

People & Religious Life

People



The Republic of India dominates the geography of south Asia and the Indian Ocean. Occupying 1,147,950 square miles of land, India is bordered by Pakistan, China, Bangladesh, Myanmar and the Indian Ocean. Within its borders live more than one billion people, one-sixth of the world's population. Since gaining independence from Great Britain in 1947, India has become the largest democracy in the world.

India also is a land of great diversity. In 1991, 4,635 distinct people groups were identified within the country. Moreover, racial, ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity is made even more complex by the caste system, in which there are an estimated 6,400 castes. Each caste is a distinct group divided by social barriers from the others. Despite efforts at social reform and the fact that caste discrimination is forbidden by India's constitution, the caste system—which is fundamental to Hinduism— influences all religious and social structures in India. Hindi is the official language, though there are 406 other languages spoken by India's indigenous people groups.

Though India's cities are crowded, 60 percent of the people still live in villages. Some Indians are extremely wealthy; however, 60 percent of the people live in deep poverty with an annual per person income of about US\$370. Consequently, 40 percent of the people cannot afford an adequate diet. Two-thirds of the labor force works in agriculture.

Two hundred and fifty million Indians have a high standard of living, comparable to the United States, with vehicles, televisions and good housing. India is the seventh largest industrial nation in the world. It has an outstanding educational system, so people come to India from all over the world for higher education. Twenty million Indian nationals live outside the country, primarily as engineers and computer experts. India has become a worldwide center for the technology industry.

Religious Life



India is the home of Hinduism, which has become an umbrella of religious practices with two themes—belief in many gods and in reincarnation. Almost 80 percent of Indians are Hindu, 12 percent are Muslim, 2.4 percent are Christian, and 2 percent are Sikh. Hinduism not only dominates the religious climate of India, but as mentioned above, it greatly dictates social behavior as well. India's constitution provides for full religious freedom for all

religions, though in the current political environment, this liberty has eroded in some areas of the country.

The rise of Hindu extremism has resulted in persecution against Muslims and Christians since the 1990s. This is particularly true in the state of Gujarat, where in 1998, 34 Christian churches suffered destruction or damage. In Gujarat, Orissa, and Tamil Nadu (the state in which the India Evangelical Lutheran Church predominantly works) Hindu fundamentalist governments have passed anti-conversion legislation. To further complicate matters, India has closed its doors to foreign missionaries, leaving some of the world's largest communities of people isolated from the Gospel.