

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

By Coonoor Kripalani

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1. Population

India's population of 1.3 billion is the world's second-largest. It has one of the youngest populations of the world. Half the population is aged below twenty-five, while around 65 percent is aged under thirty-five. This demographic portends well for the country, which will have a relatively young workforce in the coming decades. Another unusual aspect of India's demographics is that there are unusually more males than females: 943 females to 1,000 males. Some experts explain this imbalance as being caused by neglect of women and female children, leading to their illness and death.

2. Constitution

India's Constitution is one of the most liberal and progressive (as well as one of the longest!). The preamble of the Indian Constitution guarantees each and every citizen justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity, regardless of sex, race, caste, or creed. This was based on the understanding of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution, that these issues were interdependent and meaningless without the inclusion of all. It also defines the Indian Republic as secular and democratic. So when India goes to the polls, it is the world's largest democracy that prepares to cast votes.

The Constitution of India ensures the freedom of worship. While over 80 percent of the population is Hindu, India is also home to a number of minority religions. India's Muslim population, second-largest in the world at approximately 195 million, accounts for about 14 percent of the population, while people of Sikh, Jain, Christian, Buddhist, Zoroastrian, and Jewish faiths make up the rest.

3. It's Not Just the Land of the Taj Mahal

The Taj Mahal, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the mid-seventeenth-century white marble mausoleum epitomizing Mughal architecture and high art, is perhaps the most well-known of India's heritage sites. But the Taj Mahal is a relatively new construction in a land that was home to a number of remarkable ancient civilizations.

Archaeological excavations in Sanghol, Punjab, and in Rakhigarhi, Haryana, as well as in Lothal and Dongavira in Gujarat, Kalibangan, near Bikaner in Rajasthan, and Alamgirpur near Meerut in Uttar Pradesh, have revealed the remains of Harappan civilization sites dating to 5,000 BCE, considered among the world's most ancient civilizations. Remains of stepped wells, drainage systems, well-planned towns, and artifacts found at these sites all indicate the spread of this ancient civilization in the former river basin of the Indus.

The Ajanta Caves in Maharashtra, not far from Aurangabad, are a complex of Buddhist caves built in two phases between the second century BCE and the mid-fifth century. The caves are adorned with sculptures and frescoes, one of the most iconic being that of Padmapani. Stunning interior architecture characterizes the cave temples, which were used as worship halls and monasteries for monsoon retreats of Buddhist monks, as well as rest stops for itinerant merchants and pilgrims.

In nearby Ellora, a rock-cut monastery and temple complex (600 to 1000 CE) in Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions is the Kailashnath



Top: The Ajanta Caves are approximately thirty rock-cut Buddhist cave monuments that date from the second century BCE to about 480 CE in Aurangabad district of Maharashtra state of India. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/y4jyx99>.



Left: Mural of the Bodhisattva of Compassion Padmapani with Blue Lotus in Cave 1. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/y4shxgnx>.

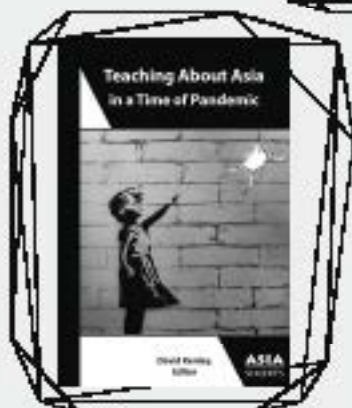


View of the Shikhara (top) of the Kailashnath Temple. The temple is the largest of the rock-cut Hindu temples at the Ellora Caves, Maharashtra, India. The top of the superstructure over the sanctuary is 107 feet above the level of the court below. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/yy8nu45>.

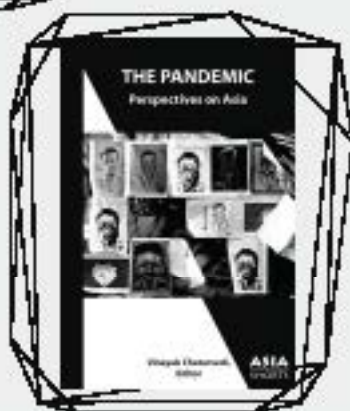


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Temple, an unexplained architectural feat that is said to have been carved into the rock from the top down. Over 100 caves at Ellora represent each of the three different religions and were used both for worship and as a travelers' rest stop.

Sanchi Stupa near Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh, a Buddhist monument housing relics of the Buddha, was started in the third century BCE. The complex continued to be built and enhanced over the centuries until the twelfth century CE. The relief sculptures of Sanchi reflect Greek influence on the carvings. Sanchi remains an important stop for Buddhist pilgrims.

In addition, numerous Hindu and Islamic archaeological sites such as forts, gardens, palaces, temples, and mosques dating from the earliest of times until the twenty-first century can be seen all around the country.

4. Storytelling and Retelling

India has a marvelous penchant for storytelling and retelling. This probably explains the endurance of the epics the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, their popularity across the country and across Southeast Asia, as well as the number of versions that exist.

In the case of the *Ramayana*, region, location, and who tells the story are all factors that weigh in the narrative. For many Indians, the narrative by the sage Valmiki is the definitive one, and it is this story that is enacted time and again when India's most famous holiday, Diwali, draws near. Street theater in towns and cities set up for the *Ramlila*, a theatrical production of the story of Ram and Sita. For almost a month before the day, various scenes of the epic tale are played out: how Ram won Sita's hand; the wedding of Ram and Sita; their exile to the forest for fourteen years; their travails in the forest; the kidnapping of Sita by Ravana, the ten-headed demon king of Lanka; Ram's search for Sita with the help of Hanuman, the Monkey God; and the battle waged by Ram against Lanka with the help of King Sugriva and his army of monkeys, culminating in the slaying of Ravana, on Dusshera, ten days before Diwali. This is often marked in a dramatic burning of three giant effigies: Ravana with all his ten heads standing in the center, flanked by his son Meghnad and brother Kumbhakaran. It is in the retelling that the excitement lies; audiences cheer the righteous characters and jeer at the villainous ones, knowing exactly what is to come.

In different states, where the telling is in different languages, small variations creep into the story. Sometimes, Sita is carried off in Ravana's golden chariot, while in other tellings she is traveling on Jatayu, a mythical bird. Some narratives change the relationship between principal characters. But even more surprisingly, the "villainous" Ravana is venerated in different parts of India as a highly evolved being with powers obtained by his penance and devotion to the gods. The legend informs us that his powers are so highly developed that he is a threat to the gods.

Nevertheless, the retelling of the *Ramayana* in any of its versions is one the nation never seems to tire of. A seventy-eight-episode TV series on the *Ramayana* created in 1987 for the national TV station Doordarshan has been replayed during the COVID-19 lockdown to an appreciative audience, together with B. R. Chopra's 1988 ninety-four-episode series on the *Mahabharata*. Once again, the nation has been happy to revisit these stories.

For many, Ram embodies the ideal Hindu man and Sita the ideal Hindu woman. The two epics together provide the guidelines to living by *dharma* (duty) and the law of karma (actions that dictate spiritual cause and effect), thus framing the code for ethical living. The epics have lent their ethos to many popular Hindi films that have shaped mass culture.

5. Film Industry

With a long history of film production, India has one of the largest film industries, producing well over 2,000 films per year. The country embraced this new medium in the late nineteenth century upon its introduction, with films based on mythological themes, as well as social issues. These films were heavily influenced by classical Indian theater and folk theater, as well as stories and themes from the epics, including their structure of



1885 photograph of Anandibai Joshi (left) from India, Kei Okami (center) from Japan, and Sabat M. Islambouli (right) from Ottoman, Syria, students from the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania. All three were the first woman from their respective countries to obtain a degree in Western medicine from a Western university.

Source: [Wikimedia Commons at https://tinyurl.com/y2mebrln](https://tinyurl.com/y2mebrln).

backstories and stories within stories. Early production centers in Madras (now Chennai), Bengal, and Maharashtra led to the production of regional films across the country and to Bollywood films, otherwise classified as popular Hindi films.

Many film directors and actors of the 1950s and 1960s, considered the golden era of Indian filmmaking, were members of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), a left-leaning group of creative intellectuals who created social realistic films. The world-famous auteur of Bengal Satyajit Ray produced the *Apu Trilogy* (1955–1959), inspiring films globally. These were also the decades of parallel cinema when production of art cinema flourished, but did not capture audiences like popular cinema did.

The 1970s saw the ascendancy of films portraying the “angry young man” essayed by Amitabh Bachchan, a giant in the industry today. 1970s' films also depicted inequities in society, together with issues of corruption, giving voice to the urban poor. By the late 1980s and into the twenty-first century, romantic films with catchy music gave a huge shot in the arm to the industry. These “feel good” films were a reflection of the mood of the nation, which was poised for prosperity in the wake of economic reform, speaking to an aspirational audience.

These years saw the dominance of the Three Khans: Aamir Khan, Shah Rukh Khan, and Salman Khan, three of the most popular actors of these decades. Their films captured international markets as well, giving the industry a higher profile within the economy. In the last decade, a number of young film stars have emerged with global celebrity status. They are followed in social media and the press with all the attendant glitz, as well as its darkest aspects.

Closure of movie theaters due to COVID-19 resulted in delays in the release of several films. Streaming services like Netflix, Prime Video, Apple TV, and others offer not only alternative viewing platforms, but also bypass the national censor board. As a result, many more unconventional and creative Indian films and series are finding a place on these platforms.

Post-2020, it is likely that Indian films will find more viewers in global markets on these platforms.

6. Digital Nation

India is one of the largest suppliers of global digital services, earning the country approximately US \$191 billion in revenues. Among the major companies are Accenture PLC, HCL Technologies Ltd., International Business Machines Corp., Infosys Ltd., Serco Group PLC, Tata Consultancy Services Ltd., Tech Mahindra Ltd., and Wipro Ltd. The industry is one of the biggest employers in the country, producing both hardware and software. Bengaluru in south India is the Silicon Valley of India, home to spanking-clean campus-like premises of various IT companies and the headquarters of Infosys.

The industry accounts for 45 percent of India's service exports. Operating in about eighty countries, India's IT industry is expected to increase to US \$266.46 billion by 2024.

Domestically, the Modi government has given a big push to introduce a cashless digital economy through various measures, particularly payment apps like PayTM. The Aadhaar card is a national identity card that gives every citizen access to essential services, as well as food rations at controlled prices. A separate PAN card is required of those availing banking services.

7. Women in Science and Medicine

In 2019, when ISRO's (Indian Space Research Organization) second spacecraft—*Chandrayaan-2*—lifted off to the moon, images of the charged atmosphere at the space station revealed a number of sari-clad women scientists. They were senior scientists in charge of the mission, most of whom had also worked on the Mars Orbiter Mission (MOM) of 2013. Role models for girls in STEM, they comprise a fraction of the 20 to 25 percent of women employees of ISRO's total of 16,000. Amongst them were Dr. Seeta Somasundaram, a space instrumentation expert, and Program Director of the Space Science Program Office; Nandini Harinath, Mission Design, Deputy Operations Director, MOM; Scientist-Engineer, and Minal Rohit, Project Manager, Methane Sensor for Mars (MSM) who also worked as Systems Engineer for *Chandrayaan-2*. The lead women scientists for the *Chandrayaan-2* mission are aerospace engineer Ritu Karidhal, Mission Director, and expert data handler Vinitha Muthayya, Project Director, while Dr. Shyama Narendranath, Instrument Operations Scientist, is in charge of mapping lunar surface chemistry.

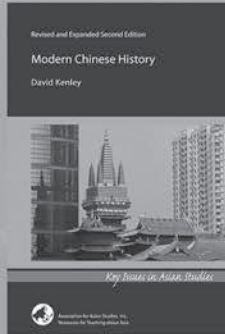
Fighting traditional biases, Indian women entered the field of medicine as early as 1886, when Dr. Anandibai Joshi graduated as India's first woman doctor from Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania in the USA. Dr. Kadambini Ganguly began medical studies in 1886 in India, completing her specializations in 1893 in the UK. Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy graduated



Dr. Seeta Somasundaram (left), Program Director of the ISRO Space Science Program Office, and Dr. Nandini Harinath (right), Project Manager, Mission Design, Deputy Operations Director, Mars Orbiter Mission (MOM). Both women played an instrumental role in the 2019 launch of *Chandrayaan-2*. Source: Screen capture from “Breakthrough: Snapshots from Afar” from December 15, 2016 by Science Friday on YouTube at <https://tinyurl.com/yy28lu5l>.

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from Madras Medical College in 1912, but subsequently became a social reformer and women’s activist. These precedents led to other women entering the medical field in the 1920s to 1940s, thus establishing a shift away from midwives delivering babies to women doctors.

In 1939, when she visited Mahatma Gandhi, young Dr. Sushila Nayar handled a cholera outbreak in Wardha singlehandedly. After this, she was appointed the personal physician to Gandhi. She fought for freedom shoulder to shoulder with the Mahatma. Another well-known freedom fighter is Dr. Lakshmi Sahgal, who—while tending to the war-wounded soldiers in Singapore—joined the Indian National Army (that allied with the Japanese against the British in 1943) as head of the women’s brigade, a revolutionary concept.

All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) was established under the auspices of Health Minister Kumari Amrit Kaur in 1952, one of fifteen women of the Constituent Assembly that oversaw the drafting of the National Constitution. Kaur also founded the Tuberculosis Association of India, the Leprosy and Research Institute, the League of Red Cross Societies, and other health care bodies.

8. Traditional Handicrafts

Indian handicrafts such as high-quality carpets, shawls, imitation jewelry and textiles, together with cheaper goods like metal works, vases, candles, Christmas decorations, etc., contribute just short of one-fourth of India’s total exports. This is a remarkable achievement considering that colonial rule reduced India’s share of the world economy from 23 percent in the eighteenth century to 3 percent by the time it ended in 1947. Famed worldwide, Indian textiles comprised 25 percent of global trade in textiles in the eighteenth century, clothing the world in both East and West, before draconian policies privileging British goods over Indian ones decimated India’s textile industry.

This is why Gandhi’s act of spinning cotton yarn and wearing *khadi*, cloth made of hand-spun cotton, was an act of political defiance. Yet despite the British impoverishment of artisans and weavers, lineages of these traditional occupations were somehow revived in postcolonial India, which today boasts a rich heritage not only in handloom textiles, but in a great number of other handicrafts.

The chief impetus for the revival of India’s handicrafts came from the titan Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay. A freedom fighter in the nationalist struggle, Chattopadhyay was the champion of rural workers, particularly women. To ensure the inclusion, dignity, and relevance of rural labor to the rapidly industrializing economy, she worked tirelessly to rehabilitate India’s traditional handicrafts (as well as performing arts and theatre). To this end, she established institutions in Delhi to safeguard these aspects of cultural heritage. The Crafts Council of India, the National Crafts Museum and the Central Cottage Industries Emporium were set up to promote handicrafts from around the country, as well as provide a platform for sale of these products. The museum provides a space in which both master craftsmen and artisans can be present and showcase their work.

Among the many crafts that have been revived and found their place in the economy are metallurgy, woodworking, textile weaving, basketry, embroidery, Sanjhi (paper cutting), folk painting of various styles, paper-making, stone inlay in marble, pottery, ceramics, and many others. Today, it is the pride of city elites to wear saris and clothes made of handloom materials, woven and embellished with special designs from different parts of the country. High-fashion designers also use these materials in their contemporary design creations. Handcrafted decorative products are typically used in homes in towns and villages. As few handcrafted products can compete with the functionality of machine-made goods, they remain niche products domestically. Yet both domestically and as export products, handicrafts have realized the dream of the early champions of the industry: to make these master craftsmen and artisans a recognized pillar of India’s economy.



Rajasthani painting of women hunting lions (ca. 1810).
Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/y6m66g3t>.

9. Diversity of Wildlife and Ecosystems

Reduced human activity during recent lockdowns throughout India due to the COVID-19 pandemic caused a resurgence of wild animals not just in wilderness areas but also in urban spaces. Sightings of leopards, tigers, lions, bears, snakes, and mongooses, as well as super-shy animals like the black panther, have been reported in recent weeks and received wide coverage. The richness of India's wildlife is unique, especially when one considers how closely humans and wild animals share space. There are many villages on the outskirts of forests, and in some cases, like in the mangroves of the Sundarbans, villages are within forests.

India is perhaps the only country that is home to both lions and tigers. Several endangered species, like rhinoceroses, elephants, leopards, cheetals, nilgais (the largest Asian antelope), reptiles, and other species of animals and birds also exist in India, while a number of migratory birds annually make their way to welcoming areas in India.

Varied ecosystems can also be found in the country, from dense tropical forests to deserts, temperate forests in the mountain ranges of the Himalayas in the north to the rocky terrain of plateaus in the center, wetlands in mangrove swamps to a coastline rich with sea life, to rough and icy terrain above the treeline, home to snow leopards.

Shrinking forests imperil the existence of all these creatures. It is imperative for governments to underwrite and enforce policies that prioritize the survival of these animals and their habitats over commercial and political interests.

10. Color, Food, and Festivals

The colors of India are evident in the clothes people wear, paintings on trucks, shopfronts, awnings on public streets, flowers that are offered at temples, and new shrines that appear at every corner.

Public spaces are characterized by noise, bustle, crowds, and traffic. Marketplaces are full of alluring shops and little places to eat delicious

street food savories in the form of snacks or full meals. Many such food vendors are on the gourmand's list for a must-try. The food is often seasonal, relating to festivals at different times of the year, and also regional—it could be Bengali, Tamilian, Gujarati, or from Kerala.

Festivals in India are regional, and even those observed nationwide are celebrated differently in different states. The biggest Hindu festivals are Dussehra and Diwali, celebrating Ram's defeat of Ravana, and Ram and Sita's homecoming. There's Basant Panchami, a celebration of spring's impending arrival, and Holi, a later spring festival. Participants celebrate Holi by throwing colors on each other. Ganesh Chaturthi honors the elephant-headed god. Other Indian festivals include the Muslim festivals of Eid; Onam in Kerala, celebrating the annual return of the demon king Mahabali; Pongal, the harvest festival of Tamilians; Buddha Jayanti to celebrate the life of the Buddha; Easter and Christmas; Gurburab to celebrate the lives of the Sikh Gurus; and many others. Together with religious rituals, all these festivals are celebrated with special meals, clothes, and camaraderie. ■