

Free Essay: Culture of India

Nearly one sixth of all the human beings on Earth live in India, the world's most populous democracy. Officially titled the Republic of India, it's 1,269,413 sq. mi. lie in South Asia, occupying most of the Indian subcontinent, bordered by Pakistan (W); China, Nepal, and Bhutan (N); and Myanmar (E) and Bangladesh forms an enclave in the NE. Its borders encompass a vast variety of peoples, practicing most of the world's major religions, speaking scores of different languages, divided into thousands of socially exclusive castes, and combining the physical traits of several major racial groups (Compton's).

The modern nation of India (also known by its ancient Hindi name, Bharat) is smaller than the Indian Empire formerly ruled by Britain. Burma (now Myanmar), a mainly Buddhist country lying to the east, was administratively detached from India in 1937. Ten years later, when Britain granted independence to the peoples of the Indian subcontinent, two regions with Muslim majorities—a large one in the northwest (West Pakistan) and a smaller one in the northeast (East Pakistan)—were partitioned from the predominantly Hindu areas and became the separate nation of Pakistan. East Pakistan broke away from Pakistan in 1971 to form the independent nation of Bangladesh. Also bordering India on its long northern frontier are the People's Republic of China and the relatively small kingdoms of Nepal and Bhutan. The island republic of Sri Lanka lies just off India's southern tip (New World Encyclopedia).

Much of India's area of almost 1.3 million square miles (3.3 million square kilometers—including the Pakistani-held part of Jammu and Kashmir) is a peninsula jutting into the Indian Ocean between the Arabian Sea on the west and the Bay of Bengal on the east. There are three distinct physiographic regions. In the north the high peaks of the Himalayas lie partly in India but mostly just beyond its borders in Nepal, Bhutan, and Tibet. South of the mountains, the low-lying Indo-Gangetic Plain, shared with Pakistan and Bangladesh, extends more than 1,500 miles (2,400 kilometers) from the Arabian Sea to the Bay of Bengal (Compton's). Finally, the peninsular tableland, largely the Deccan, together with its adjacent coastal plains, makes up more than half of the nation's area.

In general, India's climate is governed by the monsoon, or seasonal, rain-bearing wind. Most of the country has three seasons: hot, wet, and cool. During the hot season, which usually lasts from early March to mid-June, very high temperatures are accompanied by intermittent winds and occasional dust storms (Concise).

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Most of the far northeast (north and east of Bangladesh), northern West Bengal, and the west coast from Cochin to somewhat north of Bombay get more than 80 inches (200 centimeters) of rainfall annually. This is usually enough to keep the soil moist throughout the year. The natural vegetation associated with these regions is an exceedingly varied, broadleaf, evergreen rain forest, typically tall and dense. Much of the rain forest, however, is in hilly regions that have been repeatedly burned over and cleared for slash-and-burn

agriculture, a type of farming particularly associated with India's tribal population. As a result, the soil has become less fertile. Where the forest has grown again, it is generally lower and less open than the original vegetation (New World Encyclopedia).

It is not certain which racial group first occupied India. The assumption is often made that the first inhabitants had characteristics in common with the small-statured, dark, aboriginal population of Australia, as well as with other tribal groups still found in isolated, forested regions of Southeast Asia. Therefore, the term proto-Australoid has been applied to the racial type represented by a number of tribes still living in India, mainly in the states of Bihar, Orissa, and Madhya Pradesh. Other early arrivals were the ancestors of the peoples, now living mainly in southern India, who speak languages of the Dravidian family. The Mongoloid peoples have also been in India a long time. Their present-day descendants include several tribal groups living along the frontiers with Myanmar, China (Tibet), Bhutan, and Nepal.

Linguistic differences are much clearer than those of racial groupings. Two linguistic groups, the Indo-Aryan and the Dravidian, account for all but a tiny proportion of the population (Compton's). Of the Indo-Aryan languages, Hindi, the official national language, is the most important. In its standard form and its many dialects, it is spoken by about 43 percent of the population and is understood by a large number of others. It is predominant in the northern and central regions. Included among the Hindi variations is Urdu, referred to until 1947 as Hindustani or Khari Boli, which is recognized as a separate "official" language in the Indian constitution. Urdu is also the official language of Pakistan and is spoken by most Indian Muslims (except in the far south and east).

Other important Indo-Aryan languages are Bengali (the official language of the state of West Bengal and also of Bangladesh), Panjabi (the official language of the state of Punjab and the most widely spoken language of Pakistan), and Marathi, Gujarati, Oriya, Assamese, and Kashmiri (respectively, the official languages of the states of Maharashtra, Gujarat, Orissa, Assam, and Jammu and Kashmir). Two other languages of the Indo-Aryan family are among the 15 regarded as official languages by the constitution: Sanskrit, a classical literary language, and Sindhi, spoken largely in the Sind province of Pakistan and also by Hindu refugees who came to India after partition in 1947. The list of official languages includes four Dravidian tongues: Telugu, Tamil, Malayalam, and Kannada, which predominate, respectively, in the southern states of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Karnataka (Compton's).

English is understood by most educated persons. While it is not one of the 15 languages, it is officially recognized and is used, for example, for correspondence between Hindi-speaking and non-Hindi-speaking states. It is also the language shared by the Dravidian-speaking south and the Hindi-speaking north. Of the scores of languages not officially recognized, many are spoken almost exclusively by tribal peoples, known collectively as Adibasis (New World Encyclopedia).

Though a number of religions flourish in India's tolerant social climate, four fifths of the people are Hindus. Hinduism evolved from Vedism, the religion of the early Aryan invaders.

While it recognizes innumerable gods, they are widely regarded as diverse manifestations of one great universal spirit. Hinduism has no standard orthodox form. It is, in effect, what people who call themselves Hindus do in carrying out their dharma, or religious obligations. This varies considerably from one region and social group to another.

The social groups with which Hindus identify most strongly are their jatis, or castes. A caste is a hereditary group whose members intermarry only among themselves. Each has its own origin myth, traditional occupation, rules relating to kinship, diet, and various forms of behavior. Castes are graded in a social and ritual hierarchy in which each expects respect from inferior groups and gives respect to superior ones. While obviously creating disparities, the caste system is not regarded by most Hindus as unjust. According to generally accepted beliefs associated with reincarnation, or rebirth after death, the caste into which one is born depends on one's karma—that is, one's accumulated good and bad deeds in previous existences. The way to achieve higher status in future incarnations is to accept one's station in life and live accordingly. This is the path that may eventually lead to salvation, called moksha, freedom from the continuous round of rebirths (New World Encyclopedia).

Muslims, who constitute 11 percent of the population, are the largest religious minority. Many of these followers of the monotheistic faith of Islam are descendants of invaders from the Middle East and Central Asia who began entering the subcontinent as early as the 8th century. Most, however, are descendants of converts from Hinduism and other faiths. The majority belong to the Sunnah branch of Islam, though the Shi'ah sect is well represented among Muslim trading groups of Gujarat.

Although Islam, unlike Hinduism, stresses the equality of people, the institution of caste is so strong in the subcontinent that it has affected the communities professing Islam and most other faiths. Thus, most Indian Muslims intermarry within graded, castelike groups, many of which have traditional occupations. Muslims form a majority of the population in Jammu and Kashmir and substantial minorities in the states of Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Assam, and Kerala.

Sikhs, with 2.6 percent of the population, are predominant in the state of Punjab. Their faith, which dates from the early 16th century, combines aspects of Hinduism, such as belief in reincarnation, with ideas borrowed from Islam, in particular strict belief in only one God. A militant brotherhood, they are recognizable by their distinctive beards and turbans. Sikhs form a prominent part of India's army and are influential in many professions and in government (Concise).

Households often consist of more than one married couple. These joint families are usually headed by a senior male, whose wife, mother, or another related senior female assigns domestic chores to the women and girls. Generally the extended family may include his unmarried children, his younger brothers and their wives and unmarried children, his unmarried sisters, and his married sons and grandsons and their wives and unmarried children. In practice, however, brothers commonly separate and form new households soon after the death of their father.

Over most of India (though not in the south or northeast), a girl marries outside her village, usually while still in her teens. Even where a female marries within the village, she moves to the husband's household. Widow remarriage is frowned upon. Married couples display a marked preference for male children. Boys are desired not only because of their anticipated contribution to the family income but also because sons are needed to perform certain rites at a parent's cremation. Girls, on the other hand, are seen as a liability because they require expensive dowries when they are married. Various state governments have tried to discourage this practice, but often families still go into debt to provide dowries; a family with several daughters and no sons may face financial disaster. Boys are expected to help in the fields and girls in the home. The freedom that girls enjoy is restricted after they reach the age of puberty; in northern India, even among the Hindus, female seclusion is common (New World Encyclopedia).

Most villagers are farmers. The majority own some land, usually in scattered parcels, but a substantial number must rent all or part of the land they farm, either for cash or for an agreed-upon share of the harvest. The amount depends on whether the cultivator or the landlord pays for seed and irrigation water, and on who provides the animals for plowing. Shares typically range from one third to one half the harvest. Many families, especially among the scheduled castes, have no land at all, and both adults and children must sell their labor to the larger farmers.

The simple tools used by most Indian farmers are generally made in the villages. Plows are wooden, with short iron tips. They furrow but do not turn the soil. Draft animals are mainly oxen in the drier regions and water buffalo in the wetter, rice-growing areas. Both cattle and water buffalo are milked, but yields are low. Transport is still largely by oxcart or buffalo cart, though the use of trucks is gaining as a result of road improvement. Tractor cultivation is rare except in Haryana and the Punjab (Compton's).

Goods and services that are not available locally are obtained from nearby villages, at weekly outdoor markets, in towns and cities, and at fairs, usually held in connection with religious holidays. Payment for goods and services provided within the village may be either in cash or in kind. The latter type of payment, usually a portion of grain at the time of harvest, used to be the customary rule. Most specialized-caste families catered to a particular set of patron families, known as jajmans, with whom they were linked by hereditary ties. This jajmani system is breaking down over most of India, but patron-client alliances among various castes remain a common feature of village life.

Most villages have at least a primary school offering up to six years of instruction. Some also offer adult education classes in the evening. While few villages can support a well-trained doctor, many have practitioners of traditional medicine. Government-aided dispensaries are increasingly common.

For entertainment men join their fellow caste members or those from castes at levels close to their own to pass the evening hours smoking and chatting. Women and girls talk at the village well and may join groups to sing religious songs. Male youths sometimes form sports clubs or drama groups. Village-owned radios set up in public spaces are common, but

television is rare. Traveling storytellers, musicians, acrobats, and snake charmers relieve the drabness of life, as do weddings, religious celebrations, trips to local fairs, and occasional religious pilgrimages.

India's present constitution went into effect on Jan. 26, 1950. At that time, the nation changed its status from a dominion to a federal republic, though it remained within the Commonwealth. The governor-general, appointed by the British Crown, was replaced by a president, chosen by an electoral college. The president is the official chief of state, but the office is largely ceremonial.

Village government is in the hands of a democratically elected council, known as a panchayat, presided over by a village headman. In former days virtually all panchayat members were men of the upper castes, usually those who owned the most land. Now many states require that a certain number of women and members of scheduled castes be included. Increasingly, elections are held by secret ballot. The panchayats are expected to work closely with the government-sponsored Community Development Program, which has divided the entire country into community development blocks, averaging about a hundred villages each. Village-level workers within each block are the chief links between the government and the villagers. They bring news to the villagers of developments that might benefit them and report back the sentiments of the people (Concise).

The artistic and literary heritage of India is exceptionally rich. Probably most renowned are the country's architectural masterpieces. These date from many different ages. The ancient Buddhist domed stupa, or shrine, at Sanchi was probably begun by the emperor Asoka in the mid-3rd century BC. The Kailasa Temple at Ellora was carved out of solid rock in the 8th century. The enormous, elaborately sculptured Sun Temple at Konarak dates from the 13th century, and the Minakshi Temple in Madurai, with its striking outer towers and inner Hall of 1,000 Pillars, from the 16th century. The sublime Taj Mahal at Agra was built in the 17th century by the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan as a mausoleum for his favorite wife. Every major region and religious group of India has produced works of extraordinary merit. Hindu and Jaina temples are usually richly embellished by sculpture. Because of the Islamic opposition to representative art, mosques are comparatively austere and rely for adornment largely on inlaid stonework, decorative tiles, geometric designs in stone, plaster, or wood, and ornate calligraphy (Compton's).

Painting is relatively less developed, and much of the work of the past has fallen victim to weather. However, the well-preserved, sensuous cave paintings at Ajanta, dating from the 1st century BC to the 7th century AD, demonstrate great technical proficiency at an early date. Altogether different is the lyric and romantic style of the various schools of miniature painting that flourished in the courts of the Mughals and the Rajput princes in the 16th and subsequent centuries. Modern painting, inspired by both European and Far Eastern models, has had several internationally recognized exponents.

Classical Indian music, dance, and drama are closely linked. Their roots go back nearly 2,000 years. Their mastery calls for great discipline and intensive practice. Each has a conventionalized "language" that demands considerable sophistication on the part of the

audience. As with architecture, a number of regional styles have developed. Folk music and dance also show wide regional variations (Compton's).

The literature of India covers many fields of knowledge, but religious and philosophical texts are particularly numerous. The oldest religious texts, the Vedas (beginning with the 'Rig-Veda' around 1500 BC, were transmitted only by word of mouth for many centuries before being committed to writing. For most Hindus the two best-known texts are the great epics, the 'Ramayana' and the 'Mahabharata', composed roughly 2,000 years ago. The former recounts the adventures of the god-king Rama and provides models of proper conduct for both men and women. The latter, the longest poem ever written, relates a great mythical war involving all the peoples of ancient India. The most important portion of that epic, the 'Bhagavadgita', is the principal Hindu tract on morality and ethics (Compton's).

Indian Muslim literature covers a wide range of practical subjects. However, the authority of the Koran, Islam's holy book, leaves little room for religious speculation. Poetry is particularly admired.

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