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India is in many ways a paradox. It is both a young state and one of the world’s oldest civilizations; it is a potential superpower, yet more than 300 million of its citizens live in abject poverty; it is the proud land of the peaceful Mohandas Gandhi, yet it brandishes nuclear weapons and hosts one of the world’s largest militaries; its rivers are revered for embodying deities, yet are among the world’s most polluted waterways; its infrastructure in many areas is abysmal, yet its information technology workers, engineers, scientists, and academics are in demand the world over; it is a country led by powerful women at various ranks, yet its women are among the most marginalized in the world; and it is a mind-boggling polyethnic society prone to secessionist movements and periodic communal violence, yet is also the world’s largest and most vibrant democracy.

North Americans and Europeans look to their big cities and take pride in their cosmopolitanism. But this cosmopolitanism is recent and much of it was transplanted in the past century. India’s diversity is thousands of years old and is partly what makes its civilization unique. There are actually many Indias, given that the country’s present territorial borders represent a historical accident. British India consisted of some 600 principalities, and it was British ambitions and malpractice that gave India its current boundaries. Britain’s biggest mistake may have been to clumsily partition the subcontinent in August 1947, which led to hundreds of thousands being killed and an estimated 15 million people displaced, as it created Pakistan and, inadvertantly, Bangladesh (Talbot and Singh 2009: 2). Postindependence India’s challenge has been to try to get the variegated peoples that ended up within its borders to embrace and celebrate a common Indian identity even while nurturing their distinct cultures and traditions. This is a continuous challenge, and it is manifested in the periodic communal violence (especially between Hindus and Muslims) and secessionist
violence the Indian state has experienced since independence. India faced so many daunting challenges at the time of independence that many believed the country was bound to disintegrate. Yet India has defied the odds and chugged along; and except for the period between June 1975 and January 1977, when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi imposed a state of emergency, it has done so democratically.

It is thus with good reason that Robert Blackwill, upon completing his tenure as US ambassador to India in 2003, noted “India is a pluralist society that creates magic with democracy, rule of law and individual freedom, community relations and diversity. . . . I wouldn’t mind being born ten times to rediscover India” (Phadnis 2003). Indeed, one would need to be born at least ten times to discover India. This is why there are no “experts” on India. Notwithstanding the plethora of knowledgeable commentators on specific subjects pertaining to India, only those who are arrogant or ignorant dare claim to be an “expert” on this maddeningly diverse country comprising 325 functioning languages (including twenty-two official languages), hundreds of dialects, twenty-five scripts, six major religions—Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Jainism—4,500 caste groups, hundreds of tribal groups, and their resulting traditions and cultures encompassed in twenty-eight states and seven territories (see Table 1.1). This was partly made evident when the brilliant Indian writer Salman Rushdie claimed that the best writing in India was done in the English language. Rushdie was quite rightly pilloried from various quarters with detractors asking how anyone not familiar with all of India’s languages—with some like Tamil and Sanskrit being over two and three millennia old and comprising awesome literatures—was qualified to make such a claim.

India’s diversity and its consolidated democracy are the country’s greatest strengths. What we now call Hinduism has played a huge role in fostering India’s diversity. The term Hinduism is of recent origin and was popularized by the British in the nineteenth century as they sought to understand the religious traditions among India’s diverse Hindus (Hawley 1991). Given their Christian background, the British were nonplussed when confronted with the various “Hinduisms” in India that embraced numerous gods, rituals, and traditions, all of which had evolved over 4,000 years. Unlike the monotheistic (and most other) religions, Hindus do not have an official canon, stated doctrine, an overarching leader, or institution. In short, one could be a monotheist, a polytheist, or an atheist (who may merely devote himself to the study of the Upanishads—ancient, abstruse philosophical texts—yet never visit a temple) and still be considered a good Hindu. Unlike the monotheistic texts that mandate fundamental beliefs, the Hindu texts promote varied beliefs and practices and come across as contradictory. As US scholar Wendy Doniger (2009: 688) has noted, one could use these texts and

argue for almost any position in contemporary India: that Hindus have been vegetarians, and that they have not; that Hindus and Muslims have gotten
### Table 1.1 India’s States and Territories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Year Created</th>
<th>Major Language/s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>1956</td>
<td>Telugu and Urdu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arunachal Pradesh</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>English, Miji, Honpa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>1947</td>
<td>Assamese and Bodo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bihar</td>
<td>1950</td>
<td>Hindi and Bhojpuri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chhattisgarh</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Hindi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goa</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Marathi and Konkani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gujarat</td>
<td>1960</td>
<td>Gujarati</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haryana</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>Hindi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Himachal Pradesh</td>
<td>1971</td>
<td>Hindi and Pahari</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jammu and Kashmir</td>
<td>1947</td>
<td>Kashmiri, Urdu, Dogri, Pahari, Ladakhi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jharkhand</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Hindi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karnataka</td>
<td>1956</td>
<td>Kannada</td>
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<td>1960</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manipur</td>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Meiteilon</td>
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<tr>
<td>Meghalaya</td>
<td>1972</td>
<td>English, Garo, Khasi</td>
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<td>1987</td>
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<td>Nagaland</td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>English</td>
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<td>1949</td>
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<td>1956</td>
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<td>Rajasthan</td>
<td>1956</td>
<td>Hindi and Rajastani</td>
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<td>Sikkim</td>
<td>1975</td>
<td>Nepali, Bhutia, Limbu, Lepcha</td>
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<td>Bengali</td>
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#### Territories

<table>
<thead>
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<th>State</th>
<th>Year Created</th>
<th>Language/s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>2001</td>
<td>Nicobarese, English, Bengali, Tamil, Hindi, Telugu, Malayalam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chandigarh</td>
<td>1953</td>
<td>Hindi and Punjabi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dadra and Nagar Haveli</td>
<td>1961</td>
<td>Marathi and Gujarati</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daman and Diu</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Marathi and Gujarati</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delhi</td>
<td>1947</td>
<td>Hindi, Urdu, English, Punjabi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakshadweep</td>
<td>1956</td>
<td>Malayalam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pondicherry</td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, French</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
along well together, and that they have not; that Hindus have objected to suttee [or sati, whereby widows were burned on their husband’s funeral pyres], and that they have not; that Hindus have renounced the material world, and that they have embraced it; that Hindus have oppressed women and lower castes, and that they have fought for their equality.

One can see why the British, who possessed a predilection for categorizing and cataloging the territories and peoples they conquered, got confused. Hindu extremists, however, find such pluralism threatening because they believe it weakens India. They have therefore sought to promote the Hindu god Ram as Hinduism’s central figure and his story in the *Ramayana* as the basic Hindu text. Part of the irony here is that the *Ramayana* itself is a testament to the diversity of Hinduism given that there are over 800 known versions of the book. The Hindu extremists, consisting of various groups headed by the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (National Volunteers Organization, RSS) and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council), have tried to get around this by promoting a particular version of the book. They also promote an ideology called Hindutva, or “Hinduness,” that argues that no matter what religion an Indian espouses, s/he should subscribe to a Hindu ethos (Hardgrave 2005). In short, these extremists not only seek to discard the pluralism inherent in Hinduism for a homogeneous identity, they also undermine the secular ideals upon which India’s democracy has been built (Aiyar 2004; Bhargava 1998). Their shrill rhetoric and combative stance toward Pakistan and the only Muslim majority state of Jammu and Kashmir, which has experienced an insurgency spanning more than two decades, also complicate India-Pakistan and Hindu-Muslim relations. Ultimately, the goals of Hindu extremists combined with the rough and tumble of democratic politics have led to Hindu-Muslim violence, especially in north India (Brass 2003; Varshney 2002; Wilkinson 2004), with the December 1992 destruction of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya, which Hindus claim was built over a temple honoring Lord Ram’s birthplace, and the February–March 2002 pogrom in Gujarat, which was sparked after Hindu pilgrims returning from Ayodhya were attacked and killed, radicalizing the country’s already marginalized Muslims.

Muslim elites like Mohammed Ali Jinnah had justified partition by promoting a “Two Nation Theory,” which claimed that Hindus and Muslims were different nations no matter how you evaluated them, and the subcontinent’s Muslims therefore qualified to have their own country. This was the basis for creating Pakistan. Indian elites like Jawaharlal Nehru were determined not to position their country as a Hindu entity in opposition to “Muslim Pakistan” and staunchly promoted India as a secular state in which all religious groups could live amicably. Notwithstanding the grotesque violence that accompanied partition, India encouraged Muslims to make the country their home; and Gandhi’s campaigns on behalf of Muslims, his assassination in January 1948 at the hands of an RSS member, and the reflection this promoted among both Hindus and Muslims also influenced many among the latter to stay on in India (Husain 1965: 134). When the Hindu ruler of Kashmir decided to join India, Nehru assured his
predominantly Muslim population that they would be treated as equal citizens even as India and Pakistan battled over Kashmir. In an attempt to buy their loyalty, Kashmir was provided certain privileges that did not apply to other states (i.e., its own constitution, flag, and the provision that only Kashmiris could purchase land in Kashmir). India consequently now has the world’s third largest Muslim population after Indonesia and Pakistan. What is important to recognize is that while Nehru realized that India’s diversity required the government to compromise when dealing with minority communities, he emphasized not merely being tolerant but also being generous. His dealings with the country’s Muslim community especially signify this.

Independent India also decided not to institute a uniform civil code, which meant that Muslims could utilize their own law when dealing with issues of marriage, divorce, and inheritance. The Hindutva advocates point to such policies and claim that the Congress Party has been mollycoddling the Muslims in exchange for their votes and that such preferential treatment makes a mockery of India’s claim to being a secular country. They also argue that India’s Muslims operate as a fifth column for Pakistan and hence cannot be trusted and that Muslims aspire to procreate at a faster rate and eventually become a majority in India, even though much evidence makes clear that fertility rates for both Hindus and Muslims are related to educational and economic circumstances (Jeffery and Jeffery 2006). Following partition, most prominent and accomplished Muslims migrated to Pakistan. Most among those who decided to stay in India were extremely poor, and according to the 2006 Rajindar Sachar Committee report, India’s Muslims now lag behind other communities when it comes to government employment, access to health facilities and bank credit, education, and their overall economic condition (Prime Minister’s High Level Committee 2006). Demonizing an already downtrodden population is a sure way to radicalize them, and in a region where Islamic fundamentalism is in sway and Islamic terror groups are looking to attack India, it is akin to playing with fire.

Hindu extremists thrived on using such anti-Muslim themes for politicking purposes and to fan anti-Muslim violence, and such demagoguery did advantage the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People’s Party, BJP), which politically represents the Hindutva forces, during the 1990s especially. The BJP and its allies, however, suffered a surprise defeat in the 2004 general elections and they fared even worse in the 2009 elections. This has led many to believe that their tactics rooted in promoting anti-Muslim sentiment and a homogeneous Hinduism may have run their course. If so, it represents a clear positive for communal relations and democracy in India; for while the BJP and others that constitute the so-called saffron brigade promote a “Hindu” identity, the Congress Party, its numerous shortcomings notwithstanding, supports a pluralist “Indian” identity that is consistent with India’s civilization. India’s aspiration to become a great power in global affairs is dependent on internal cohesion. That in turn mandates camaraderie especially between its Hindus and Muslims, which is more likely to be achieved in a pluralist and secular, as opposed to “Hindu,” India.
India’s other greatest strength is its democracy. Indeed, elections in India are akin to carnivalesque celebrations, and the Indian word *tamasha* (which the *Oxford English Dictionary* now refers to as “an entertainment, show, display, public function” and “a fuss, a commotion”) best captures the accompanying spirit and milieu of political campaigning. The closest comparable atmosphere in the United States is the tailgating revelry that takes place prior to football games. Depending on their wherewithal, candidates aspiring to political office campaign using aircrafts, helicopters, trains, tractors, automobiles, bullock carts, elephants, and camels. Details pertaining to the country’s fifteenth general elections are discussed in Chapter 4, but the following statistics highlight some aspects of the world’s largest democratic exercise held in April and May 2009: 714 million registered voters (of which 420 million actually voted); 8,070 candidates (including 3,150 independents); 1,055 parties; 1,368,430 electronic voting machines; 828,804 polling centers, of which 12,901 were set up to accommodate villages constituting less than 300 voters; 4,700,000 polling staff; and 2,100,000 security personnel. Such exercises have been the norm in India beginning with the country’s very first general election between October 1951 and February 1952 (the logistical challenges involved in conducting general elections in India mandate that they be held in stages, with different regions going to the polls at different times, although elections today last around a month). That first general election saw 176 million Indians, of which 85 percent were illiterate, qualifying to vote and provided the opportunity to exercise their franchise at 224,000 polling booths presided over by 56,000 election offices, 280,000 assistants, and 224,000 policemen (Guha 2007: 133–134). Today, a position in the Election Commission is one of the most powerful in all of India, and one can see why the chief election commissioner at the time felt qualified to advise his counterparts in the United States following the 2000 presidential election fiasco in Florida!

There were dozens of countries in Africa and Asia that gained independence in the two decades following World War II, yet India is among the few that successfully nurtured and maintained its democracy even though it was considered among the most likely to fail. Why is this so? The Nobel laureate Amartya Sen (2005) has argued that Indian civilization has long tolerated, encouraged, and celebrated an argumentative tradition that has been conducive to democracy and secularism. Others suggest that there is nothing inherently democratic about India’s past, and the consolidation of democracy is mainly due to the conscious decisions made by Indian leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru who championed the idea of representative government for all citizens (Khilnani 1997).

There is no gainsaying how important Nehru was in ensuring India adopted a democratic trajectory. In a real sense, Jawaharlal Nehru was India’s George Washington. Indeed, one could argue that Nehru was burdened with a more difficult responsibility than was Washington, for while Washington’s United States had its fair share of challenges, it was a relatively sleepy republic compared to the tumultuous India Nehru inherited. Nehru served three full terms as prime
minister, and among his first responsibilities was helping to forge the Indian Constitution, which one scholar thinks may represent “the greatest political venture since that originated in Philadelphia in 1787” (Austin 1999: 308). Nehru also instituted important precedents like ensuring the military stayed subservient to civilian rule, India’s regional leaders were accommodated as much as possible, and religious minorities (especially the country’s Muslims) were dealt with generously. Nehru, Gandhi, and many Indian leaders believed that a united India was only possible provided the country promoted an egalitarian ethos. This was a bold decision, given that the Indian polity was—is—divided along class, caste, religious, ethnolinguistic, and regional lines. But these crosscutting cleavages also ensured that democracy was, arguably, the only way through which to ensure the country did not disintegrate.

Successive Indian governments have consequently adopted a carrot-and-stick approach when dealing with forces threatening to sunder the Indian union. In the latter instance, the Indian state has resorted to brute violence to put down separatist forces, and the tactics it has resorted to in places like Kashmir and Nagaland have rightly generated condemnation both within and without India. Attempts by Sikh extremists in the 1980s to create a separate state called Khalistan in the Punjab were also violently put down, and Indira Gandhi’s decision to send the Indian army into the Golden Temple, Sikhism’s holiest shrine, to force out insurgents hiding within its compound culminated in her Sikh bodyguards assassinating her in October 1984. In the past few years, various Maoist groups have taken up arms against the state so that nearly 200 of India’s over 600 districts now deal with insurgencies. In most instances, the so-called Maoist violence stems from attempts to uproot tribal people especially from their land (so states and private companies can extract various natural resources), the scarcity of government services and employment among rural youth, and the impunity with which police and paramilitary forces perpetrate violence against India’s most marginalized populations. Chapter 12 discusses in some detail the causes for and consequences of the Maoist insurrection, but here it is relevant to note how the crackdown against the Maoists and the concurrent incentives the government is trying to put into place to deal with some of their grievances highlight India’s use of both force and accommodation when trying to ensure its territorial integrity.

The political process in India typically unfolds amid great tumult, and students of India cannot be blamed for thinking that Indian elites are better at ruling than governing. One can rule by diktat, but governance requires compromise and tact. Nehru, who was instinctively drawn toward accommodation as opposed to confrontation, stands out with regard to the latter, and this is evident in how he dealt with regional leaders and their various demands. It is especially evident in his instructions to the Indian army regarding how to deal with the Naga tribes even after Naga rebels had ambushed homes, burnt houses, “looted shops . . . kidnapped teachers . . . raided railway stations and sniped trains” (Elwin 1961: 60).
You must remember that all the people of the area in which you are operating are fellow-Indians. They may have a different religion, they may pursue a different way of life, but they are Indians, and the very fact that they are different and yet part of India is a reflection of India’s greatness. Some of these people are misguided and have taken to arms against their own people, and are disrupting the peace of this area. You are to protect the mass of the people from these disruptive elements. You are not there to fight the people in the area, but to protect them. You are fighting only those who threaten the people and who are a danger to the lives and properties of the people. You must, therefore, do everything possible to win their confidence and respect and to help them feel that they belong to India. (Ibid.)

This was the same tact that Nehru used with the leaders of south India when they demanded separate states and later threatened secession due to Hindi being made the official language. The demand to create states along linguistic lines first led to the creation of Andhra in 1953 (and renamed Andhra Pradesh in 1956). With Andhra’s Telugu speakers having won their state, other regions also began demanding statehood. This led to the States Reorganization Act of 1956 that created a number of states along ethnolinguistic lines. Nehru and the Indian elite were initially averse to creating such states, believing it could lead to India’s balkanization (Guha 2007: 189, 199), but by giving into the popular will of the masses, these states “consolidated the unity of India” (ibid.: 200). Since then, new states have been periodically created along regional lines (but never on religious grounds), with Chhattisgarh, Uttarakhand, and Jharkhand being the last three formed in 2000.

The Indian Constitution, which was adopted in November 1949 and became operational in January 1950, said that Hindi would become the national language within fifteen years, until which time English could also be used for all official purposes. As the date approached to implement Hindi as the sole national language, southerners especially turned hostile. Nehru’s tendency to accommodate and cooperate was again made evident when in 1963 he passed the Official Languages Act, which said English may continue to be used for official communication even after 1965. When debates over verbiage led to the act not being implemented, violent protests erupted in Tamil Nadu leading to rioting and self-immolation. Lal Bahadur Shastri, who became prime minister following Nehru’s death in May 1964, soon thereafter declared that states will be allowed to maintain their regional languages and also continue to use English as an official language when communicating with each other and the central government. This continues to be the case in India, where the sense of being Indian is not associated with any particular language. Indeed, the popularity of Hindi and English has grown to the point where both languages now are spoken interchangeably, leading to a fusion called “Hinglish.” Indian authors today are among the best writers in English, and their literary success has led some to claim that the “empire is striking back.” The influence of these authors on the
expanding middle class together with the growth of the Internet, text messaging, and satellite television have all helped with the spread of English in India. On the other hand, Hindi cinema, which is popularly referred to as Bollywood, is the craze throughout India (despite about 400 movies also being made in regional languages). One-third of Indians today speak Hindi, and Bollywood no doubt has played a major role in facilitating this. Even regions that rebelled against Hindi being imposed are now gradually accepting it, and this would not have happened if the Indian government had refused to compromise on the language issue and sought to impose Hindi on the entire population. Like Nehru, who was averse to creating linguistic states but relented in order to ensure India’s territorial integrity, Prime Minister Shastri was averse to continuing with English as an official language (ibid.: 395). But he too gave into the popular will of the south, and polyglot India is a culturally richer country thanks to it.

Save for India’s south, many today do not recall how Andhra Pradesh and other ethnolinguistic states came to be created. It is worth noting because it highlights aspects of Indian democracy that outsiders especially merely equate with chaos and instability. Andhra’s case gained prominence thanks to a man called Potti Sriramulu going on a fifty-eight-day fast demanding statehood. Nehru relented following Sriramulu’s death. The same scenario was repeated in December 2009 when K. Chandrasekhar Rao, the leader of a party representing the Telangana region of Andhra Pradesh, went on a fast demanding a separate state of Telangana. Rao ended his fast after eleven days when the Congress Party announced that it would grant the region statehood, with Hyderabad, one of India’s premier software centers, likely being its capital. The announcement was opposed in the rest of Andhra Pradesh with the same sorts of protests the supporters of a Telangana state had mounted, and this in turn caused the central government to waver over its decision, which predictably led to a new round of violent protests by the pro-Telangana forces. The demand for a separate Telangana state is nearly sixty decades old, with its proponents harboring legitimate grievances dealing with neglect and instability.

Telangana state is nearly sixty decades old, with its proponents harboring legitimate grievances dealing with neglected development. It may take a while before a new Telangana state is added to the Indian union, but the entire episode has emboldened other regions hoping to form their own states. In 2004, the Indian government proposed creating a Second States Reorganization Committee, and one should not be at all surprised if the India of the future included states called Vidarbha, Gorkhaland, Harit Pradesh, Bhojpur, Mahakaushal, Poorvanchal, Bodoland, Marathwada, Rayalaseema, Bundelkhand, Seemanchal, Avadh, and Kongu Nadu. One author has even suggested that India should be divided into fifty or sixty states (Kashyap 1998). While this may sound excessive, it is useful to consider that as currently constituted, the United States, with about 310 million people, has fifty states, while India, with four times as many people, has just twenty-eight states. For instance, Uttar Pradesh, India’s largest state, has over 190 million people (which is over 60 percent of the US population), and even its chief minister now proposes that it be split into three states. Telangana,
should it get statehood, will harbor 35 million people within its borders, and this is one argument in its favor. It is ultimately a testament to Indian democracy that it remains one of the few countries (another being Nigeria) that can continue to add to its list of states.

What grates observers, however, is how popular demands get carried out in India—as when hunger strikes lead to the creation of new states or protestors block roads and railway tracks so as to publicize their demands (thereby inconveniencing millions and costing the government and businesses millions of dollars in revenue). What such observers fail to recognize is that dharnas (fasting unto death, if necessary) and hartals and bandhs (both forms of strikes, although the latter, which the Indian Supreme Court banned in 1998, typically get organized by political parties) are part of India’s vocabulary and are very much a part of the country’s DNA. Fasting, for instance, is an age-old tradition in India, and Gandhi’s genius was to take such a practice, which all in the country could identify with, and use it as a tool to further the nationalist cause and especially promote Hindu-Muslim unity at a time when Hindu-Muslim animus was at its highest. Similarly, civil disobedience is rooted in nonviolent protest. It is designed to inconvenience those who have refused or failed to develop a consciousness about your plight. It is how India gained its independence nonviolently. (As a significant aside, it is also how African Americans mobilized to bring an end to Jim Crow laws. As Martin Luther King memorably said, “Christ gave me the message. Gandhi gave me the method.”) Gandhi is said to have noted that the tactics used to gain independence from the British would not be appropriate in postindependence India, but this is not advice average Indians are aware of or care to adhere to. From their standpoint, disruptive protests are very much a part and parcel of the country’s democratic heritage. They certainly garner attention and force even the most recalcitrant and laggardly politician to respond to grievances.

India’s unique democracy also upends arguments made by western scholars of democracy. For instance, scholars hold that the more educated and economically better off people are, the more likely they are to vote. In India, however, the less educated and poor vote in greater numbers (often after standing in queues for hours) than those who are better educated and economically well off. Furthermore, in western countries, minorities tend to vote in lower numbers. In India, on the contrary, minorities vote in higher numbers and may also vote strategically. This is especially true with Muslims, who not only vote to ensure their preferred candidate wins but also vote to ensure their least-preferred candidate (usually representing the BJP) does not win. Muslims and low-caste groups have also formed alliances in states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar to try to defeat upper-caste groups and coalitions, and the politicking that goes on makes clear that for India’s poor the franchise is akin to a weapon.

 Democracies, more than any other form of government, are better at reforming and adapting. This process, however, is rarely pretty, and India proves the point. There are no perfect democracies in the world, and India, as Chapter
12 will make clear, still needs to shed some troubling features before it can be considered a full-fledged liberal democracy. Yet its democratic structure is sufficiently robust that various Indian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and citizens’ groups have been able to use the country’s constitution and institutions (especially the courts) when trying to confront injustices committed against the most marginalized citizens—including the lower castes, women, and children. By some accounts these civil society organizations number over 500,000, and anyone spending sufficient time in rural and urban India can speak to their valiant efforts. One example here, which some have branded a second struggle for independence, will suffice: in June 2005, the Indian Parliament finally succumbed to fifteen years of pressure from various Indian activists and civil society groups and passed the Right to Information Act. Coming into force in October that year, the act partly mandates that citizens can request information from public authorities and stipulates time periods for the release of the sought-after information. It has led to villagers seeking information about how monies allocated to village projects have been spent, whether materials used for development projects were of the proper quality, and whether the wages paid them matched what the government was charged for that labor. When combined with sections of the media that also go out of their way to document corruption and injustice, such measures have the potential to radically improve accountability, governance, and democracy.

The reservation (or quota) system put in place so Dalits (formerly called Untouchables), Tribals, and Other Backward Castes (or Classes) could overcome discrimination and secure employment represents another significant instance of accommodation on the part of the Indian state. Whatever reasons may have justified the creation of the caste system, it morphed over the ages into an institution that oppressed and denigrated millions of Indians. The periodic violence ranging from rape and murder associated with caste represents a major blemish on Indian society. Those who continue to face the brunt of this oppression are Dalits. Forced into lives of servitude, drudgery, and humiliation, it is only in postindependence India that many Dalit communities have been able to assert themselves, and the main reason for their being able to do so is the right to vote. Chapter 10 describes the caste and reservation systems, but what needs to be noted here is that the rise of the Dalits and lower castes in India represents a social revolution. The reservation system put in place over the years now ensures that 22.5 percent of all jobs in the central government are reserved for Dalits and Tribals. Similarly, 27 percent of all jobs are reserved for caste groups that fall under the Other Backward Castes (or Classes) category.

While caste is typically associated with Hindus, its influence has been around so long that even non-Hindus (Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, and Sikhs) ended up with castes of their own. Even the Dalits, who fall outside of the overarching caste system, have over 1,000 subcastes, with many Dalits also being Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Sikh, Jain, and Zoroastrian (or Parsi). With
the reservation system applying only to those classified as Hindu, Muslims and other religious minorities have not had access to the quota system for jobs at the national level (although some states with large Muslim populations have created quotas for Muslims at the state level). In December 2009, however, the National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities proposed that the reservation system be extended to all minorities (including Hindus who constitute minority communities in Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab, Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya, and the union territory of Lakshadweep) and that the entire reservation system be based on income as opposed to caste. Should its recommendations be implemented, the new policies would especially benefit Muslims who, as noted above, are among India’s poorest.

India also has quotas in place for Dalits and Tribals in Parliament. Currently, out of the 543 seats in Parliament’s lower house, 79 are reserved for Dalits and 41 for Tribals. Dalits and Tribals also have seats reserved for them in the respective state legislatures. Furthermore, Dalits and Tribals have access to quotas in government educational institutions, and in August 2008 the Indian Supreme Court ordered all higher institutions funded by the central government to reserve 27 percent of seats for OBCs. The Congress Party–led government even considered imposing job quotas on the private sector to increase Dalit and low-caste representation but then backed off.

The Indian government even nominates two representatives from the Anglo-Indian community (those of European and Indian ancestry) to serve in Parliament (as the community is relatively small and too scattered to compete for any seats). While the number of women winning elections to the Lok Sabha (lower house) of Parliament has been inching up—45 women were elected in 2004 whereas 58 were elected in 2009—there has long been a movement to pass the Women’s Reservation Bill, which would set aside 33 percent of seats in the lower house, state legislatures, and local governments for women. In March 2010, India’s upper house (Rajya Sabha) took the first step and voted on the Women’s Reservation Bill, which must now also be passed by the lower house and approved by at least half the country’s state assemblies before the legislation can take effect. In addition, 33.3 percent of seats in village councils (panchayats) are reserved for women. Consequently, at present about a million women get elected to village councils every five years. And the current Congress Party government has now proposed to increase women’s representation in village councils to 50 percent (thereby joining states like Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, and Uttarakhand that already reserve 50 percent of village council seats for women). This would raise women’s representation in village councils to 1.4 million. There is no electoral exercise of this magnitude designed to empower women anywhere else in the world. Separately, in December 2008 the Delhi High Court asked the central government to set aside 3 percent of jobs in the public sector for the disabled. Indeed, quotas are very much a part of the Indian political scene.
Affirmative action is a controversial issue in the United States, and extending reservations in India too has caused vocal and violent protests, especially among upper-caste communities (who stand to lose the most). While decisions pertaining to the reservation system have inevitably been colored by political considerations, their main purpose has been to try to create a more egalitarian and less sexist India where historically the poor and women have been the most disempowered and oppressed. This too is part and parcel of India’s democratic process of accommodating important constituencies and ensuring that they have opportunities to thrive in the country’s growing economy. India’s vibrant and expanding economy will no doubt generate jobs for the skilled lower castes as well and thereby cause caste and the reservation system to lose their saliency over time (Das 2002). However, while development and modernization have already vitiated caste consciousness, the reservation system is bound to be a feature in India for a long time to come.

Up to about the early seventeenth century, India and China were responsible for nearly 60 percent of the world’s gross domestic product. In 1700, India’s share of world income stood at 22.6 percent. The British exploited and pauperized India to such an extent that by the time they gave up colonial rule India was capable of producing very little. This no doubt partly influenced the likes of Jawaharlal Nehru into being highly suspicious of capitalism. Nehru and other Indian leaders were also thoroughly impressed with how the Soviet Union had transformed itself within a generation from a predominantly peasant society into an industrial state. The rise of the Labour Party in Britain, its support for Indian independence, and its embrace of socialist economic principles also influenced Nehru and other Congress Party leaders to eschew a capitalistic system and instead put their faith in socialism (Luce 2007: 28). But the economic policies they subsequently pursued stifled entrepreneurship, creativity, and industry so that India’s economy kept growing at an average of only 3.6 percent until the 1970s, which just about kept up with the country’s population growth and was derogatorily referred to as the “Hindu rate of growth.” The economy did grow at an average of about 5.6 percent in the 1980s, but when one looked at how Indians who had gone abroad were thriving, it was amply clear that the country’s economic structure was weighing down entrepreneurial Indians. Consecutive Indian governments were unhappy that qualified Indians were leaving the country to work abroad and bemoaned how this “brain drain” was undermining India while benefiting western countries especially, but those who left India retorted that living in socialist India was a “drain on the brain.” Today India is experiencing a “brain gain,” with many of those who left the country choosing to return, mainly because they believe that India provides better opportunities. The thousands of individual decisions associated with such reverse migration provide a powerful statement about India’s rise and its promising future.

At a time when India and China are constantly compared, it is indeed a testament to the country’s plural nature and democratic culture that while Chinese
leaders shudder at the hint of dissent, India’s leaders govern amid constant dissent. India has not been able to keep pace with China economically, partly because China’s open market reforms began twelve years before India’s and mainly because authoritarian systems operate more efficiently as they can cavalierly disregard their citizens’ preferences. For instance, when China decides to build a highway, it does so according to plan and those displaced as a result know better than to protest too loudly or violently. When India, on the other hand, builds a highway, it must often negotiate with various village heads and citizens’ groups who may protest against the planned route or over the amount villagers are compensated for sacrificing their land. Besides blocking construction, villagers and their NGO supporters may also halt progress by filing public interest lawsuits, which may thereafter take the overburdened courts years to rule on. To use a specific example, in 2004 Reliance Power, owned by one of India’s richest men, worked through the Uttar Pradesh state government and acquired 2,500 acres of land with plans to build a power station. According to Indian law, states can force farmers to sell their lands to private establishments provided they in turn develop the land in a manner that benefits the public. The state government had thus used emergency powers to buy the land and transfer it to the company. But 200 farmers owning 400 acres challenged the acquisition process in court. In December 2009 the Allahabad High Court ruled in favor of the farmers, thereby complicating the company’s plans. When combined with the red tape and rampant corruption throughout government bureaucracies, it is a miracle that postindependence India has come this far so quickly. Thus a leading Indian commentator could note: “Both the Chinese and the Indians are convinced that their prosperity will only increase in the 21st century. In China it will be induced by the state; in India’s case, it may well happen despite the state” (Das 2009).

Notwithstanding such inefficiencies, India and its polity enjoy a degree of governmental stability. China, however, is still evolving politically—that is unless one believes the Chinese Communist Party can continue governing for decades to come without instituting significant political reforms. No one knows how peaceful or disruptive China’s transition from authoritarianism to a more representative form of government is going to be and what this means for disgruntled regions like Tibet and Xinjiang Province. According to one study, by 2050 China, India, and the United States will be the world’s first, second, and third largest economies (Dadush and Stancil 2010), respectively, although other projections show China surpassing the United States to take the top spot as early as 2027. A separate study claims that India even has the potential to become an advanced economy and surpass the United States to become the second largest global economy by 2039 (Asian Development Bank 2009). Yet when the imponderables associated with China’s political evolution are considered, India, its slower pace of development notwithstanding, could like the proverbial tortoise very well overtake China as well in the not too distant future.
The Indian economy has certainly come a long way from where it was in 1991 when the country only had foreign currency reserves to purchase less than two weeks’ worth of imports and was forced to secretly transport its gold as collateral to the Bank of London so as to ensure assistance from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The IMF also forced the Indian government to institute open market policies, which ended the socialist dispensation Nehru and Indira Gandhi had championed. The gamble has paid off, with India registering under 6 percent growth during the first half of this decade and averaging close to 9 percent growth during 2005–2008. Incidentally, India ended 2009 with the fifth largest foreign reserves in the world and by buying up 200 tons of gold from the International Monetary Fund so as to shore up its reserves.

India’s economic reforms have led to a rising middle class that may number over 150 million people, with some claiming it is as high as 300 million people. Either figure must be juxtaposed with the over 400 million Indians who are illiterate. This has also led to a wider gap between those who are relatively well off and the country’s poor. India still comprises about 600,000 villages, and over 70 percent of Indians continue to live in rural areas and depend on agriculture for their livelihood. The percentage living in poverty differs based on how one calculates poverty in India (i.e., calorie intake, income, goods and services utilized), and often the country’s states and central government disagree on the respective figures. Over one-half of India’s population, however, may be living in poverty or levels bordering on poverty. A recent study that gauged poverty based on goods and services consumed at the level of the household concluded that 37.2 percent of India’s population lived below the country’s poverty line. The study found that over 40 percent of Indians lived on less than Rs 15 (15 rupees; about 30 US cents) per day. A separate study claimed that if Rs 20 (about US 45 cents) per day was considered the poverty line, 77 percent of Indians would be considered poor and vulnerable (Economic and Political Weekly 2009: 5). The United Nations and World Bank poverty line is US$1.25 (around Rs 60), and by this measure the vast majority of Indians live in poverty. India’s Planning Commission, however, estimates that around 300 million Indians live in poverty (80 million in urban areas and 220 million in rural areas). While one may quibble about the various methodologies employed to conduct such studies, the fact remains that they all point to a rising economic disparity especially between rural and urban India and between the poor and middle/upper classes.

The present Congress government has sought to cushion the plight of such Indians by forgiving farmers’ debts and instituting a National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), which guarantees 100 days of manual work per year at Rs 100 (approximately US$2.50) per day for adults in rural areas. During 2008–2009, nearly 45 million households benefitted from some employment thanks to NREGA, and its popularity may be an important reason the Congress and its allies were reelected in May 2009. Some states in India carry out subsidized food programs whereby the poor get to purchase staple commodities at Rs
2 per kilogram (2.2 pounds). The Indian government’s 2009 budget proposes supplying every family living below the poverty line 25 kilograms (55 pounds) of rice and wheat at Rs 3 per kilogram. This Food Security Act, if and when implemented, will no doubt help the poorest in India even as it likely expands the Congress Party’s vote base.

Widespread poverty notwithstanding, India’s rise is also evident from the increased stature it now enjoys on the world stage. This is in spite of its fluctuating tensions with China and enmity with Pakistan. Indians are still to get over the humiliating military defeat their country suffered following China’s preemptive attack in 1962. While relations between the two countries have since improved drastically, to the point where they cooperate closely against the western states on issues like trade and the environment, tensions stemming from the Dalai Lama’s presence in India and a disputed border have ruffled Indo-China relations from time to time. Pakistan, on the other hand, has defined its identity in opposition to India, and the two countries have, in the main, enjoyed hostile relations since their independence. Pakistan controls one-third of Kashmir but claims the country can never be complete until all of predominantly Muslim Kashmir becomes part of Pakistan. India, however, considers Kashmir very much a part of its borders and also uses its only majority Muslim state to bolster the country’s secular status. The Pakistani military has used various extremist elements in the country to fan a proxy war within India-administered Kashmir and encourage secessionist forces within the state (Bose 2003; Ganguly 1997). Terrorist groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba that operate within Pakistan, often with the support and connivance of elements within Pakistan’s intelligence agency, have also targeted other parts of India. Thus, while for Americans September 11 signifies the day terrorists attacked the United States, for Indians December 13 and November 26 are days on which terrorists attacked India. The former refers to the attack on the Indian Parliament in December 2001, while the latter refers to the November 2008 attacks on Mumbai that lasted three days and killed 173 people. In many ways, the enmity with Pakistan compromises India’s international stature by complicating its relations with the Kashmiri people and foreign affairs with neighboring states. The sooner the differences between the two states are amicably settled and Pakistan becomes a stable democracy, the better it would be for India.

While India has had mixed relations with its smaller South Asian neighboring states, the country enjoys much closer ties with the United States. The George W. Bush administration was reviled in most parts of the world, but Indians gave it high marks for going out of its way to foster US-India ties. This culminated in the nuclear agreement that was reached between the two countries in 2008 that allows India to purchase fuel for its nuclear reactors and also import nuclear reactors even as it maintains separately its nuclear weapons program. India is now accepted as a responsible nuclear weapons state, talked about
as a possible permanent member of a reformed UN Security Council, and is an indispensable country when it comes to dealing with the challenges stemming from global warming. The multilateral foreign policies that the Barack Obama administration is advocating at a time when the United States is experiencing a period of relative decline and countries like India and China are on the rise affords India numerous opportunities to stamp its mark on global affairs.

In 2001, exactly a decade after India began gradually opening up its economy, an influential US scholar wondered if “India is destined always to be ‘emerging’ but never actually arriving” (Cohen 2001: 2). Nearly ten years later, it appears that India has indeed “arrived” and is now destined to be one of the three foremost powers (together with the United States and China) to play an important role in the twenty-first century.

In the topical survey of India that follows, Chapter 2 by Ashok Dutt briefly maps India’s geographical features so as to provide an overarching view of India’s topography. Dutt’s account indicates how India’s monsoons and great rivers sustain millions of people, and how for the average farmer it is the weather gods that determine doom or bloom.

Chapter 3 by Benjamin Cohen provides an overview of India and South Asia’s major historical periods, events, and some themes from the Indus Valley era (c. 2500 B.C.E.) to India’s independence in 1947. Neither settled nor fixed, India’s history is constantly being added to, challenged, and revised as new discoveries are made and new theoretical insights are applied to its lengthy past. The chapter divides India’s past into a more nuanced scheme rather than the traditional tripartite ancient, medieval, and modern periods. Cohen brings to the fore the major dynasties and empires that have held sway over the subcontinent while alluding to some of the scholarly debates that have intervened in their narratives. Although far from comprehensive, this chapter provides a broad introduction and contextualization for modern India’s history.

Chapter 4 by Shalendra Sharma explains the resilience of democracy in India in the face of a low-income economy, widespread poverty, illiteracy, and immense religious and ethnic diversity; how the country’s political system is structured; how it has evolved over the decades; its strengths and weaknesses; the way in which democratic governance has shaped political and socioeconomic change; and what the future holds for Indian democracy. It argues that the “deepening of democracy” in India has tended to exacerbate the problems of governance even as India’s democracy appears to be self-correcting.

Chapter 5 discusses India’s international relations since independence. In it, I look at why Nehru pursued an expansive foreign policy and dominated the decisionmaking process, how and why the country’s international relations were more regionally focused between Nehru’s death and the end of the Cold War, and the opportunities and challenges facing India in the international arena in the twenty-first century.
Chapter 6 by John Adams and Jason Kirk presents a bottom-up view of India’s economic activities to show how Indians perceive their roles and duties in the tasks of production, exchange, and consumption. The authors’ intent is twofold: to try to convey people’s aims and actions in the material or economic realm of their lives and to apply and make real concepts that are vital to understanding the operations of one of the world’s most complex and dynamic economies. The analysis suggests the enormous potential Indians have to extend the economic gains of the past sixty years and make India a much more prosperous country. Adams and Kirk note that about half of India’s families still rely on farming for their immediate livelihoods, and many others make their living by selling or processing goods produced by the farming sector. India’s agricultural sector thus remains the basis for many of its exports. While India has a long history of commercial and industrial enterprise, urban business activities have begun to move to the forefront of national economic life only recently, with the expansion of the diverse services sector outpacing growth in industry.

Chapter 7 on population, urbanization, and the environment by Holly Sims notes how India is one of a very few nations whose constitution enjoins citizens to protect the environment. Yet this rapidly growing country, like the industrialized world before it, has degraded its air, land, and water in pursuit of economic development. Fortunately, leaders have joined some environmentally conscious citizens in remediation. As Sims notes, India is also a pioneer in renewable energy, which may restore a polluted Earth dependent on grimy fossil fuels that warm the planet.

In Chapter 8, Lisa Trivedi looks at India’s women and identifies some of the common pitfalls in our thinking about women in modern India even as she introduces the turning points in the emergence of women as historical subjects and actors. Beginning with a discussion of the common misconceptions and paradoxes of women’s position in contemporary Indian society, Trivedi explains how colonialism, nationalism, and the family have contributed to the particular political, social, and economic position in which women live today. Her chapter also explores the roles of Indian women themselves in transforming society and their position within it over the course of more than a century. Finally, the chapter considers women’s position in society in terms of education, politics, and work in the period following independence. New opportunities in the workforce made possible by India’s liberalized and growing economy are today challenging social roles and customs that have heretofore been the single most important influence on women’s lives in India. Just how much women’s social status will be changed by women themselves and how much it will change due to forces brought to bear upon society by the economy is a question for the century ahead.

Chapter 9 by Ainslie Embree highlights how many religious systems have contributed to the complex mosaic of contemporary Indian life. Four of them—
Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, and Sikhism—originated in South Asia and comprise over 80 percent of India’s population. Three had their origins outside the subcontinent—Islam (by far the largest), Christianity, and Zoroastrianism. Embree offers brief surveys of the historic development of these religions in India and emphasizes their interaction with each other and their contributions to the larger society. As he notes, these interactions have, unfortunately, been characterized by hostility, especially before and after partition in 1947 and by the development of political parties stressing the dominance of Hindu culture over the religious groups that had their origins outside the subcontinent.

Chapter 10 by Christophe Jaffrelot discusses the origins of the caste system and how both Dalits and the Other Backward Castes have used their numbers and the franchise to gradually organize, mobilize, and assert themselves in Indian politics. Jaffrelot discusses how Kanshi Ram gave rise to the Bahujan Samaj Party and the party’s progress and impact on Indian politics (especially in Uttar Pradesh) over the past few elections. Caste was most salient when the jajmani system (which specified services across caste groups) operated and perpetuated hereditary caste-based employment. But that is less and less the case today. As Jaffrelot notes, caste still exists and is especially important when it comes to marriage, “but the caste system is undergoing significant change, at least in urban areas.”

Given India’s incredible diversity, dealing with a topic like art in a single essay is an almost impossible task, yet Ananda Lal does a superb job in Chapter 11, succinctly going over the various artistic forms and genres that have contributed to India’s rich culture. The West is well aware of Indian artists working in English or through popular Bollywood cinema, but Lal’s chapter introduces readers to a number of leading Indians who have worked through various mediums and contributed immensely to the country’s polyethnic heritage.

Finally, Chapter 12 discusses the trends and prospects facing India both domestically and internationally. It makes clear that India has no business aspiring to superpower status unless it first takes care of its millions of citizens relegated to illiteracy and poverty. If this introduction has rightly touted India’s wondrous polyethnicity and democratic heritage, the trends and prospects’ chapter notes how India needs to overcome a number of challenges dealing with governance and antistatist forces on the domestic front and terrorism originating beyond its borders if the country is to become a great power. This chapter especially discusses how the increasing gap between the haves and have-nots and the country’s rampant quest for development have partly contributed to the country’s Maoist rebellion and argues that how India deals with this dissent and also its Muslim population’s legitimate grievances will, to a significant degree, determine the speed of its rise.

At the end of World War II, no serious student of international affairs could afford to ignore the United States. Similarly, no serious student of international affairs today can afford to ignore India, for its actions too will increasingly affect the rest of the world for better or worse. The chapters that follow go a long
way in helping students better comprehend the extraordinary and complex country that is India.

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