

India: The Land and Its People

India became an independent nation on August 15th, 1947 after a long and historic struggle for freedom led by Mahatma Gandhi, India's apostle of truth and non-violence. The constitution of the Indian Republic came into force on January 26th, 1950.

India is a Union of 25 States and 7 centrally administered Union Territories. The States are Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Goa, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Orissa, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Tripura, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal. The centrally administered territories are Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Chandigarh, Daman and Diu, Dadra and Nagar Haveli, Delhi, Lakshadweep, and Pondicherry.

India, with an area of 1.3 million square miles, is a subcontinent. The peninsula is separated from mainland Asia by the Himalayas. The country lies 8 degrees North of the Equator, and is surrounded by the Bay of Bengal on the East, the Arabian Sea on the West, and the Indian Ocean to the South.

India is probably the country with the largest and most diverse mixture of races. All the five major racial types — Australoid, Mongoloid, Europoid, Caucasian and Negroid — find representation among the people of India, who are mainly a mixed race. The people of India belong to diverse ethnic groups. At various periods of India's long history, successive waves of settlers and invaders, including the Aryans, Parthians, Greeks, and central Asians, came into the country and merged with the local population. This explains the variety of racial types, cultures and languages in India.

India has about 15 major languages, and 844 different dialects. The Sanskrit of the Aryan settlers has merged with the earlier Dravidian vernaculars to give rise to new languages. Hindi, spoken by about 45 percent of the population, is the national language. English has also been retained as a language for official communication.

(Courtesy: The Consulate General of India, Chicago)

The National Emblem

The National Emblem of India is a replica of the Lion of Sarnath, near Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh. The Lion Capital was erected in the third century BC by Emperor Ashoka to mark the spot where Buddha first proclaimed his gospel of peace and emancipation to the four quarters of the universe. The National Emblem is thus symbolic of contemporary India's reaffirmation of its ancient commitment to world peace and good will.

The four lions (one being hidden from view) — symbolizing power, courage and confidence — rest on a circular abacus. The abacus is girded by four smaller animals — guardians of the four directions: the lion of the North, the elephant of the East, the horse of the South and the bull of the West. The abacus rests on a lotus in full bloom, exemplifying the fountain-head of life and creative inspiration. The motto 'Satyameva Jayate' inscribed below the emblem in Devanagari script means 'Truth Alone Triumphs.'

The National Flag

The Indian Flag was designed as a symbol of freedom. The late Prime Minister Nehru called it a flag not only of freedom for ourselves, but a symbol of freedom to all people. Wherever it may go, it will bring a message . . . a message that India wants to be friends with every country in the world.

The flag is a horizontal tricolor of deep saffron on the top, white in the middle and dark green at the bottom in equal proportions. The ratio of the width to the length of the flag is two to three. In the center of the white band, there is a wheel in navy blue to indicate the Dharma Chakra, a wheel of law in the Sarnath Lion Capital. Its diameter approximates the width of the white band, and it has 24 spokes.

The saffron stands for courage, sacrifice and the spirit of renunciation; the white, for purity and truth; the green for faith and fertility on which all life depends. The Ashoka wheel in the center of the white is the wheel of law.

NATIONAL SONG OF INDIA

Vande Mataram, Vande Mataram,
Sujalaam Suphalaam, Malayaja Sheetalaam,
Sashya Shyamalaam Mataram
Vande Mataram.

Shubhra Jyotsana Pulakita Yamineem
Phulla Kusumita Druma Dala Shobhineem
Suhasineem Sumadhura Bhashineem
Sukhadaam Vardaam Mataram
Vande Mataram

— Bankim Chandra Chatterjee

Translation

I bow to my motherland endowed with sweet waters,
sweet fruits, sweet cooling hilly breeze
Enriched with green fields
I bow to my mother-land
The nights are in ecstasy with the light of the moon;
the grass, the petals and leaves show her utterances -
always offering good to all, boons to all -
I bow to my Mother-land.

*... the earth when I look at it
Makes me aware
Of the hubbub of a huge concourse
Of ordinary people
Led along many paths and in various groups
By man's common urges,
From age to age, through life and death.
They go on pulling at oars,
Guiding the rudder,
Sowing seeds in the fields,
Cutting ripe paddy.
The work —
In cities and in fields.
Imperial canopies collapse,
Battle-drums stop,
Victory -pillars, like idiots, forget what their own words mean;
Battle-crazed eyes and blood-smearred weapons
Live on only in children's stories;
Their menace veiled.
But people work —
Here and other regions,
Bengal, Bihar, Gujarat —
Filling the passage of their lives with a rumbling and thundering
Woven by day and by night —
The sonorous rhythm
Of Life's liturgy in all its pain and elation,
Gloom and light.
Over the ruins of hundreds of empires
The people work.*

— Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941)

(Extract from the poem *Recovery* 10 translated by William Radice)

PUBLIC HOLIDAYS & RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS

Pongal: A 3-day harvest festival, one of the most joyful events in the South. In Tamil Nadu, newly harvested rice is ceremonially cooked. In Karnataka, the festival is called 'Sankranti,' and cows and bullocks are gaily decorated and fed on 'Pongal' (a sweet preparation of rice). In the evening, the cattle are led out in procession to the beat of drums and music.

Republic Day: January 26 marks the anniversary of the adoption of the Constitution in 1950 and is India's National Day. Celebration in the State Capitals are colorful. The celebrations in New Delhi, a magnificent parade of the armed forces and civilians, is followed by an impressive cultural pageant and a colorful folk-dance festival.

Id-Uz-Zuha: Commemorates the sacrifice of Abraham. The Muslims offer prayers all around the country.

Muharram: Commemorates the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, the grandson of the holy Prophet Mohammed, and observed by the Shiite Muslims, who take out processions of colorfully decorated "Tazias," which are paper and bamboo replicas of the martyr's tomb at Karbala in Iraq. The processions are specially impressive at Lucknow. In parts of the South, tiger dancers — men painted over with stripes and wearing tiger masks — lead the procession.

Holi: The most boisterous of all Hindu festivals, observed all over the North. It heralds the end of the cold weather. Men, women and children revel in throwing colored powder and squirting colored water on each other. Greetings and sweets are exchanged.

Mahavir Jayanti: The anniversary of the birth of Vardhamana Mahavira, the 24th Tirthankara, more than 2,500 years ago. The festival attracts pilgrims from all parts of the country to the ancient Jain shrines at Gimar and Palitana in Gujarat.

Good Friday: Services and recitals of religious music are held in hundreds of churches all over India.

Easter: The Christian belief in the resurrection of Christ is celebrated with enthusiasm by the members of the community. Processions are taken out in some parts of the country.

Baisakhi: The Hindu Solar New Year Day. People bathe in rivers and go to temples to offer puja (worship). Baisakhi is of special significance to the Sikhs. On this day in 1699, Guru Gobind Singh organized them into the 'Khalsa,' brotherhood of man. In Punjab, farmers start harvesting on this day with great fanfare. Villagers perform the 'Bhangra' folk dance.

Buddha Purnima: Marks the birth and enlightenment of Buddha.

Khرداد Sal: The birth anniversary of the Prophet Zarathustra (Zoroaster), who was born at the beginning of the 1st millennium BC. It is one of the most important Parsee festivals.

Janmashtami: The birth anniversary of Lord Krishna, the incarnation of Vishnu and the author of the Bhagavad Gita

(Song Celestial), is observed all over. It is celebrated with special eclat at Mathura and Brindavan where Lord Krishna spent his childhood. Night-long prayers are offered and religious hymns are sung in temples. Scenes are enacted from Lord Krishna's early life.

Independence Day. August 15th marks the anniversary of independence in 1947 and is celebrated with due solemnity. The national flag is hoisted and the occasion marked as a day of dedication.

Onam: Kerala's most popular festival, celebrated with great enthusiasm. It is primarily a harvest festival. The most exciting part of the festival is the snake-boat race held at several places in the palm-fringed lagoons.

Dussehra & Durga Puja: Among the most popular of all festivals, it symbolizes the triumph of good over evil. Every region observes this 10-day festival in a special way. In the North, 'Ram Lila' recitations and music recall the life of the legendary hero, Rama. Large fire-cracker-stuffed effigies of Ravana, symbolizing evil, explode to the cheers of thousands of spectators. In Kulu against the backdrop of snow-covered mountains, villagers dressed in their colorful best assemble to take out processions of local deities accompanied by music on pipes and drums. In Karnataka, Dussehra is celebrated with magnificent pomp and pageantry. In Bengal and the East, it is called 'Durga Puja.' Images of Goddess Durga are worshiped for four days and, on the last day, taken out in a procession and immersed in a river or the sea.

Gandhi Jayanti: October 2, the birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Nation. Special prayers are offered at the Gandhi Samadhi at Rajghat, Delhi and celebrations are held all over the country.

Diwali: The festival of lights is one of the most beautiful of Indian festivals. It comes 21 days after Dussehra and celebrates the return of Rama to Ayodhya after his 14-year exile. Countless flickering oil lamps and lights are lit in houses all over the country, making it a night of enchantment. Worship of Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth, and fireworks and festivities are an essential part of the occasion.

Guru Nanak Jayanti: Also known as 'Gurupurab,' it is the birth anniversary of Guru Nanak who founded the Sikh faith. For two days and nights preceding the festival, the 'Granth Sahib' (Holy Book) is read and on the day of the festival, taken out in a grand procession. The celebrations at Amritsar are especially impressive.

Children's Day: November 14, the birth of Jawaharlal Nehru, is celebrated throughout the country as Children's Day. Groups of children participate in rallies and cultural programs.

Id-Ul-Fitr: Celebrates the end of Ramzan, the Muslim month of fasting. It is an occasion of feasting and rejoicing. The faithful gather in mosques to pray; friends and relatives meet to exchange greetings.

Christmas: Celebrated by Christians and non-Christians with special enthusiasm. The bigger cities like Delhi, Bombay and Calcutta wear a festive look as Christmas bazaars and festivities are organized.