

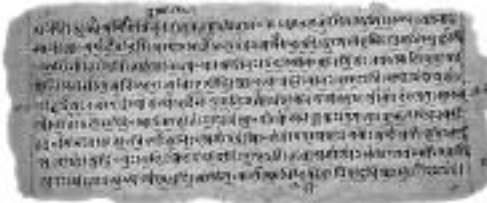
# TOP THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT INDIA IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

BY AINSLIE EMBREE

## 1 THERE IS NOT ONE, BUT FOUR INDIAS

“The first and most essential thing to learn about India,” declared a famous British administrator in 1888, is “that there is not, and never was an India, or even any country of India, possessing, according to European ideas, any sort of unity, physical, political, social or religious.”<sup>1</sup> The statement sounds startlingly silly until one notices the defining clause, “according to European ideas.” Then one can change it to read, “One of the most essential things to learn about India is to not try to fit it into a European idea of what is essential for India.” Confusion arises because the term “India” has been used, by both foreigners and Indians, for four quite different entities. India is, first of all, a geographic term for the subcontinental region demarcated by the great sweep of hills and mountains from the northwest on the Arabian Sea to the Bay of Bengal on the northeast, and bordered on two sides by those seas and the Indian Ocean. The ancient literature makes clear its people were aware of this distinctive, well-defined land mass.

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Eighteenth-century manuscript of the *Rig Veda*. The *Rig Veda* was composed before 1200 BCE.

Source: *India: Belief and Ritual, the Gods and the Cosmos, Meditation and the Yogic Arts* by Richard Waterstone. ©1995 by Duncan Baird Publishers.

literature—that through the centuries has flourished in the region called Bharat in the ancient literature. It was the civilization of many kingdoms and empires from Kashmir to Tamilnadu, but was not

exclusively identified with any particular one. This civilization not only dominated territorial India but was exported throughout Asia, especially Southeast Asia. Then India is used for a third India, best known to the Western world from the empire established in the subcontinent by Great Britain at the end of the eighteenth century, although the word was not officially used until 1833 when the East India

Company official who had been known as Governor-General of Fort William in Bengal was designated Governor-General of India by the British Parliament.



East India Company Coat of Arms

Source: *The East India Company: Trade and Conquest from 1600* by Antony Wild. Published by First Lyons Press, 2002.

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The fourth India is, of course, the modern nation-state which became independent in 1947, making using “India” for the first time the name of a sovereign state. While its geographic inheri-



Source: *Cultural Atlas of India* by Gordon Johnson. ©1996 by Andromedia Oxford limited.

Symbol of the Republic of India adopted in 1948.

tance is only part of the territorial India that had been ruled by Britain, it claims as its historical inheritance the civilizations, cultures, and political states that have flourished in the region for millennia. Here is the source of tensions and passions in relations with Pakistan, the other successor state of imperial India, in quarrels over its sovereignty in Kashmir and with China over other border areas in the Northeast. Probably most important for the future, however, is the claim made by powerful groups in contemporary India that Indian nationalism must be defined in terms of the second India, of the culture that was indigenous to the region, which they define as Hindutva, the culture of Hindu India.

## 2 NARRATIVE ACCOUNTS OF INDIAN HISTORY ARE NECESSARILY CONFUSING AND MISLEADING

The peoples of India have always reflected on their past, their social origins, and their history in ways of fundamental importance for understanding intellectual and social ideas. These ways, however, did not always conform to western—nor, it should be noted, to Chinese or Islamic—historiography. What confused Europeans when they began studying Indian culture—and Indians who used the methodologies of modern European scholarship—was that India’s past was a living reality, the past intertwined in the present. The vast body of Indian literature, a modern Indian historian points out, shows how “the variety of structural forms of social relations, the intricacy of their interconnections and the long course of the historical evolution of these forms through social struggle” are stamped on the living beliefs and practices of the people.<sup>2</sup> Their past, the Indianness of India, is always palpable to the people of present day India.

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The narrative of Indian history is also confusing because it lacks a political core on which to base a narrative. Seven centuries of invasions and rule by foreigners, with the accounts written by them, made a dispiriting national narrative for generations of Indians. “Whether unintentional or not,” a British historian commented, “no greater spiritual injury can be done to a people than to teach them to despise the achievements of their forefathers. To overvalue them can hardly be a mistake.”<sup>3</sup> The evaluation of the past was a critical project for modern India, and to a very considerable extent, the Indian nationalist movement involved the appropriation of the Indian past to define the nation, the integration of India’s complex, often contradictory, past into a national narrative.

**3 THE FOREIGN CONQUESTS OF THE INDIA SUBCONTINENT MUST BE UNDERSTOOD IN TERMS OF THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONDITIONS OF BOTH THE CONQUERED AND THE CONQUERORS**



Detail from a miniature of the *Babur-nama*, Sixteenth-century. National Museum of India, New Delhi. Source: *India and the Moghal Dynasty* by Valérie Berinstain. ©1998 Thames and Hudson Ltd., London.

It may seem to be stating the obvious to argue that the foreign conquests in the Indian subcontinent must be understood in terms of the social and political conditions of both conquered and conquerors, but understanding many

aspects of contemporary India depend precisely on this very difficult task, not yet adequately accomplished by scholars. Popular writing, including textbooks, newspapers, and even some scholarly works, still use such terminology as “the invasion of India,” implying an attack on a political entity, comparable to a modern nation-state encompassing territorial India. The familiar phrase “the Muslim invasion of India” must also be used with extreme care for a number of reasons. One is that there was no single state encompassing India, but many small kingdoms and principalities. Another is that the term “Muslim invasion” comes freighted from the contemporary world with connotations: terrorism rooted in a religious commitment to violence, a staple, unhappily, of political discourse in the United States and India at the beginning of the twenty-first

century. The invasions were by groups of various ethnic origins who were adherents of Islam, and were attracted by the wealth of India. Arab traders, before they became Muslims, were active along the Indian coast, and it was Arab Muslims from Iraq who conquered Sind early in the eighth century. Later invaders were not Arabs, but Turkish chieftains from Central Asia who, beginning at the end of the tenth century, made inroads into North India, and by the middle of the fourteenth century had spread throughout much of India. The interest of these chieftains was the collection of revenue from the Indian peasants and merchants, not their conversion to Islam, although many thousands of the local people became its adherents.

After centuries of Muslim rule, the population of India remained overwhelmingly Hindu, and trade, commerce, and the banking system were largely in the hands of Hindus, as was much of the bureaucracy. The next major intruders, the British, came not as an invading force sent by a nation, but as a group of traders, the East India Company, eager to make money. While it began trading in 1600, the East India Company did not become a political power in India until 1765 when it gained control of the revenues of Bengal, the richest province of the Mughal empire. Great Britain was then on the way to becoming a great industrial nation, self-confident in its military and political power. It came to an India of great cities, well-articulated political systems, enormous agricultural population, an ancient textile industry, large external and internal trade, and religious and literary traditions that had developed over the course of two thousand years. The coming together of these two civilizations set the stage for the development of modern India as a great nation in the twenty-first century.

**4 GREAT BRITAIN IMPOSED ON INDIA WHAT MANY INDIANS CONSIDER TO HAVE BEEN AN OPPRESSIVE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC SYSTEM, BUT INDIANS APPROPRIATED AND ADAPTED WHAT THEY NEEDED FROM THE WEST**

In the nineteenth century, the British were fond of cataloging the benefits their rule had brought to India: political unification, a western legal system, a system of university education, the English language, modern medicine, and modern communications. This is more or less true in a formal sense, but it conceals what is of fundamental importance, namely, that the traditional Indian elites, working within the British system, appropriated what they needed for their own purposes. The most familiar example of this is the eagerness with which the Indian upper classes and upper castes adopted Western learning through the medium of English. The decision was made in 1835 that government support for higher education would go only to institutions that used English, and, from the very beginning, many members of the elite saw the advantage English gave them to acquire the learning of the West. From this followed quick access to the great institutions of the modern world—the press, new professions, ideas of constitutional government, representative political institutions, science and technology, new industries. Study of this complex process of exchange and transformation is vital for understanding the nature of contemporary India.

## 5 THERE WAS NOT ONE BUT MANY INDIAN NATIONALIST MOVEMENTS

In our teaching and writing we tend to speak of the “Indian nationalist movement,” because of the organizational dominance of the Indian National Congress after its founding in 1885, which expressed itself in the idiom of contemporary British liberalism. This success of the Congress masked, however, that there were at least four other important strands in the opposition to British rule, all of which have been central to India’s political discourse since Independence.

One early challenge from Muslim leaders was that majority rule meant the denial of the right of groups to express their social and religious values through political structures. This challenge led to the creation of Pakistan in 1947. In direct opposition to this position was the demand, always present among the membership of the Indian National Congress, that Hindu culture must be the basis of Indian nationalism. A third strand in the opposition to British rule was linked to claims from regional groups, such as the Tamils in South India, that they represented a culture different from that of the Indians from North India who were dominant in the Indian National Congress. This sub-nationalism did not deny the primacy of the Indian nation but insisted on the recognition of linguistic, religious, and historical differences. Then there were groups, not very vocal before independence, but increasingly afterwards, that argued for regional self-determination, claiming they had never been integrated into Indian empires, neither Mughal nor British. The so-called tribal people in the Northeast became spokesmen for the right of self-determination, along with groups in Kashmir and Punjab. Much of the politics of contemporary India reflects these divergent nationalisms.

## 6 THE PARTITION OF INDIA IN 1947 MIGHT HAVE BEEN AVOIDED

The most controversial questions in modern South Asian history have to do with the reasons for the Partition of what I have called the “third India,” that is, British India, that led to the creation of two new nations, India and Pakistan, and eventually to a third, Bangladesh. Could it have been avoided or was it inevitable? Who was primarily responsible? An immense literature, scholarly and popular, gives passionate and contradictory answers to these questions; but it seems possible that Partition might have been avoided if Nehru and the other leaders of the Indian National Congress had been more accommodating to M. A. Jinnah, leader of the Muslim League, more understanding of the demand that the rights of groups, not just of the majority, must be recognized. It is not certain what Jinnah would have settled for, but he might have accepted a constitutional arrangement that established states with strong powers and a central government that was relatively weak, concerned mainly with defense, foreign affairs, and currency. Nehru and the leaders of the Indian National Congress, however, wanted above all else a strong central government that would have the

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power to transform India’s political and economic life, making it into a powerful nation. So it is possible to argue that if Nehru and the other Congress leaders had not been so intransigent, India could have remained undivided.

## 7 FIVE GREAT COMMITMENTS OF THE NEHRU YEARS (1947–54) EXPRESSED INDIA’S HOPES FOR THE FUTURE

In a speech to the Constituent Assembly in 1946, on the eve of becoming the first prime minister of independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru stated his certainty that India would advance “in spite of obstructions and difficulties, and achieve and realize the dream that we have dreamed so long.”<sup>4</sup> In the following years, in the Constitution that was adopted in 1950 and in subsequent amendments, through acts of parliament, and through a multitude of books and speeches, Nehru and those who followed him gave expression to those dreams and tried to achieve them. They can be fairly summarized under five terms that are emphasized in the Constitution and a sixth that has certainly found frequent authoritative expression in other ways.



Nehru on the cover of *Time*, December 14, 1956.

The Preamble to the Constitution, as amended in 1976, declares that the people of India have given to themselves “A Sovereign Socialist Secular Democratic Republic” that assures “the unity and integrity of the Nation.” All of the terms relate, directly and indirectly, to the historical experience of the four Indias mentioned above. Some of them have been widely accepted as defining the nature of India, while others have been fiercely contested. All that can be done here is enumerate them, with brief comments.

Sovereignty has, of course, special meaning to a people who had lost it on numerous occasions to foreigners, and now is intent on maintaining it against any attempts to diminish it. The “unity of

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India” is one of the most frequently used phrases in political discourse in India, with historic memories of how disunity made possible foreign conquest. The commitment to the practice of democracy has been demonstrated in elections which have been remarkably free of corruption in comparison with almost all other recently-decolonized countries. These three commitments have been widely accepted without much overt opposition.

The decision to declare a “socialist” country was done by a constitutional amendment in 1976. That a so seemingly momentous change was made without great opposition suggests that it was not intended to bring about the sweeping redistribution of wealth and power of the kind that took place in other socialist countries. In general, what was meant by socialism was, first of all, social justice for India’s poverty-stricken masses, and the conviction of Nehru and others that this could only be obtained by central planning and government control of the economy. Much of the criticism of Nehru’s policies, now widespread in India, has been directed at this state planning of the economy. There has, however, been no formal attempt to delete “socialist” from the Constitution as a defining characteristic of the Indian nation.

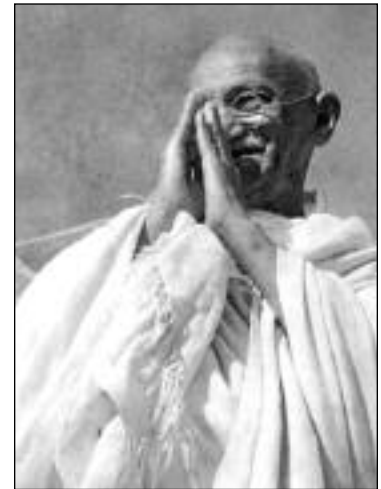
Secularism, the fifth of the great Nehruvian commitments, in Indian constitutional usage does not carry as its primary dictionary meaning indifference to religion or antagonism to its beliefs. The word was added to the Preamble of the Constitution in 1976, but it was implicit in the articles in the original version of 1950, guaranteeing freedom of religion and declaring that the state would not support any particular religion and that all religions would be equal before the law. Christians, Muslims, and other minority religious groups were in favor of these clauses as they gave them the right to freely practice and propagate their faiths, but the constitutional guarantees also seemed to a great many Hindus, perhaps the majority, to express fundamental Indian attitudes towards religion. For members of all communities, the clauses seemed to promise relief from the communal strife between Hindus and Muslims. The opposition to secularism came, as noted later in number nine, from proponents of Hindu nationalism.

The sixth of the great commitments that defines India in the twenty-first century is that India must find the place that she deserves in the world community, not the one that foreign rulers previously assigned her. This conviction does not find a specific constitutional statement, but is surely implied in the Directive Prin-

ciple that declares India would “promote peace and international security.”<sup>5</sup> Nehru’s ambition was to make India the spokesman for what became known as the “Third World,” or the countries emerging from European control in Asia and Africa. Especially in the United Nations, India’s representatives became the champion of anti-imperialism, denouncing the old imperial powers: Great Britain, France, and Portugal, as well as what they regarded as the new imperialism of the United States. The Soviet Union was seen as India’s ally in this struggle.

**8 MAHATMA GANDHI IS AN ICON FOR INDIA AS A NATION**

Outsiders often ask about the relevance of Gandhi and his message for the India of the twenty-first century, with the world’s fourth largest army, nuclear weapons, an industrialized, capitalist economy, and a consumer society that models itself on the United States. India also has a staggering burden of poverty and has experienced riots in which thousands of people have been killed in the name of religion. All of this suggests that Gandhi, the apostle of peace and non-violence, of compassion for the poor, of simplicity in life-styles, no longer has influence. How can he be an icon for India as a nation? An icon is, literally, a pictorial representation used to center one’s attention during religious devotions. Gandhi is not an icon in that sense, although there are many thousands of statues of him throughout India and one in the heart of Washington, DC. He is an icon for India in the sense that he is remembered for what he did to make India into a free and vibrant nation, not for teachings that Indians know and follow. He is also an icon for India in another, and very modern, sense. An icon on a computer desktop suggests the availability of a function, but its relevance depends on the knowledge and needs of the user, not on the function itself. This is not a bad paraphrase of what Gandhi meant when he said to his people: “Deluded by modern western civilization, we have forgotten our ancient civilization and worship the might of arms.”<sup>6</sup>



Gandhi greeting the crowds in Madras, 1946. Source: *Gandhi* by Peter R  he,  2001 Phaidon Press Limited.

**9 HINDU NATIONALISM CLAIMS TO BE THE AUTHENTIC VOICE OF INDIA FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

Who speaks for India? This was an urgent domestic question throughout the twentieth century as Indians increasingly began to speak of independence and freedom from British rule. By 1946 it was clear the Indian National Congress spoke for the majority of Indians, but not for most of the vast Muslim minority. After independence, the Congress claim to speak for India became less and

less tenable, especially as noted in number seven of Top Ten Things, by those critical of its commitment to secularism.

The opponents of secularism have formed organizations, notably the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), that have been successful in winning support in many segments of society. This indicates the superior organizational skills of their leaders, as well as their ability to articulate an appealing version of the nationalist project, which they can translate into electoral support and mobilization of crowds to demonstrate and, very frequently, to take violent action.

Recognition of the political importance of the RSS began with the strong showing in electoral contests made in the 1950s and 1960s by the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, a political party that drew many leaders from the RSS. Its role in Indian politics increased with the formation of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the successor of the Jana Sangh. Its success is indicated by electoral statistics: in the elections of 1984, it won two seats; in 1991, it won 122; and in 1998 it became the major party in India's ruling coalition. The RSS and its membership could now truly claim that its nationalist project had become central in the mainstream of India's political discourse.

Hindu nationalism rejects the central tenet of secularism that religion is a private matter. "We make war or peace, engage in arts and crafts, amass wealth and give it away—indeed we are born and die—all in accord with religious injunctions."<sup>7</sup> The success of the RSS depends, to a considerable extent, upon the skillful appeal to the greatness of India's past, real or imagined, and the conditions, again, real or imagined, of the contemporary world. There is little question that Hindu nationalism will remain a major force in Indian social and political life.

## 10 INDIA HAS A STRONG CIVIL SOCIETY THAT HELPS TO ASSURE ITS DEMOCRATIC FUTURE

The last of my Top Ten Things, while based on the historical analyses attempted in the other nine, moves to the uncertain ground of forecasting the future. There has been much internal violence in India in the years since Independence, but not only has the nation survived, it has been governed by democratically elected governments; it has fought wars with two of its neighbors, Pakistan and China; it has faced internal uprisings in Kashmir, Punjab, and the Northeast; it has endured horrendous religious riots; it has suffered from the natural disasters of earthquakes and famines.

That India has not only survived all these shocks and traumas but emerged a strong and vibrant state has been explained in many ways, but the general explanation seems to be that even before Independence, India had a functioning civil society and that this has been greatly strengthened through years. Civil society is understood, in broadest terms, as an autonomous arena free from state control, sometimes cooperating with the state but often in opposition or in rivalry with some of the state's functions as it defines public issues and defends its autonomy. While many of the institutions of civil society have immediate links with institutions in the Western world, they are deeply embedded in the indigenous social structures and historical experiences of the South Asian subconti-

ment.<sup>8</sup> Science, technology, communications, and democracy should not be seen as artifacts of the West, but the common inheritance of the modern world. The Internet, so ubiquitous in modern India, is a familiar example as is the Indian cinema, so often deplored by Indian intellectuals for distorting the realities of modern India. M. V. Kamath, the well-known journalist, makes a cogent argument, however, that the cinema is peculiarly Indian, cutting across class and regional differences, giving access to the principles by which the society "attempts to organize and conceptualize its experience."<sup>9</sup> Broadly speaking, the development of democracy in India is closely related to activities of civil society, for while civil society may exist to some degree in a non-democratic political order, democracy surely cannot exist, in India or anywhere, without the activities of civil society. These activities include, in no particular order, social service organizations, organized sports, aspects of popular culture such as the cinema and television, the print media, business and labor movements, women's movements, human rights groups, non-governmental organizations both indigenous and foreign, the activities of religious groups, environmental concerns, cultural and educational enterprises, and, very significantly, the project of nationalism itself as nurtured by groups belonging to civil society as it merges with the political sphere.

The nature of civil society in India, along with the other Top Things, seems to justify the conclusion that democracy in India is firmly established and that India will be both a free country and a great one in the twenty-first century. ■

### NOTES

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3. E. B. Havell, quoted in A. L. Basham, "Modern Historians of Ancient India," in C. H. Philips, editor, *Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 273.
4. Jawaharlal Nehru, *Independence and After* (New Delhi: Government of India, 1949), 348.
5. Constitution of India, Part IV, art. 51.
6. Quoted in Stephen Hay, editor, vol. 2, *Sources of Indian Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 265.
7. M. S. Gowalkar, *We, or Our Nation Defined* (Nagpur: M. N. Kale, 1947), 28.
8. A discussion of this point is found in Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani, editors, *Civil Society: History and Possibilities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
9. M. V. Kamath, "The Indian Ethos," in *Film India* (New Delhi: Directorate of Film Festivals, 1981), 31–32.

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