

HINDU CULTURE

LOCATION

India is the seventh largest country in the world and with its almost one billion people, the second most populated country in the world, after China. The official name for the country is the Republic of India. However, other names for India are Bharat and Hindustan.

HISTORY

The earliest civilization in India was in the Indus River Valley between 2600 and 2000 BCE. They lived in the north-western part of India.

Around 1500 BCE northern India was invaded by the Aryans, people who came from Iran and Southern Russia. The Aryans were light-skinned wandering tribes who forced the local dark-skinned people of Northern India, called Dravidians, southwards. For this reason, the Northern Indians are believed to be the descendants of the Aryans and the Southern Indians are considered descendants of the Dravidians.

Other groups of people invaded India too. The ancient Persian Empire expanded its boundaries to India in 516 BCE. Alexander the Great arrived in present day Pakistan in 326 BCE, and Greek settlements were established on Indian territory shortly afterwards. Other invaders (Scythians, Kushans and Huns) also arrived in India and established kingdoms at different times. Between the 8th and 13th century, India was invaded by Turks, Arabs and Afghans. They brought the Muslim religion to India and dominated part of the country.

The Moghuls were perhaps the most famous of the Indian Empires that have ever existed. At their height they controlled the whole of Northern India, present day Pakistan and large parts of Southern India. Around 1700 the Moghul empire began to weaken because of internal struggles. During this period of instability various European powers – English, French, Dutch, Danish and Portuguese - started to control Indian territories.

The Europeans came to India mainly for trade. In the beginning they took land and built factories. Later on they created armies to protect their interests and their power increased. In this way, the British became the rulers of India. India became independent from the British in 1947, but the British army did not leave India until 1950.

RELIGION

The oldest in India was Vedism. Followers of Vedism worshipped many gods. They were mostly male gods which represented nature and natural forces.

The Vedic priests were known as Brahmans. During Vedic ceremonies, animals were sacrificed and the believers drank a sacred liquor called soma. Over time, the Vedic rituals became more and more complicated, with many rules, hymns and prayers. Only highly trained Brahmans and priests could carry out the rituals. This gave them great power; if the rites were incorrectly performed disaster or death would follow.

Eventually, Vedic religion began to change. In the 6th century BCE the concepts of reincarnation of souls, karma, and the importance of meditation (rather than sacrifice), marked the end of the Vedic period and the beginning of Hinduism. Vedism and Hinduism are very different religions. Hindus believe in reincarnation. They believe that each person's fate is already decided depending on what a person did during his or her lifetime. This is called 'Karma'. A soul who practices good Karma in one life will be rewarded with a better life in their second incarnation. Eventually that soul will be released from the cycle of life, death and rebirth and will be allowed to enter Nirvana (heaven). Souls who spread bad Karma will be punished; they will continue to be born in this world again and again.

ECONOMY, POLITICS AND SOCIETY

Religion, especially Hinduism, have had a major impact on Indian society and culture. One of the most obvious examples of this is the caste system. Traditionally, people are born in a certain caste, or class, and they can never change that. Brahmans (priests) are at the top of the social caste system and at the very bottom are the so-called "untouchables". They were called "untouchable" because everyone from the higher castes avoided them. These people did the most difficult and unwanted work. They had contact with dirt and were considered "polluted" by other castes. They were only allowed to live in certain parts of most towns.

Much has changed in Indian society and the caste divisions today are now less rigid. However, the separation between groups with higher and lower social status is still present. The term “untouchable” is not used anymore; they are now called Harijans, or “Children of God,” as Mahatma Gandhi called them. Harijans are still the poorest people in India and perform most of the agricultural work, as well as work which is considered ‘polluted’. They make up about one-sixth of India's total population.

India has made great progress since its independence. Roads and industry have greatly expanded; farming techniques have improved and Indian science and engineering is very advanced. Their movie industry is the largest in the world, larger even than Hollywood.

At independence, India was blessed with several great leaders; Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India after the British rule. They helped India to play an important role in world affairs, often supporting the world's poorest people and the least developed nations.

Despite economic and social improvements a large part of Indian population remains very poor and lives in poverty. India has a large number of industries but is still mostly an agricultural country. Most farms provide little more than what a family needs to survive. Almost one-third of all farm households own no land at all.

CULTURE

India is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world. In addition to its many religions and sects, India has many castes and tribes. There are also more than a dozen major languages and hundreds of minor languages from greatly different origins.

In general, a person is expected to marry someone within the same caste that they come from, and follow a strict set of rules for proper behavior (for work, diet and relationships). While many Indians are vegetarians, there are groups that will eat goat, mutton, chicken, eggs, and fish. Sheep are raised for both wool and meat. Pork is taboo to members of several faiths, including Muslims and most Hindus. Cows are sacred animals to members of the Hindu faith, and are also not eaten. In many places cows are allowed to wander where ever they please, even if they block traffic or enter marketplaces.

Much of India's rural population lives in villages, but the major cities (such as New Dehli, Bombay and Calcutta) have grown very quickly in the last 50 years. Each of these three cities has a population of more than 10 million, while Bombay has more than 15 million.

