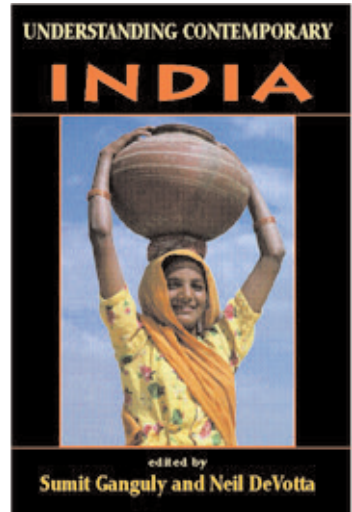


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# Understanding Contemporary India

edited by  
Sumit Ganguly and Neil DeVotta



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# Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	xi
<i>Preface</i>	xv
1 Introduction <i>Sumit Ganguly and Neil DeVotta</i>	1
2 India: A Geographic Preface <i>Ashok K. Dutt</i>	7
3 The Historical Context <i>Manu Bhagavan</i>	17
Ancient India 18	
Medieval India 24	
Mughal India 29	
The Emergence of British India 33	
Conclusion 36	
4 The Nationalist Movement <i>Pratap Bhanu Mehta</i>	41
The Revolt of 1857 43	
The Birth of Modern Nationalism 44	
Gandhi and the Trajectory of Indian Nationalism 46	
Muslims and Indian Nationalism 52	
Interpreting Indian Nationalism 56	
Ideas of India 58	
5 Indian Politics <i>Shalendra D. Sharma</i>	63
The Democratic Structure 64	
General Elections in the 1990s 70	
State-Society Relations and the Crisis of Governability 73	
India's Democratic Paradox 81	
The Resilience of Indian Democracy 85	

6	International Relations	<i>Sumit Ganguly</i>	93
	The Past as Prologue	94	
	The Limits of Nonalignment	96	
	The Brasstacks Crisis and Beyond	99	
	The End of the Cold War	100	
	Institutional and Societal Factors in the Policymaking Process	102	
	The Future of India's Foreign Policy	105	
7	India's Economy	<i>John Adams</i>	111
	The Rural Economy and Agriculture	113	
	Commerce and Industry	120	
	Government and the Private Sector	127	
	Accomplishments and Prospects	130	
8	The Role of Women	<i>Barbara Crossette</i>	137
	Poverty with a Female Face	139	
	Village Women on the March	143	
	The Dispiriting Dynasties	146	
	Investing in Women	148	
	Learning About Life and Love	152	
9	Population, Urbanization, and the Environment	<i>Holly Sims</i>	157
	The Population Lens	159	
	The Poverty Lens	169	
	The Technology Lens	177	
	The Economic Rationalism Lens	182	
	India's Environmental Activists	184	
	Conclusion	186	
10	Religion	<i>Ainslie T. Embree</i>	191
	Lived Religions	192	
	Four Indigenous Religions	194	
	Two Indigenous Religions	203	
	Religions in Interaction and Reinterpretation	207	
	Communal Tensions and Secularism	215	
	Conclusion	226	
11	Caste	<i>Vibha Pingle</i>	231
	The Caste System	232	
	Recent Changes in Indian Society	237	
	Caste, Class, and Affirmative Action in India	249	
	Conclusion	250	

12	The Arts	<i>Ananda Lal</i>	255
	Fine Art	257	
	Literature	260	
	Cinema	263	
	Television	266	
	Challenges for the Traditional Performing Arts	269	
	Music	270	
	Dance	273	
	Theater	276	
13	Trends and Prospects	<i>Sumit Ganguly and Neil DeVotta</i>	283
	<i>Glossary</i>		289
	<i>The Contributors</i>		293
	<i>Index</i>		297
	<i>About the Book</i>		313

# 1

## Introduction

*Sumit Ganguly and Neil DeVotta*

India is both a marvel and a paradox. The world's largest democracy, it is a mind-boggling polyethnic society numbering more than 1 billion people. It is one of the world's oldest civilizations and has produced four major religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. It is a mostly agrarian, poverty-stricken country, even though it is a world leader in information technology and space exploration. It is the birthplace of Mohandas Gandhi and the influence for various nonviolent crusades, even as the country ever more confidently brandishes its nuclear capabilities. And it is a young state that is constantly seeking to negotiate the present and future, even as it almost fanatically holds on to a glorious past.

India's constant dance with the past and present is nicely illustrated by the coded message that was sent out in 1974 to signal that the country had successfully tested its first nuclear device. The message, "the Buddha is smiling," referred to Buddha's reaction to a war between his kinsmen and disciples from two principalities. A dejected Buddha is supposed to have said that complete peace was unlikely until all the world's countries were equally mighty. If the code was meant to indicate that Buddha was now smiling because India had achieved a degree of parity in the nuclear realm, it also showed how Indians could connect a modern, revolutionary achievement (with potentially destructive consequences) to something said to have happened 2,500 years ago.

When India gained independence in 1947, its ethnic, caste, and religious conflicts, its security considerations, and its poverty, illiter-

acy, and other social woes caused many experts to predict that the country was bound to disintegrate. India, however, has proven these doomsayers wrong—as it continues to provide fodder to those who want to believe that the country cannot sustain itself in the long run.

India's democracy must rank as its greatest postindependence achievement. In contrast to the situation in many western societies, where low voter turnout is the norm among ethnic minorities, the less educated, and the working class, India's "poor, the underclass, [and] the uneducated . . . tend to vote not less but more than others" (Gill 1998: 166). The country has held thirteen parliamentary elections since 1952; the most recent, in September and October 1999, encompassed 900,000 polling stations, more than 4.5 million election staffers, and an electorate of more than 600 million. Indeed, the idea of the democratic contest and respect for the electoral verdict are so entrenched in India that the country's election commissioner felt it appropriate to advise his U.S. counterparts following the latter's November 2000 election fiasco in Florida. India's vibrant democracy also contrasts with that of other South Asian states, where democracy has been jettisoned in favor of authoritarianism or has been compromised by illiberal and exclusivist practices.

India's strong democracy has resulted from compromise and accommodation with its diverse regional, ethnic, and caste groups. Indeed, at a time when we see widespread ethnic conflict, caused in part by various governments' unwillingness to allow increased autonomy to ethnic groups, India is arguably the only country in the world that is creating ethnoregional states that diminish ethnic tensions. The number of states in the Indian union is twenty-eight (three new states were created in 2000). The government realized early on that states demarcated along ethnolinguistic lines could serve to compartmentalize friction and prevent ethnic unrest from spreading across state boundaries. In the main, this strategy has worked and has led to the decision to continue to create new states. The approach has not been a cure-all for ethnic relations in India, but given the country's extraordinary diversity and complexity, such accommodation along ethnic and regional lines is a major reason that the Indian union is in a stronger position today than it was at independence.

This argument in no way suggests that Indians are able to take their boundaries or unity for granted: the country's borders and national identity continue to be challenged on a daily basis. With regard to borders, the Chinese, who inflicted a humiliating loss on the Indians during the 1962 Sino-Indian war, continue to claim territory in the coun-

try's northeast, while rebel groups in the same region militarily challenge the state and its security forces. The country's most costly conflict is taking place in the state of Kashmir, where militants, some of whom are sponsored by the Pakistani government, are engaged in a savage war against India. Pakistan, which was created together with India when the British partitioned the subcontinent in 1947 along principally religious lines, claims that Kashmir—India's only majority Muslim state—is in fact Pakistani territory. India's belief that Kashmir belongs within its sovereign borders, its determination not to give in to its rival, and its realization that giving up territory could create a precedent for other independence-seeking movements within the country has forced it into a debilitating conflict.

The Hindu-Muslim religious divide, which existed prior to independence and was intensified by the subcontinent's partition, also can be seen in the efforts of Hindu extremists who seek to discard India's secular status and instead make it a culturally Hindu country. The most atrocious act of this kind was committed in December 1992, when some 200,000 extremists tore down the sixteenth-century mosque at Ayodhya, claiming that it was built on the exact spot where the Hindu god Rama was born. The subsequent rioting between Hindus and Muslims, the terrible anti-Sikh riots in November 1984 (after Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards to avenge her decision to invade the Sikh Golden Temple in Amritsar), and the March–April 2002 riots in the state of Gujarat signify the tenuous nature of ethnic relations in India.

Ethnic divisions and attempts to dismember the country are not the only challenges facing India. A relatively weak bureaucracy coupled with widespread corruption, especially at the state and local levels, also challenges the country's ability to govern efficiently and to improve its citizens' standard of living. In addition, India's burgeoning population makes the task even more difficult. At independence, India's population stood at 340 million. Just over fifty years later, that figure had reached 1 billion—two and a half times the population of the European Union (EU). Extending the comparison, 343,000 people were born in the European Union in the year 2000; India added that many people during the first week of 2000. When those who had immigrated to Europe were included, the EU states added approximately 1.2 million people in 2000; India added that many people during the first three weeks of that year. At this rate of growth, the country's population could rise to 1.5 billion by 2050. For a country that already has a poor record when it comes to the environment, with millions deprived of

clean air and water, such a staggering increase over a fifty-year span will inevitably pose severe challenges to future governments.

This population bulge raises some fundamental questions: Despite having eradicated famines (though still dealing with significant malnutrition problems), how successfully will India be able to feed its millions? To what extent will such a population increase create unrest within and between states, as millions crave more resources or migrate to areas with relatively more resources? To what extent will the already woeful sanitary conditions in the country become worse, and what more dangerous conditions will such growth introduce? Fifty years ago, some experts looked at population trends in India and preached doom and gloom. Today, not only is India self-sufficient in food production, but life expectancy in the past twenty years alone has risen from 55.0 years in 1980 to 62.6 years in 1999; and there is evidence that the use of high-yielding seeds and other developments will allow such progress to be maintained. That noted, only time will tell if the country can consolidate such gains or if future growth estimates are unsustainable.

From an economic standpoint, India has made significant strides since the country began selectively opening its markets in 1991. Although the foreign investment that has since poured into the country is much lower than the amounts invested in China, for example, there is no denying that the relatively open market policies that successive governments have pursued have led to an expansion of the middle class (which was claimed to be the world's largest even before the reforms) and have placed the country on a trajectory to become a major player in the global marketplace. Certain nationalist groups oppose foreign involvement in the country's economy because they see it as compromising India's cultural identity, and their opposition has no doubt complicated the dynamic between foreign investors and their Indian counterparts. Nevertheless, it is clear that India's political and business elites are keen on participating in the global economy. Consequently, although domestic constraints may inhibit India from embracing economic reforms as fast and as fully as the International Monetary Fund and its western friends may like, few if any doubt the country's resolve to become a part of the burgeoning international free-trading regime.

Also in the realm of international relations, the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union caused India to reevaluate its security alignments. Heavily dependent on the Soviet Union for diplomatic and military assistance during the Cold War—despite the rhetoric about India being a nonaligned power—the country now enjoys better rela-

tions with the United States and even China. It also continues to have healthy relations with Russia and other former Soviet states.

Relations between the United States and India (and, for that matter, between most western countries and India) were frayed in May 1998, when the latter conducted five nuclear tests. (Until that point, India had conducted only one test, in 1974.) Although all concerned had suspected that India and Pakistan possessed nuclear weapons, the May 1998 tests, which Pakistan reciprocated, led to economic sanctions against India. They also forced the world, and especially the recognized nuclear powers, to grapple with how to deal with the new reality. Those opposing India's decision to acquire nuclear weapons argue that it is immoral for a country with so much poverty to expend its scarce resources on such destructive technology. Others, however, argue that the country has no choice but to create the best possible deterrent capabilities against its enemies and that doing so means acquiring nuclear weapons. Although China's relatively advanced nuclear capabilities and its support for Pakistan's nuclear program clearly have been a factor in India's development of a nuclear arsenal, India's determination to be recognized as a regional superpower and a global power has no doubt also influenced its decision to enter the so-called nuclear club. This desire to be considered a global power, coupled with the fact that nearly one in every six persons in the world is an Indian, explains why the country calls repeatedly for a permanent Security Council seat in the United Nations. Whatever other consequences may stem from India's decision to build a nuclear arsenal, it has forced the world to pay even more serious attention to the marvel and the paradox that is India.

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