

INDIA

Chennai, India Overview

India is a land of contrasts. There is a saying that goes, "Whatever you say about India, the reverse is also true." It is a country that exists in several centuries at once. On the one hand, India is a sophisticated and modern society, a leader in the industrial world. On the other hand, it is home to millions of wretchedly poor who live without the "modern" conveniences that most Americans accept as part of their everyday life.

India is vast; this single country is the size of Europe. More than 1600 languages and dialects are spoken, and fierce regional loyalties exist. There are 15 official languages. English is the only language known throughout the country; yet only three in 100 speak it.

India's population is huge. In 1947 when the British bid farewell to the "jewel in the crown of their empire" there were 350 million people. Today, there are more than one billion people in India, and the population is growing. One in six people is Indian in today's world. Another paradox of life in India is that improvements in public health, disease control and agricultural production all contribute to a growing population.

REGION: Chennai is one of the mercantile ports developed during the British colonial period and is also the capital of the state of Tamil Nadu. To the west is the state of Karnataka, with its distinct Dravidian culture based in the Kannada language. On the southwest coast is the state of Kerala. The southern states are less influenced by Moslem and British forces; but, at the same time, are oriented to the traditional sea trade of the Indian Ocean. Thus, Tamils are found in Malaysia and Sri Lanka, and one-fourth of Kerala's population is Catholic. The South is culturally more 'pure' and yet fairly cosmopolitan. The people are also quite warm and hospitable. 'South' in India shares some of the connotations with 'South' in the United States, the pace is slower, and some say the life is richer and less hectic.

CLIMATE: Chennai lies in an equatorial, tropical region (i.e. HOT). As March begins the transition to the summer months, temperatures may range from 91° - 99°F during the day with little noticeable change at night.

FOOD: The food of India is one of its great pleasures. Inexpensive Indian restaurants can be found in almost any town. South India is famous for its delicious **coffee** and for its two breakfast foods, **idli** and **dosa**. Both are made from a slightly-fermented batter of ground rice and lentils. *Idli* is steamed so it emerges as a light, fluffy, snow white, savory cupcake, while *dosa* is spread to paper thinness and fried to crispness on a flat griddle.

CURRENCY: The unit of currency is the *rupee* and is divided into 100 *paise*.

HINDUISM

The Hindu religion is predominant in today's India (80%). There are approximately 14% Muslims, 2.5% Christians, 2% Sikhs, 1% Buddhists, and 0.5% Jains. Hinduism is both a powerful religious and social force. Hindus believe in the power of the Supreme Being, but this is not the central focus of Hinduism. There is one impersonal and spiritual Being which pervades everything, but thousands of gods are worshipped. The Supreme Being, called Brahm, has three personal manifestations. These are as Brahma, the Creator; Vishnu, the Preserver, and Siva (Shiva), the Destroyer and Reproducer.

To assist you in the identification of temple sculptures, the following descriptions and mythological information should be helpful. Brahma is generally represented with four heads and four arms, in which he holds a portion of the *Veda*, a spoon for ceremonial observations, a rosary, and a vessel of ceremonial water. Sarasvati, the wife of Brahma, rides on a peacock and has a musical instrument, the *vina*, in her arms.

Vishnu holds a quoit, a ring of iron, in one hand, a conch shell in another, a club in another, and a lotus flower in the fourth. A common picture shows him with his wife, Lakshmi (the goddess of prosperity), sitting on the snake that represents eternity, with Brahma on a lotus springing from his navel. Vishnu is said to have come down to earth nine times, and is expected a tenth time. These nine incarnations were in the form of (1) a fish; (2) a tortoise; (3) a boar; (4) a man lion; (5) a dwarf; (6) Rama with the axe; (7) Rama, the hero of the epic poem, *Ramayana*; (8) Krishna; and (9) Buddha. The adoption of Buddha as one of the incarnations aimed at a compromise with Buddhism. It led to the reabsorption of Buddhism into the general Hindu culture.

Siva holds in his four hands a trident, an antelope, a noose for binding his enemies, and a kind of drum. He wears a tiger's skin around his loins. Siva has many roles. He is the Great Yogi meditating on Mount Kailasa. He is Nataraja (Lord of Dance), creating and destroying. He is the seed of life and his phallic symbol is worshipped in many temples. Siva's wife is known by several names and in several characters. She is Shakti (Energy). In her beneficent form she is Parvati, the goddess of beauty; while in her terrifying form she appears as Durga, or Kali. Siva has two sons. One is Ganesh – with a fat body and an elephant's head. Ganesh is often viewed as a bringer of success, and he is the god of learning. Kartikkeya (also called Skanda or Subrahmanya), is Siva's other son and the god of war.

Of all the Hindu gods, Krishna is the most human. He is pictured as a child, stealing butter; as a handsome youth, dressed in yellow silk with a crown of peacock feathers; and as the wise philosopher whose teaching is embodied in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Krishna fell in love with Radha. Their romantic love is interpreted symbolically as the relationship of the human soul with the Divine Spirit.

Hinduism Continued...

The ultimate goal of Hinduism is *moksha*, liberation from the cycle of existence. One's soul is eternal and goes through a cycle of births, deaths, and rebirths. The conditions of life in each birth are determined by the cumulative results of the *karma* (deeds) performed in previous lifetimes. Thus, present difficulties are caused by sins committed in a former lifetime. The future may be improved by a series of selfless actions. The Hindu code for living is based on *dharma*, doing one's duty. Hindus believe that the earth has experienced a series of different ages, and that we are in the last age. The only people on earth today are those who have not yet lived sufficiently good lives to have attained Nirvana. This is seen by some Hindus as the reason that so much evil exists in today's world.

Hindu practices include the following:

- Abstain from killing any animal.
- Strictly obey caste rules, including marrying within your caste.
- Do not eat food cooked by an inferior caste.
- Wash in a holy river, especially the Ganges, to help cleanse the soul of impurities.
- Revere the cow. It is common to see cows walking undisturbed through the streets of India. Even if people are starving, cows are not killed for food.
- Leather is forbidden in temples.

The Code of Manu (CE 100-300) specified rules of domestic conduct and ceremony. It created four *Varnas* (literally, colors) which became the basis for the caste system: Brahmins, Warriors, Agriculturists and Traders, and Non-Aryans (*Sudras*). The first three were of Aryan descent and honored by the name "twice born". By the time this code was formed, racial distinction between the Aryans and non-Aryans ceased, and the *Sudras* included all persons who were not born in the twice-born status. The *Sudras* were not allowed to be present at the great national sacrifices or at the feasts. Each trade in time came to have a separate caste. There are more than 3,000 castes in India, from the Brahmins (highest) to the Untouchables or Dalits (lowest). Although the caste system has been outlawed, it still exists in the form of racial, social and religious pressures. Another paradox is found here: the caste system has been both a force for stability and a cause of dissension.

Although the caste system is still a part of Indian life, in the 1941 census, many professed Hindus were unable to name their castes. Yet members of the lowest caste, the untouchables, still suffer discrimination. Untouchables are not restricted to a given area, they permeate every part of India. Untouchables are not those people who, like lepers, suffer from a contagious disease. Rather they are born into this caste. Although things are changing, untouchables are condemned to work the lowest-ranking jobs such as leather workers or scavengers. Their presence within a 40-yard range is still seen as pollution to some high caste Hindus. They were denied access to temples until Mr. Gandhi's crusade, and are often denied access to schools, wells, and even burning ghats.

Hindi Language Cheat Sheet

Please	<i>zarā</i>	Restaurant	<i>restrent</i>
Hello	<i>namaste</i>	My name is	<i>mér_ n_ m hai</i>
Goodbye	<i>namaste</i>	Train Station	<i>rél g_ r_ stéshan</i>
Bank	<i>baink</i>	What is your name?	<i>_pk_ n_ mky_ hai?</i>
Post Office	<i>d_ k kh_ n_</i>	Bus Station	<i>bas stéshan</i>
Toilet	<i>tatt_</i>	Mosque	<i>masjid</i>
Telephone	<i>télifon</i>	What time is it?	<i>ky_ t_ im hu_ ?</i>
Yes	<i>h_ ñ or nahin</i>	Where is the	<i>kah_ ñ hai?</i>
No	<i>n_</i>	Thank you	<i>shukriyā or dhanyawad</i>

Days of the Week
Monday <i>somv_ r</i>
Tuesday <i>mañgalv_ r</i>
Wednesday <i>budhv_ r</i>
Thursday <i>bruhaspativ_ r</i>
Friday <i>shukrv_ r</i>
Saturday <i>shan_ v_ r</i>
Sunday <i>rav_ v_ r</i>

Numbers
1 <i>ék</i>
2 <i>do</i>
3 <i>t_ n</i>
4 <i>ch_ r</i>
5 <i>p_ ñch</i>
6 <i>chha</i>
7 <i>s_ t</i>
8 <i>_ th</i>
9 <i>nau</i>
10 <i>das</i>