

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

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1. Indian Elections Are a Sight to Behold

Every Indian federal election breaks its previous record as the world's largest electoral exercise. In the 2019 such election, about 900 million Indians were eligible to vote. Sixty-seven percent of them showed up at the voting booth, a percentage higher than in most democracies, including the US.

Indians take their elections quite seriously. The Election Commission, enjoying a high level of public trust where such trust is generally hard to come by, strives to set up enough voting stations that no voter must travel more than two kilometers (approximately 1.2 miles) from home. The commission's logistical feats are the stuff of Democrats' lore everywhere. Voting equipment is transported on elephants through thick forests, in boats across crocodile-infested swamps, and in sleighs over snow-capped mountains. For the 2019 elections, the commission set up more than a million polling stations, one of which was set up for the benefit of a single registered voter.

The elections are no mere formality; political power is seriously contested. Around 2,300 political parties (including those contesting only state or local elections) are officially registered. The 105,443 newspapers/periodicals registered with the Registrar of Newspapers for India (RNI) convey every shade of political opinion, from longing for British colonial rule to calls for a Maoist revolution. Incumbents are frequently voted out of office.

Election days have an air of festivity. People wake up early to queue outside the polling stations, with women decked out in their finest jewelry. The poor in India vote at a higher rate than the nonpoor, and at a rate higher than even the poor in developed democracies. It seems they maintain faith in the country's democracy and its promises.

Though there are electoral malpractices, very few people seriously dispute that the results by and large reflect the will of the people. The results, though, often upend the expectation of those with a high-minded conception of democratic politics. Forty-three percent of newly elected parliamentarians in the 2019 national election had previously faced criminal charges, ranging from hate speech and robbery to murder and terrorism.

2. India Is the Most Linguistically Diverse Country

Around 180 languages are spoken in India. Thirty-two of those have more than a million speakers, and twenty-two of them are officially "recognized" as major languages. These are not mere dialects but distinct languages with their own scripts. English and French have more in common with each other—a common script, for example, and words with a common root—than many Indian languages do with each other. There is only a 36 percent chance that two Indians selected at random will be able to converse in a common language.

The country's institutions reflect and accommodate the linguistic plurality. One can listen to radio programs in one of 146 languages and read a newspaper in one of thirty-five. Around eighty languages are taught in at least one school. The National Academy of Letters gives out literary awards in twenty-four language categories. Each currency note spells out its denomination in fifteen scripts. Most of the twenty-eight Indian states are demarcated on the basis of language so that speakers of each language group can enjoy a certain level of cultural autonomy and identity.

After Independence, the national leaders aspired to adopt Hindi, a north Indian language spoken by slightly less than half the population, as the sole official language. Many non-Hindi speakers, however, viewed the adoption as a cultural imposition. They refused to learn Hindi and thwarted its aggressive promotion as the lingua franca to replace the language of the old colonial power. English thus survived by default as the language of interstate and federal-state communication, federal judiciary, corporations, and higher education. Given the edge accrued to English speakers in the global economy, most upwardly mobile Indians have shed any misgivings about embracing the colonial remnant. India's English speakers now number 125 million, the largest such pool outside the United States.

3. India Is Religiously Diverse

About 80 percent of India's 1.3 billion people are Hindus, 14 percent are Muslims, and 2.3 percent are Christians. Smaller religious minorities include Sikhs, Parsees, Jains, and Buddhists. Given India's enormous population, the followers of the minority religions register heavily on the global

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Beawar, Rajasthan, India, September 28, 2020: Rajasthani veiled women wait in long queues to cast votes at a polling station during Panchayati Raj elections, amid coronavirus pandemic, at Sendra village. Source: © Shutterstock. Photo by Sumit Saraswat.

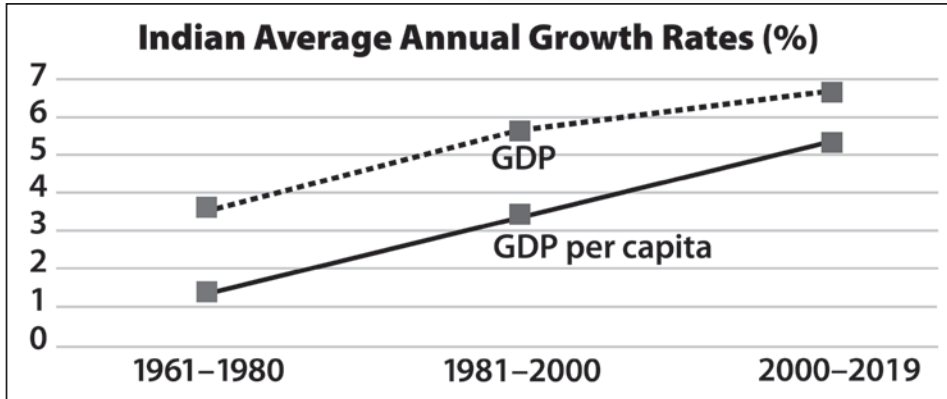


Figure 1. Indian Average Annual Growth Rates. Source: World Bank World Development Indicators.

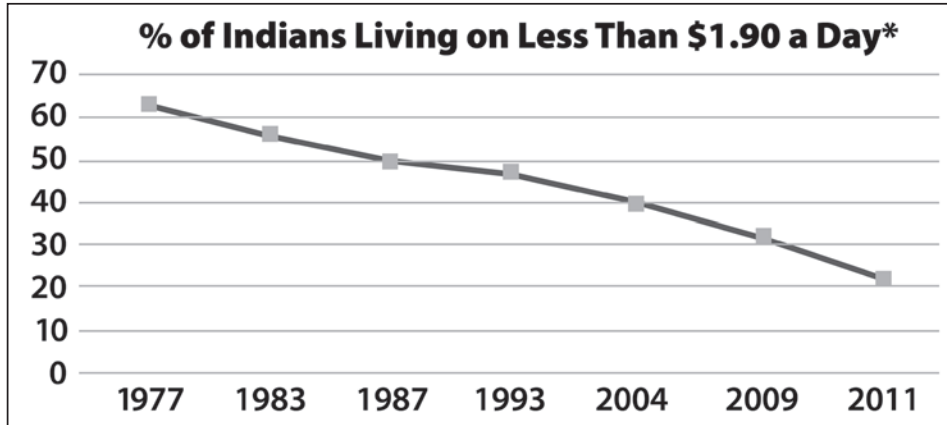


Figure 2. Percentage of Indians Living on Less Than US \$1.90 a Day* (at purchasing power parity of 2011 prices). Source: World Bank World Development Indicators.

scale. For example, Indian Muslims outnumber those in all the Middle Eastern countries put together (195 million versus 161 million), and Indian Christians outnumber Canadian ones (28 million versus 23 million).

Despite the Partition with Muslim-majority Pakistan at Independence, the leaders of the new Indian nation decisively rejected the notion of a Hindu state and fashioned a fastidiously secular Constitution. They went out of their way to reassure religious minorities of their place in the new nation by granting them autonomy in matters of personal law. For example, Muslims, but not others, are legally permitted to practice polygamy. Educational institutions run by foundations (or trusts) of minority religions are permitted to give preference to their coreligionists in admissions. Some of the most selective private schools and colleges in India are run by Christian trusts.

Social cleavages along religious lines, by some accounts, have deepened over the years. The tension is greatest between Hindus and Muslims, which has sometimes resulted in riots, political violence, and genocide. Politicians advocating a more assertive Hindu identity for India have gained electoral success in recent decades. They have leveraged Hindu grievances, real and imagined, against Muslims. Outside politics, greater comity has prevailed. Muslims and Parsees have founded some of India's most successful multinational corporations. A disproportionately high number of the most popular movie stars and artists are Muslim. India has had a Sikh prime minister (Manmohan Singh), two Muslim presidents (Zakir Hussain and Abdul Kalam), and a Catholic leader of a ruling party (Sonia Gandhi).

A consequence of its large Hindu and Jain populations is that the country is home to the world's largest number of vegetarians (500 million). Though not all Hindus are vegetarians, the practice has had enough of centuries-long critical mass for many of the country's culinary traditions to have grown around it. People outside India adopting vegetarianism for ethical, environmental, or health reasons often turn to Indian recipes for

ideas on how to make their diets tasty, filling, and wholesome.

4. India's Enduring Democracy Is a Major Outlier

While India's economic successes are much talked about, its political success—enduring as a single nation at relative peace despite major cleavages of caste, language, and religion—is more remarkable but less widely appreciated. India is known among political scientists to be an exception to many otherwise well-supported theories of how nation-states and democracies consolidate. Simply put, extrapolation from other countries predicts that a country as poor and as riven with religious and linguistic divisions as India will not endure as a single nation, let alone a democratic one. In an empirical model constructed by Przewoski et al., India was predicted to be a dictatorship from 1950 to 1990 on account of its low levels of literacy and high levels of social conflict. Given that India was a reasonably well-functioning democracy throughout this period, the study termed it as a “major outlier.”

5. India's Economy Is Booming like Few Others

The swarm of construction cranes jutting into the sky over Indian cities leaves no doubt that the country is in the midst of an economic boom. The change in the economic growth rates—plotted in Figure 1—is of great significance. The growth rate of the 1960s and 1970s (3 percent aggregate and 1 percent per capita) marked an improvement over the economic

performance in the first half of the twentieth century under colonial rule, when per capita income “grew” at the unimpressive rate of 0 percent. But the improvement was not sufficient to increase dramatically the low standard of living of the average Indian. At that rate, the average income would have doubled only every seventy-two years. Some commentators at the time dubbed the growth rate of the time the “Hindu rate of growth,” alluding to the common conception of Hindus as being fatalistically resigned to accepting their lot in life.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the growth rate boomed as a result of economic reforms. The average Indian could hope to double his standard of living every twenty years. In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, the growth rate accelerated further, ranking below only that of China's breakneck pace. The average Indian can now expect to double his income every thirteen years, amounting in a fivefold increase over the span of a generation!

The middle and upper classes have most obviously benefited from the boom. The glitzy skyscrapers, malls, and airports in India's cities can attest to that. But the poor have benefited, too. As Figure 2 shows, the percentage of the population living on less than \$1.90 a day (an international poverty line) has fallen steadily from 60 percent in 1977 to 20 percent in 2011. Outside of China, never have so many people been lifted above subsistence level so rapidly.

But it is one thing to leave behind the subsistence level and another to become solidly middle class. The path upward to the 300 million-strong middle class—making up only one-fourth of the population—remains narrow. Despite the boom, jobs in the formal economy, which comprise the most common gateway to the middle class, are not rising fast enough to absorb all—or even most—asplicants. A substantial percentage of previously poor find themselves stuck toiling as casual workers, shopkeepers, or

peddlers in the informal economy. The coronavirus recession is highlighting their economic precarity.

6. The Indian Economy Is Part Silicon Valley and Part Dickensian England

In cities such as Bangalore, Hyderabad, and Gurugram, many young Indians working for Amazon or Google (as well as homegrown companies such as Infosys and Wipro) stroll in office parks not unlike the ones in California. In between designing algorithms, coding, and playing “team building” rounds of foosball, many twenty-something, highly-educated techies in designer *kurtas* lounge about on their brightly colored funky furniture with a cup of freshly brewed *masala chai* in hand. They dream of their own venture capital-funded startups that would use machine learning to perform a range of tasks from detecting cancer early to getting more Americans to click on ads. They represent, at most, 2–3 percent of the population.

From here, one can travel to a slum ten kilometers (6.2 miles) away or a village 100 kilometers (62 miles) away and feel like one has arrived in nineteenth-century. Comprising around 50 percent of the country's population, the people living here use lanterns, and there is no running water. People defecate in the open sewage that runs next to their shacks, which are constructed by stretching plastic tarps over poles. Naked children frolic around on a garbage dump. Tuberculosis and leprosy—eliminated from many other parts of the world—leave the people here unfazed. People perform dangerous work in the fields or workshops with no personal protective equipment, or even shoes. Women squint and cough as they hunch over the smoke from their stoves burning dried cow dung cakes as fuel. Only the cellphones—that seem to have miraculously made their way into many such households where even indoor plumbing and electricity haven't—hint at the twenty-first century.

7. India's Population Is Youthful

More than 50 percent of India's population is less than twenty-five years old. For the US and China, the percentages are 35 percent and 42 percent, respectively. India's burgeoning youthful population means more workers and savers. The resulting economic boost expected is termed as the “demographic dividend.” India is the only large economy whose working-age population is expected to keep rising for at least two more decades. The working-age populations have been shrinking for a while in Japan and European countries, and more recently, in the US and China. India is thus a demographic outlier in a way that could give it some edge over other large economies.

But the size of the dividend will depend on how well the country harnesses the propitious demographic pattern. Are the youth properly fed, educated, supported, and liberated to realize their economic potential? On that front, the country's record so far has been mixed.

8. India's Gender Disparities Are Severe

There are approximately 940 women for every 1,000 men in India, while in North America and Europe, there are 1,050 women for every 1,000 men. Though low female-to-male ratios are observed in many Asian and North African countries, India's ratio is rather extreme. It is a product of two underlying disparities: (1) fewer girls being born compared to boys due to sex-selective abortion, which is illegal but prevalent; and (2) higher mortality among female children due to neglect. Both of these reflect a strong and stubborn cultural preference for male offspring.

The two countries' militaries, now nuclear-armed, face off along the world's longest militarized border.



India's militarized zone. Source: British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)

Similar disparities permeate every sphere. Seventy-five percent of Indian men are literate, while only 53 percent of Indian women are. The labor force participation rate of women is 20 percent, the tenth-lowest in the world. The comparable rates in the US and China are 56 percent and 60 percent, respectively. While the school enrollment rates for male and female children are more or less the same at the primary level, the picture turns bleak once girls reach adolescence. Sixty percent of girls drop out because of early marriages, the stigma associated with menstruation, poor bathroom facilities at school, or increased threat of sexual assault. Fifty-six percent of women are anemic. The average height of adult women in India is among the lowest in the world, a consequence of their severe childhood malnutrition.

Recently, some well-publicized cases of rape have drawn international spotlight on the country's record pertaining to gender violence. The statistics on domestic violence are particularly grim. In 2018, nearly 40 percent of violent crimes against women fell under the category of “cruelty by husband or his relatives.” Overall, an estimated 28.8 percent of all women face spousal violence over their lifetimes. The collective treatment of women in India belies the country's aspiration to moral leadership.

9. India Has the World's Largest Militarized Zone

Though the country justifiably prides itself for having assimilated many disparate regions, religious followers, and language groups into a single democratic nation-state, not all parts of the country sit easily within it. Kashmir, a Muslim-majority region that should have been part of Pakistan according to the logic of Partition, ended up a part of India, owing to a quirky turn of events. Consequently, the picturesque region of snow-capped peaks has been the site of competing territorial claims and two wars (in 1947 and 1965) between the neighbors. Insurgent guerilla warfare in the region continues and is abetted by Pakistan, which believes it has a right to the territory. Counterinsurgency operations by India have turned

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Kashmir, a region with significant tourism potential, into the world's largest militarized zone. The two countries' militaries, now nuclear-armed, face off along the world's longest militarized border and are always on a hair-trigger alert, providing the world a good scare now and then.

The Kashmiri population is bitterly divided by religion and on the question of their political future (India? Pakistan? Independence?), not that anyone is asking Kashmiris their opinion. Heavy-handed counterinsurgency operations by the Indian military wielding extrajudicial powers have resulted in innocents and dissidents being denied their civil liberties and human rights. It has alienated many of the region's moderates, radicalized its youth (burgeoning in numbers and underemployed as elsewhere in India), and convinced Pakistan further of India's fiendishness. The cycle of violence and heavy-handedness has escalated with no obvious end in sight, and it is incongruent with the country's self-image of a peaceful liberal democracy.

10. India's Movies Are a Popular Export

Indian commercial feature films beat yoga and chicken tikka masala in popularity outside of India. A distinctive feature of Indian films is that they are punctuated by short intervals of song and dance, often lavishly choreographed, in a dreamlike sequence, and tangentially related to the storyline. Some song and dance sequences become famous in their own right and enjoy a cachet in the popular culture independent of the film they appeared in. Some unaccustomed viewers find the sequences jarring ("The movie was set in Mumbai; how come all the characters are suddenly dancing in Switzerland?"), while for others it is a redeeming feature ("The storyline sucked, but I loved the songs. You should definitely watch the movie.").

Though Westerners have not gravitated to Indian films in huge numbers, audiences in South Asia, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and Africa have. The recurrent themes of tradition versus modernity, individuality versus community, etc., resonate more deeply with audiences in other similarly and rapidly modernizing societies. The global viewership of Indian films is second only to that of Hollywood. While Hollywood produces around 200 films a year, India produces around 1,000. Keeping with the country's linguistic diversity, the films are produced in around thirty languages. The Hindi-language film industry (nicknamed Bollywood) bags the biggest box office share.

The popularity of Indian films abroad gives India quite a bit of soft power. The films cultivate a taste abroad for Indian fashion, arts, and culture. Pakistanis are eager consumers of Indian movies, which are one of the few things that make it through the tightly sealed India-Pakistan border. After the decade-long Taliban regime fell, among the first things Afghans did was exchange pictures of Indian movie stars. In the 1950s, from behind the Iron Curtain, Russian audiences had so warmed towards Indian films that the name Raj—after the Hindi filmmaker Raj Kapoor—was common among Russian newborns. Today, one can find on YouTube homemade videos of Africans, Chinese, Central Asians, and Middle Easterners who do not speak Hindi mimic beautifully their favorite Hindi movie songs.

Plentiful representation from religious minorities in the films—indeed, for a decade at the turn of the century, the three male leads with the biggest box office draw were all Muslim—gives some credence to the country's claim to being inclusive and tolerant. The movies often portray the travails of religious minorities sympathetically. They also convey other liberal and progressive sensibilities, such as gender equality and, more recently, LGBT equality. Many audiences experiencing oppression elsewhere, therefore, see India as a shining city on the hill. ■