotes remind us of the regular maritime traffic between the northeastern seaboard of the US and India. No small number of Yankee fortunes were built on the East India trade, which included most famously Indian black tea—for those who remember the Boston Tea Party—but also white Massachusetts ice, which was shipped east to cool the fevered brows and sundowner drinks of British officials and Indian princes. In 1913, the Indian Nobel Laureate and poet Rabindranath Tagore spent some months in Urbana–Champaign visiting his son, who was studying agriculture at the University of Illinois. Even before World War I, Indian immigrants and demobilized Indian soldiers of the British Army began to work in the lumberyards and agricultural fields of the western US and Canada. Like other Asians, they struggled against legal restrictions on owning property and obtaining full citizenship due to race-based exclusions. One remarkable story of adaptation concerns Indian men who married Mexican women in the early years of the twentieth century; the oldest community of Punjabi–Mexican–Americans is said to be found in Yuba City, California. Similar stories of adaptation can be found on the East Coast as well, dating from the same time. Bengali-speaking merchants and sailors who jumped ship found sanctuary with Puerto Rican and African–American communities in large cities such as New York and Detroit, and as far south as New Orleans, creating novel and hybrid legacies for the present that one scholar has called Bengali Harlem.

Today, US Vice President Elect Senator Kamala Harris traces her name and origins to a mother from Chennai and a father from Jamaica. Her heritage sounds unusual, even exotic, but it isn't really when seen in the larger context of the long history of relations between the US and India, for now the world's oldest and largest democracies. ■