

History

India's story is one of the grand epics of world history. Throughout thousands of years of great civilisations, invasions, the birth of religions and countless cataclysms, India has time and again proved itself to be, in the words of its first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, 'a bundle of contradictions held together by strong but invisible threads'. Indian history has always been a work-in-progress, a constant process of reinvention and accumulation that can prove elusive for those seeking to grasp its essential essence. And yet, from its myriad upheavals, a vibrant, diverse and thoroughly modern nation has emerged, as enduring as it is dynamic and increasingly well equipped to meet the challenges of the future.

INDUS VALLEY CIVILISATION

The Indus Valley, straddling the modern India–Pakistan border, is the cradle of civilisation on the Indian subcontinent. The first inhabitants of this land were nomadic tribes who cultivated land and kept domestic animals; indeed, it is no leap of the imagination to wonder whether in some parts of rural India, little has changed. Over thousands of years, an urban culture began to emerge from these tribes, particularly from 3500 BC. By 2500 BC large cities were well established, the focal points of what became known as the Harappan culture, which would flourish for more than 1000 years.

The great cities of the Mature Harappan period were Moenjodaro and Harappa (both excavated in the 1920s) in present-day Pakistan, and Lothal (p728) near Ahmedabad. Lothal can still be visited and from the precise, carefully laid-out street plan, some sense of this sophisticated 4500-year-old civilisation is still evident. Harappan cities often had a separate acropolis, suggesting a religious function, and the great tank at Moenjodaro may have been used for ritual bathing purposes. The major Harappan cities were also notable for their size – estimates put the population of Moenjodaro as high as 40,000 to 50,000.

By the middle of the 3rd millennium BC the Indus Valley culture was the equal of other great civilisations emerging at the time. The Harappans traded with Mesopotamia, and developed a system of weights and measures and a highly developed art in the form of terracotta and bronze figurines. Recovered relics, including models of bullock carts and jewellery, offer the earliest evidence of a distinctive Indian culture. Indeed, many elements of Harappan culture would later become assimilated into Hinduism: clay figurines found at these sites suggest worship of a Mother goddess (later personified as Kali) and a male three-faced god sitting in the attitude of a yogi (the prehistoric Shiva) attended by four animals. Black stone pillars (associated with phallic worship of Shiva) and animal figures (the most prominent being the humped bull; later Shiva's mount) have also been discovered.

EARLY INVASIONS & THE RISE OF RELIGIONS

The Harappan civilisation fell into decline from the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC. Some historians attribute the end of the empire to floods or decreased rainfall, which threatened the Harappans' agricultural base. The

Harappa (www.harappa.com) provides an illustrated yet scholarly coverage of everything you need to know about the ancient Indus Valley civilisations, including a link to recent archaeological discoveries.

Like so many periods of Indian history, Harappan culture carries a strong element of mystery – the Harappan script has never been deciphered.

TIMELINE

3500–2000 BC

Indus Valley civilisation known as the Harappan culture

1500–1200 BC

Vedic-Aryan period during which the Hindu sacred scriptures were written and the caste system formalised

MAP-DRAWING ARYAN-STYLE

While historians dispute the origins of the Aryan presence in northern India, there is little argument that the subsequent Aryan kingdoms adhered to one of history's more curious forms of territorial demarcation. Under the highly formalised ritual of *asvamedha* (horse sacrifice), a horse was allowed to roam freely, followed by a band of soldiers. If the horse's progress was impeded, the king would fight for the land in question. At the end of the prescribed period, the entire area over which the horse had wandered was taken to be the king's unchallenged territory. The horse was rewarded for its success or failure – which, it didn't matter – by being sacrificed. The system must have worked, because the ritual was still being performed centuries later by dynasties such as the Chalukyas of Badami (p926) to demonstrate the ruler's complete control over his kingdom.

more enduring, if contentious, theory is that an Aryan invasion put paid to the Harappans, despite little archaeological proof or written reports in the ancient Indian texts to that effect. As a result, some nationalist historians argue that the Aryans (from a Sanskrit word meaning noble) were in fact the original inhabitants of India and that the invasion theory was actually invented by self-serving foreign conquerors. Others say that the arrival of Aryans was more of a gentle migration that gradually subsumed Harappan culture.

Those who defend the invasion theory believe that from around 1500 BC Aryan tribes from Afghanistan and Central Asia began to filter into northwest India. Despite their military superiority, their progress was gradual, with successive tribes fighting over territory and new arrivals pushing further east into the Ganges plain. Eventually these tribes controlled northern India as far as the Vindhya Hills. Many of the original inhabitants of northern India, the Dravidians, were pushed south.

The Hindu sacred scriptures, the Vedas (see p65), were written during this period of transition (1500–1200 BC) and the caste system became formalised.

As the Aryan tribes spread across the Ganges plain in the late 7th century BC, many were absorbed into 16 major kingdoms, which were, in turn, amalgamated into four large states. Out of these states arose the Nanda dynasty, which came to power in 364 BC, ruling over huge swathes of North India.

During this period, the Indian heartland narrowly avoided two invasions from the west which, if successful, could have significantly altered the path of Indian history. The first was by the Persian king Darius (521–486 BC), who annexed Punjab and Sindh (on either side of the modern India–Pakistan border). Alexander the Great advanced to India from Greece in 326 BC, but his troops refused to go beyond the Beas River in Himachal Pradesh. Alexander turned back without ever extending his power into India itself.

The period is also distinguished by the rise of two of India's most significant religions, Buddhism (p68) and Jainism (p69), which arose around 500 BC. Both questioned the Vedas and condemned the caste system, although, unlike the Buddhists, the Jains never denied their Hindu heritage and their faith never extended beyond India.

Emperor Ashoka's ability to rule over his empire was assisted by a standing army consisting of 9000 elephants, 30,000 cavalry and 600,000 infantry.

321–184 BC

The Mauryan empire

AD 319–510

Golden age of the Gupta empire

THE MAURYAN EMPIRE & ITS AFTERMATH

If the Harappan culture was the cradle of Indian civilisation, Chandragupta Maurya was the founder of the first great Indian empire. He came to power in 321 BC, having seized the throne from the Nandas, and he soon expanded the empire to include the Indus Valley previously conquered by Alexander.

From its capital at Pataliputra (modern-day Patna), the Mauryan empire encompassed much of North India and reached as far south as modern-day Karnataka. The Mauryas were capable of securing control over such a vast realm through the use of an efficient bureaucracy, organised tiers of local government and a well-defined social order consisting of a rigid caste system.

The empire reached its peak under emperor Ashoka (see the boxed text, below). Such was Ashoka's power to lead and unite that after his death in 232 BC no-one could be found to hold the disparate elements of the Mauryan empire together. The empire rapidly disintegrated and collapsed altogether in 184 BC.

None of the empires that immediately followed could match the stability or enduring historical legacy of the Mauryans. The Sungas (184–70 BC), Kanvas (72–30 BC), Shakas (from 130 BC) and Kushanas (1st century BC until 1st century AD, and into the 3rd century in a diminished form) all had their turn, with the latter briefly ruling over a massive area of North India and Central Asia.

Despite the multiplicity of ruling powers, this was a period of intense development. Trade with the Roman Empire (overland, and by sea through the southern ports) became substantial during the 1st century AD; there was also overland trade with China.

According to Megasthenes, an ambassador to the Mauryan court, Pataliputra was 33.8km in circumference, making it the largest city in the world at the time.

AN ENLIGHTENED EMPEROR

Apart from the Mughals and then the British many centuries later, no other power controlled more Indian territory than the Mauryan empire. It is therefore fitting that it provided India with one of its most significant historical figures.

Emperor Ashoka's rule was characterised by a period of flourishing art and sculpture, while his reputation as a philosopher-king was enhanced by the rock-hewn edicts he used to both instruct his people and delineate the enormous span of his territory. Some of these moral teachings can be still be seen, particularly the Ashokan edicts at Junagadh in Gujarat (p749).

Ashoka's reign also represented an undoubted historical high point for Buddhism. He embraced the religion in 262 BC, declaring it the state religion and cutting a radical swathe through the spiritual and social body of Hinduism. The extant highlights of Ashokan Buddhist India are visible in Sarnath (p438) in Uttar Pradesh (on the spot where Buddha delivered his first sermon expounding the Noble Eightfold Path, or Middle Way to Enlightenment; see p68) and the stupas that the emperor built at Sanchi (p689) in Madhya Pradesh. Ashoka also sent missions abroad, and he is revered in Sri Lanka because he sent his son and daughter to carry Buddhism to the island.

The long shadow this emperor of the 3rd century BC still casts over India is evident from the fact that Ashoka's standard, which topped many pillars, is now the seal of modern-day India (four lions sitting back-to-back atop an abacus decorated with a frieze and the inscription 'truth alone triumphs') and its national emblem, chosen to reaffirm the ancient commitment to peace and goodwill.

THE GOLDEN AGE OF THE GUPTAS

The empires that followed the Mauryans may have claimed large areas of Indian territory as their own, but many secured only nominal power over their realms. Throughout the subcontinent, small tribes and kingdoms effectively controlled territory and dominated local affairs.

In AD 319 Chandragupta I, the third king of one of these tribes, the little-known Guptas, came to prominence by a fortuitous marriage to the daughter of one of the most powerful tribes in the north, the Liccavis. The Gupta empire grew rapidly and under Chandragupta II (r 375–413) achieved its greatest extent. The Chinese pilgrim Fahsien, visiting India at the time, described a people ‘rich and contented’, ruled over by enlightened and just kings.

Poetry, literature and the arts flourished, with some of the finest work done at Ajanta (p812), Ellora (p809), Sanchi (p689) and Sarnath (p438). Towards the end of the Gupta period, Hinduism became the dominant religious force and its revival eclipsed Jainism and Buddhism; the latter in particular went into decline and, deprived of Ashoka’s patronage, would never again be India’s dominant religion.

The invasions of the Huns at the beginning of the 6th century signalled the end of this era, and in 510 the Gupta army was defeated by the Hun leader Toramana. Power in North India again devolved to a number of separate Hindu kingdoms.

THE HINDU SOUTH

Southern India has always laid claim to its own unique history. Insulated by distance from the political developments in the north, a separate set of powerful kingdoms emerged, among them the Shatavahanas (who ruled over central India while the Kushanas held sway in the north), Kalingas and Vakatakas. But it was from the tribal territories on the fertile coastal plains that the greatest southern empires – the Cholas, Pandyas, Chalukyas, Cheras and Pallavas – came into their own.

The Chalukyas ruled mainly over the Deccan region of central India, although their power occasionally extended further north. With a capital at Badami in modern-day Karnataka, they ruled from 550 to 753 before falling to the Rashtrakutas. An eastern branch of the Chalukyas, with its capital at Kalyani in Karnataka, rose and ruled again from 972 to 1190.

In the far south, the Pallavas pioneered Dravidian architecture with its exuberant, almost baroque, style. The surviving architectural high points of Pallava rule are to be found in the shore temple (p1045) and Five Rathas (p1047) in Mamallapuram (Mahabalipuram), the temples of the erstwhile Pallava capital at Kanchipuram (p1052) and the Rock Fort Temple at Trichy (Tiruchirappalli; p1074).

The south’s prosperity was based on long-established trading links with other civilisations, among them the Egyptians and Romans. In return for spices, pearls, ivory and silk, the Indians received Roman gold. Indian merchants also extended their influence to Southeast Asia. In 850 the Cholas rose to power and superseded the Pallavas. They soon set about turning the south’s far-reaching trade influence into territorial conquest. Under the reign of Raja Raja Chola I (985–1014) they controlled almost the whole of South India, the Deccan plateau, Sri Lanka, parts of the Malay peninsula and the Sumatran-based Srivijaya kingdom.

A History of India by Romila Thapar (Volume One) and Percival Spear (Volume Two) is one of the more thorough introductions to Indian history, from 1000 BC to Independent India.

It is believed that St Thomas the Apostle arrived in Kerala in AD 52, which accounts for the state’s sizable Christian population in the otherwise overwhelmingly Hindu south.

Not all of their attention was focused overseas, however, and the Cholas left behind some of the finest examples of Dravidian architecture, most notably the sublime Brihadishwara Temple in Thanjavur (p1071) and Chidambaram's stunning Nataraja Temple (p1065). Both Thanjavur and Chidambaram served as Chola capitals.

Throughout, Hinduism remained the bedrock of South Indian culture.

THE MUSLIM NORTH

While South India guarded its resolutely Hindu character, North India was convulsed by Muslim armies invading from the northwest.

In the vanguard of Islamic expansion was Mahmud of Ghazni. Today, Ghazni is a nondescript little town between Kabul and Kandahar in Afghanistan. But in the early years of the 11th century, Mahmud turned it into one of the world's most glorious capital cities, which he funded by plundering his neighbours' territories. From 1001 to 1025 Mahmud conducted 17 raids into India, most infamously on the famous Shiva temple at Somnath (p745) in Gujarat. The Hindu force of 70,000 died trying to defend the temple, which eventually fell in early 1026. In the aftermath of his victory, Mahmud, not particularly intent on acquiring new territory at this stage, transported a massive haul of gold and other booty back to his capital. These raids effectively shattered the balance of power in North India, allowing subsequent invaders to claim the territory for themselves.

Following Mahmud's death in 1033, Ghazni was seized by the Seljuqs and then fell to the Ghurs of western Afghanistan, who similarly had their eyes on the great Indian prize. The Ghur style of warfare was brutal – the Ghur general, Ala-ud-din, was known as 'Burner of the World'.

In 1191 Mohammed of Ghur advanced into India. Although defeated in a major battle against a confederacy of Hindu rulers, he returned the following year and routed his enemies. One of his generals, Qutb-ud-din, captured Delhi and was appointed governor; it was during his reign that the great Delhi landmark, the Qutb Minar complex (p161), was built. A separate Islamic empire was established in Bengal and within a short time almost the whole of North India was under Muslim control.

Following Mohammed's death in 1206, Qutb-ud-din became the first sultan of Delhi. His successor, Iltutmish, brought Bengal back under central control and defended the empire from an attempted Mongol invasion. Ala-ud-din Khilji came to power in 1296 and pushed the borders of the empire inexorably south, while simultaneously fending off further attacks by the Mongols.

NORTH MEETS SOUTH

Ala-ud-din died in 1320, and Mohammed Tughlaq ascended the throne in 1324. In 1328 Tughlaq took the southern strongholds of the Hoysala empire, which had centres at Belur, Halebid and Somnathpur. India was Tughlaq's for the taking.

However, while the empire of the pre-Mughal Muslims would achieve its greatest extent under Tughlaq's rule, his overreaching ambition also sowed the seeds of its disintegration. Unlike his forebears (including great rulers such as Ashoka), Tughlaq dreamed not only of extending his indirect influence over South India, but of controlling it directly as part of his empire.

India: A History by John Keay is an astute and readable account of subcontinental history spanning from the Harappan civilisation to Indian Independence.

A History of South India from Prehistoric Times to the Fall of Vijayanagar by Nilakanta Sastri is arguably the most comprehensive (if heavy-going) history of this region.

1398

Tamerlane invades North India and destroys Delhi

1510

Portuguese forces capture Goa

After a series of successful campaigns Tughlaq decided to move the capital from Delhi to a more central location. The new capital was called Daulatabad and was near Aurangabad in Maharashtra. Not a man of half measures, Tughlaq sought to populate the new capital by force-marching the entire population of Delhi 1100km south, resulting in great loss of life. However, he soon realised that this left the north undefended and so the entire capital was moved north again. The superb hilltop fortress of Daulatabad (p808) stands as the last surviving monument to his megalomaniac vision.

The days of the Ghur empire were numbered. The last of the great sultans of Delhi, Firoz Shah, died in 1388 and the fate of the sultanate was sealed when Tamerlane (Timur) made a devastating raid from Samarkand (in Central Asia) into India in 1398. Tamerlane's sacking of Delhi was truly merciless; some accounts say his soldiers slaughtered every Hindu inhabitant.

After Tughlaq's withdrawal from the south, several splinter kingdoms arose. The two most significant were the Islamic Bahmani sultanate, which emerged in 1345 with its capital at Gulbarga, and later Bidar (p933), and the Hindu Vijayanagar empire, founded in 1336 with its capital at Hampi (p919). The battles between the two were among the bloodiest communal violence in Indian history and ultimately resolved nothing in the two centuries before the Mughals ushered in a more enlightened age.

THE STRUGGLE FOR THE SOUL OF INDIA

Founded as an alliance of Hindu kingdoms banding together to counter the threat from the Muslims, the Vijayanagar empire rapidly grew into one of India's wealthiest and greatest Hindu empires. Under the rule of Bukka I (c 1343–79), the majority of South India was brought under its control.

The Vijayanagans and the Bahmani sultanate, which was also based in South India, were evenly matched. The Vijayanagar armies occasionally got the upper hand, but generally the Bahmanis inflicted the worst defeats. The atrocities committed by both sides almost defy belief. In 1366 Bukka I responded to a perceived slight by capturing the Muslim stronghold of Mudkal and slaughtering every inhabitant bar one, who managed to escape and carry news of the attack to Mohammad Shah, the sultan. Mohammad swore that he would not rest until he had killed 100,000 Hindus. Instead, according to the Muslim historian Firishtah, 500,000 'infidels' were killed in the ensuing campaign.

Somehow, Vijayanagar survived. In 1482, following much intrigue and plotting in the royal court, the Bahmani sultanate disintegrated and five separate kingdoms, based on the major cities – Berar, Ahmednagar, Bijapur, Golconda and Ahmedabad – were formed. Of these, Bijapur (p930) and Ahmedabad (Amdavad; p717) still bear exceptional traces of this period of Islamic rule. With little realistic opposition from the north, the Hindu empire enjoyed a golden age of almost supreme power in the south. In 1520 the Hindu king Krishnadevaraya even took Bijapur.

Like Bahmani, however, Vijayanagar's fault lines were soon laid bare. A series of uprisings divided the kingdom fatally, just at a time when the Islamic sultanates were beginning to form a new alliance. In 1565 a Muslim coalition routed the Hindu armies at the Battle of Talikota. Hampi was destroyed. Although the last of the Vijayanagar line escaped and the dynasty limped on for several years, real power passed to local Muslim rulers or Hindu chiefs once loyal to the Vijayanagar kings. One of India's grisliest periods came to an end when the Bahmani kingdoms fell to the Mughals.

1526

Babur becomes the first Mughal emperor

1600

Britain's Queen Elizabeth I grants first trading charter to the East India Company

THE MUGHALS

Even as Vijayanagar was experiencing its last days, the next great Indian empire was being founded. The Mughal empire was massive, and covered, at its height, almost the entire subcontinent. Its significance, however, lay not only in its size. Mughal emperors presided over a golden age of arts and literature and had a passion for building that resulted in some of the finest architecture in India. In particular, Shah Jahan's sublime Taj Mahal (p399) ranks as one of the wonders of the world.

The founder of the Mughal line, Babur (r 1526–30), was a descendant of both Genghis Khan and Tamerlane. In 1525, armed with this formidable lineage, he marched into Punjab from his capital at Kabul. With technological superiority brought by firearms, and consummate skill in simultaneously employing artillery and cavalry, Babur defeated the numerically superior armies of the sultan of Delhi at the Battle of Panipat in 1526.

Despite this initial success, Babur's son, Humayun (r 1530–56) was defeated by a powerful ruler of eastern India, Sher Shah, in 1539 and forced to withdraw to Iran. Following Sher Shah's death in 1545, Humayun returned to claim his kingdom, eventually conquering Delhi in 1555. He died the following year and was succeeded by his young son Akbar (r 1556–1605) who, during his 49-year reign, managed to extend and consolidate the empire until he ruled over a mammoth area.

True to his name, Akbar (which means 'great' in Arabic) was probably the greatest of the Mughals, for he not only had the military ability required of a ruler at that time, but was also a just and wise ruler and a man of culture. He saw, as previous Muslim rulers had not, that the number of Hindus in India was too great to subjugate. Although Akbar was no saint – reports of massacres of Hindus at Panipat and Chitrod tarnish his legacy – he remains known for integrating Hindus into his empire and skilfully using them as advisers, generals and administrators. Akbar also had a deep interest in religious matters, and spent many hours in discussion with religious experts of all persuasions, including Christians and Parsis.

Jehangir (r 1605–27) ascended to the throne following Akbar's death. Despite several challenges to the authority of Jehangir himself, the empire remained more or less intact. In periods of stability Jehangir took the opportunity to spend time in his beloved Kashmir, eventually dying en route there in 1627. He was succeeded by his son, Shah Jahan (r 1627–58), who secured his position as emperor by executing all male relatives who stood in his way. During his reign, some of the most vivid and permanent reminders of the Mughals' glory were constructed; in addition to the Taj Mahal, he also oversaw the construction of the mighty Red Fort in Delhi (p127) and converted the Agra Fort (p400) into a palace that would later become his prison.

The last of the great Mughals, Aurangzeb (r 1658–1707), imprisoned his father (Shah Jahan) and succeeded to the throne after a two-year struggle against his brothers. Aurangzeb devoted his resources to extending the empire's boundaries, and thus fell into much the same trap as that of Mohammed Tughlaq some 300 years earlier. He, too, tried moving his capital south (to Aurangabad) and imposed heavy taxes to fund his military. A combination of decaying court life and dissatisfaction among the Hindu population at inflated taxes and religious intolerance weakened the Mughal grip.

White Mughals by William Dalrymple tells the true story of an East India Company soldier who married an Indian Muslim princess, a tragic love story interwoven with harem politics, intrigue and espionage.

Akbar, the great Mughal emperor, formulated a religion, Deen Ilahi, which combined the favoured parts of all the religions he had studied.

1757

English forces recapture Calcutta (Kolkata) from a local nawab in the Battle of Plassey

1857

Indian Uprising against British forces

The empire was also facing serious challenges from the Marathas in central India and, more significantly, the British in Bengal. With Aurangzeb's death in 1707, the empire's fortunes rapidly declined, and Delhi was sacked by Persia's Nadir Shah in 1739. Mughal 'emperors' continued to rule right up until the Indian Uprising in 1857, but they were emperors without an empire.

A Princess Remembers

by Gayatri Devi and Santha Rama Rau is the captivating memoir of the former maharani of Jaipur, the glamorous Gayatri Devi, born in 1919.

THE RAJPUTS & THE MARATHAS

Throughout the Mughal period, there remained strong Hindu powers, most notably the Rajputs. Centred in Rajasthan, the Rajputs were a proud warrior caste with a passionate belief in the dictates of chivalry, both in battle and in state affairs. The Rajputs opposed every foreign incursion into their territory, but were never united or adequately organised to deal with stronger forces on a long-term basis. When they weren't battling foreign oppression, they squandered their energies fighting each other. This eventually led to their territories becoming vassal states of the Mughal empire. Their prowess in battle, however, was acknowledged, and some of the best military men in the Mughal emperors' armies were Rajputs.

The Marathas were less picaresque but ultimately more effective. They first rose to prominence under their great leader Shivaji, who gathered popular support by championing the Hindu cause against the Muslim rulers. Between 1646 and 1680 Shivaji performed heroic acts in confronting the Mughals across most of central India. At one time, Shivaji was captured by the Mughals and taken to Agra but, naturally, he managed to escape and continued his adventures. Tales of his larger-than-life exploits are still popular with wandering storytellers today. He is a particular hero in Maharashtra, where many of his wildest adventures took place. He is also revered for the fact that, as a lower-caste Shudra, he showed that great leaders do not have to be of the Kshatriya (soldier or administrator) caste.

Shivaji's son was captured, blinded and executed by Aurangzeb. His grandson was not made of the same sturdy stuff, so the Maratha empire continued under the Peshwas, hereditary government ministers who became the real rulers. They gradually took over more of the weakening Mughal empire's powers, first by supplying troops and then actually taking control of Mughal land.

The expansion of Maratha power came to an abrupt halt in 1761 at Panipat. In the town where Babur had won the battle that established the Mughal empire more than 200 years earlier, the Marathas were defeated by Ahmad Shah Durani from Afghanistan. Maratha expansion to the west was halted, and although they consolidated their control over central India and the region known as Malwa, they were to fall to India's final imperial power, the British.

THE RISE OF EUROPEAN POWER

The British were not the first European power to arrive in India, nor were they the last to leave – both of those 'honours' go to the Portuguese. In 1498 Vasco da Gama arrived on the coast of modern-day Kerala, having sailed around the Cape of Good Hope. Pioneering this route gave the Portuguese a century of monopolisation over Indian and far-Eastern trade with Europe. In 1510 they captured Goa, followed by Diu in 1531, two enclaves the Portuguese controlled until 1961. In its heyday, the trade flowing through

The Proudest Day –

India's Long Road to Independence by Anthony Read and David Fisher is an engaging account of India's pre-Independence period.

1858

British government assumes formal control over India

1869

Birth of Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi at Porbandar, Gujarat

'Golden Goa' was said to rival that passing through Lisbon. In the long term, however, the Portuguese did not have the resources to maintain a worldwide empire and they were quickly eclipsed and isolated after the arrival of the British and French.

In 1600 Queen Elizabeth I granted a charter to a London trading company that gave it a monopoly on British trade with India. In 1613 representatives of the East India Company established their first trading post at Surat in Gujarat. Further British trading posts, which were administered and governed by representatives of the company, were established at Madras (Chennai) in 1640, Bengal in 1651 and Bombay (Mumbai) in 1668. Strange as it now seems, for nearly 250 years a commercial trading company and not the British government 'ruled' over British India.

By 1672 the French had established themselves at Pondicherry (Puducherry; p1057), an enclave they held even after the British departed and where unmistakable architectural traces of French elegance remain. The stage was set for more than a century of rivalry between the British and French for control of Indian trade. At one stage, under the guidance of a handful of talented and experienced commanders, the French appeared to hold the upper hand. In 1746 they took Madras (only to hand it back in 1749) and their success in placing their favoured candidate on the throne as Nizam of Hyderabad augured well for the future. But serious French aspirations effectively ended in 1750 when the directors of the French East India Company decided that their representatives were playing too much politics and doing too little trading. Key representatives were sacked and a settlement designed to end all ongoing political disputes was made with the British. Although the French company's profits may have risen in the short term, the decision effectively removed France as a serious influence on the subcontinent.

BRITISH INDIA

By the early 19th century, India was effectively under British control (British Raj), although there remained a patchwork of states, many nominally independent and governed by their own rulers, the maharajas (or similarly titled princes) and nawabs. While these 'princely states' administered their own territories, a system of central government was developed. British bureaucratic models were replicated in the Indian government and civil service – a legacy that still exists. From 1784 onwards, the British government in London began to take a more direct role in supervising affairs in India, although the territory was still notionally administered by the East India Company until 1858.

Trade and profit continued to be the main focus of British rule in India, resulting in far-reaching changes. Iron and coal mining were developed and tea, coffee and cotton became key crops. A start was made on the vast rail network that is still in use today, irrigation projects were undertaken and the zamindar (landowner) system was encouraged. These absentee landlords eased the burden of administration and tax collection for the British, but contributed to the development of an impoverished and landless peasantry.

The British also imposed English as the local language of administration. For them, this was critical in a country with so many different languages, but it also kept the new rulers at arm's length from the Indian populace.

Kumaon and Shimla were originally part of Nepal but were ceded to Britain after the battles of 1814 (in which the Gurkhas initially defeated the British, establishing themselves in legend).

In 1909 the so-called Morley-Minto reforms provided for limited Indian participation in government and introduced separate electorates for the country's different religious communities.

Plain Tales from the Raj by Charles Allen (ed) is a fascinating series of interviews with people who played a role in British India on both sides of the table.

1885

Founding of the Congress Party

1919

Massacre of unarmed protesters by British troops at Amritsar (Punjab)

You've probably seen *Gandhi*, the film starring Ben Kingsley and 300,000 extras, but watch it again because few movies capture the grand canvas that is India in tracing the country's path to independence.

THE ROAD TO INDEPENDENCE

The desire among many Indians to be free from foreign rule remained. Opposition to the British began to increase at the turn of the 20th century, spearheaded by the Indian National Congress, the country's oldest political party, also known as the Congress Party and Congress (I).

It met for the first time in 1885 and soon began to push for participation in the government of India. A highly unpopular attempt by the British to partition Bengal in 1905 resulted in mass demonstrations and brought to light Hindu opposition to the division; the Muslim community formed its own league and campaigned for protected rights in any future political settlement. As pressure rose, a split emerged in Hindu circles between moderates and radicals, the latter resorting to violence to publicise their aims.

With the outbreak of WWI, the political situation eased. India contributed hugely to the war (more than one million Indian volunteers were enlisted and sent overseas, suffering more than 100,000 casualties). The contribution was sanctioned by Congress leaders, largely on the expectation that it would be rewarded after the war was over. No such rewards transpired and

BRITAIN'S SURGE TO POWER

The transformation of the British from traders to governors began almost by accident. Having been granted a licence to trade in Bengal by the Mughals, and following the establishment of a new trading post at Calcutta (Kolkata) in 1690, business began to expand rapidly. Under the apprehensive gaze of the nawab (local ruler), British trading activities became extensive and the 'factories' took on an increasingly permanent (and fortified) appearance.

Eventually the nawab decided that British power had grown far enough. In June 1756 he attacked Calcutta and, having taken the city, locked his British prisoners in a tiny cell. The space was so cramped and airless that many were dead by the following morning. The cell infamously became known as the 'Black Hole of Calcutta'.

Six months later, Robert Clive, an employee in the military service of the East India Company, led an expedition to retake Calcutta and entered into an agreement with one of the nawab's generals to overthrow the nawab himself. This he did in June 1757 at the Battle of Plassey (now called Palashi) and the general who had assisted him was placed on the throne. During the period that followed, with the British effectively in control of Bengal, the company's agents engaged in a period of unbridled profiteering. When a subsequent nawab finally took up arms to protect his own interests, he was defeated at the Battle of Baksar in 1764, a victory that confirmed the British as the paramount power in east India.

In 1771 Warren Hastings was made governor in Bengal. During his tenure the company greatly expanded its control. His astute statesmanship was aided by the fact that India at this time was experiencing a power vacuum created by the disintegration of the Mughal empire. The Marathas (p46), the only real Indian power to step into this gap, were divided among themselves. Hastings concluded a series of treaties with local rulers, including one with the main Maratha leader.

In the south, where Mughal influence had never been great, the picture was confused by the strong British–French rivalry, and one ruler was played off against another. This was never clearer than in the series of Mysore wars where Hyder Ali and his son, Tipu Sultan, waged a brave and determined campaign against the British. In the Fourth Mysore War (1789–99), Tipu Sultan was killed at Srirangapatnam and British power took another step forward. The long-running struggle with the Marathas was concluded in 1803, leaving only Punjab (held by the Sikhs) outside British control. Punjab finally fell in 1849 after the two Sikh Wars (1845–46 and 1848–49).

1942

Mahatma Gandhi launches the Quit India campaign, demanding Indian independence

15 August 1947

India becomes independent and is divided into two countries: India and Pakistan

disillusion was soon to follow. Disturbances were particularly persistent in Punjab and, in April 1919, following riots in Amritsar, a British army contingent was sent to quell the unrest. Under direct orders of the officer in charge they ruthlessly fired into a crowd of unarmed protesters attending a meeting, killing more than 1000 people. News of the massacre spread rapidly throughout India, turning huge numbers of otherwise apolitical Indians into Congress supporters.

At this time, the Congress movement found a new leader in Mohandas Gandhi (see the boxed text, p51). Not everyone involved in the struggle agreed with or followed Gandhi's policy of nonviolence, yet the Congress Party and Gandhi remained at the forefront of the push for independence.

As political power-sharing began to look increasingly likely, and the mass movement led by Gandhi gained momentum, the Muslim reaction was to consider its own immediate future. The large Muslim minority had realised that an independent India would be dominated by Hindus and, despite Gandhi's fair-minded approach, others in the Congress Party would perhaps not be so willing to share power. By the 1930s Muslims were raising the possibility of a separate Islamic state.

Political events were partially disrupted by WWII when large numbers of Congress supporters were jailed to prevent disruption to the war effort.

The Indian Mutiny by Saul David is a measured attempt to get behind the rhetoric of one of India's most controversial episodes, the Indian Uprising of 1857.

THE FIRST WAR OF INDEPENDENCE: THE INDIAN UPRISING

In 1857, half a century after having established firm control of India, the British suffered a serious setback. To this day, the causes of the Uprising (known at the time as the Indian Mutiny and subsequently labelled by nationalist historians as a War of Independence) are the subject of debate. The key factors included the influx of cheap goods, such as textiles, from Britain that destroyed many livelihoods; the dispossession of territories from many rulers; and taxes imposed on landowners.

The incident that is popularly held to have sparked the Indian Uprising, however, took place at an army barracks in Meerut in Uttar Pradesh on 10 May 1857. A rumour leaked out that a new type of bullet was greased with what Hindus claimed was cow fat, while Muslims maintained that it came from pigs; pigs are considered unclean to Muslims, and cows are sacred to Hindus. Since loading a rifle involved biting the end off the waxed cartridge, these rumours provoked considerable unrest.

In Meerut, the situation was handled with a singular lack of judgment. The commanding officer lined up his soldiers and ordered them to bite off the ends of their issued bullets. Those who refused were immediately marched off to prison. The following morning, the soldiers of the garrison rebelled, shot their officers and marched to Delhi. Of the 74 Indian battalions of the Bengal army, seven (one of them Gurkhas) remained loyal, 20 were disarmed and the other 47 mutinied. The soldiers and peasants rallied around the ageing Great Mughal in Delhi, but there was never any clear idea of what they hoped to achieve. They held Delhi for four months and besieged the British Residency in Lucknow for five months before they were finally suppressed and the local nawab deposed. The incident left festering scars on both sides.

Almost immediately the East India Company was wound up and direct control of the country was assumed by the British government, which announced its support for the existing rulers of the princely states, claiming they would not interfere in local matters as long as the states remained loyal to the British.

30 January 1948

Mahatma Gandhi assassinated in Delhi by Hindu zealot

1948

First war between India and Pakistan over Kashmir

INDEPENDENCE & THE PARTITION OF INDIA

The Labour Party victory in the British elections in July 1945 dramatically altered the political landscape. For the first time, Indian independence was accepted as a legitimate goal. This new goodwill did not, however, translate into any new wisdom as to how to reconcile the divergent wishes of the two major Indian parties. Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim League, championed a separate Islamic state, while the Congress Party, led by Jawaharlal Nehru, campaigned for an independent greater India.

In early 1946 a British mission failed to bring the two sides together and the country slid closer towards civil war. A 'Direct Action Day', called by the Muslim League in August 1946, led to the slaughter of Hindus in Calcutta, which prompted reprisals against Muslims. In February 1947 the nervous British government made the momentous initial decision that independence would come by June 1948. In the meantime, the viceroy, Lord Wavell, was replaced by Lord Louis Mountbatten.

The new viceroy implored the rival factions to agree upon a united India, but to no avail. A decision was made to divide the country, with Gandhi the only staunch opponent. Faced with increasing civil violence, Mountbatten made the precipitous decision to bring forward Independence to 15 August 1947.

The decision to divide the country into separate Hindu and Muslim territories was immensely tricky – indeed the question of where the dividing line should actually be drawn proved almost impossible. Some areas were clearly Hindu or Muslim, but others had evenly mixed populations, and there were isolated 'islands' of communities in areas predominantly settled by other religions. Moreover, the two overwhelmingly Muslim regions were on opposite sides of the country and, therefore, Pakistan would inevitably have an eastern and western half divided by a hostile India. The instability of this arrangement was self-evident, but it was to be 25 years before the predestined split finally came and East Pakistan became Bangladesh.

An independent British referee was given the odious task of drawing the borders, knowing full well that the effects would be catastrophic for countless people. The decisions were fraught with impossible dilemmas. Calcutta, with its Hindu majority, port facilities and jute mills, was divided from East Bengal, which had a Muslim majority, large-scale jute production, no mills and no port facilities. One million Bengalis became refugees in the mass movement across the new border.

The problem was far worse in Punjab, where intercommunity antagonisms were already running at fever pitch. Punjab, one of the most fertile and affluent regions of the country, had large Muslim, Hindu and Sikh communities. The Sikhs had already campaigned unsuccessfully for their own state and now saw their homeland divided down the middle. The new border ran straight between Punjab's two major cities – Lahore and Amritsar. Prior to Independence, Lahore's population of 1.2 million included approximately 500,000 Hindus and 100,000 Sikhs. When the dust had finally settled, just 1000 Hindus and Sikhs remained.

It was clear that Punjab contained all the ingredients for an epic disaster, but the resulting bloodshed was far worse than anticipated. Huge population exchanges took place. Trains full of Muslims, fleeing westward, were held up and slaughtered by Hindu and Sikh mobs. Hindus and Sikhs fleeing to the

India's Struggle for Independence by Bipan Chandra expertly chronicles the history of India from 1857 to 1947.

The Nehrus and the Gandhis is Tariq Ali's astute portrait-history of these families and the India over which they cast their long shadow.

Mahatma Gandhi argued that the leader of the Muslim League, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, should lead a united India, if that would prevent Partition.

1962

Border war with China over North-East Frontier Area

1964

Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru dies

MAHATMA GANDHI

One of the great figures of the 20th century, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born on 2 October 1869 in Porbandar, Gujarat, where his father was chief minister. After studying in London (1888–91), he worked as a barrister in South Africa. Here, the young Gandhi became politicised, railing against the discrimination he encountered. He soon became the spokesman for the Indian community and championed equality for all.

Gandhi returned to India in 1915 with the doctrine of ahimsa (nonviolence) central to his political plans, and committed to a simple and disciplined lifestyle. He set up the Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad, which was innovative for its admission of Untouchables.

Within a year, Gandhi had won his first victory, defending farmers in Bihar from exploitation. This was when he first received the title 'Mahatma' (Great Soul) from an admirer. The passage of the discriminatory Rowlatt Acts (which allowed certain political cases to be tried without juries) in 1919 spurred him to further action and he organised a national protest. In the days that followed this hartal (strike), feelings ran high throughout the country. After the massacre of unarmed protesters in Amritsar (p48), a deeply shocked Gandhi immediately called off the movement.

By 1920 Gandhi was a key figure in the Indian National Congress, and he coordinated a national campaign of noncooperation or satyagraha (passive resistance) to British rule, with the effect of raising nationalist feeling while earning the lasting enmity of the British. In early 1930, Gandhi captured the imagination of the country, and the world, when he led a march of several thousand followers from Ahmedabad to Dandi on the coast of Gujarat. On arrival, Gandhi ceremoniously made salt by evaporating sea water, thus publicly defying the much-hated salt tax; not for the first time, he was imprisoned. Released in 1931 to represent the Indian National Congress at the second Round Table Conference in London, he won the hearts of the British people but failed to gain any real concessions from the government.

Jailed again on his return to India, Gandhi immediately began a hunger strike, aimed at forcing his fellow Indians to accept the rights of the Untouchables. Gandhi's resoluteness, and widespread apprehension throughout the country, forced an agreement, but not until Gandhi was on the verge of death.

Disillusioned with politics and convinced that the Congress leaders were ignoring his guidance, he resigned his parliamentary seat in 1934 and devoted himself to rural education.

He returned spectacularly to the fray in 1942 with the Quit India campaign, in which he urged the British to leave India immediately. His actions were deemed subversive and he and most of the Congress leadership were imprisoned.

In the frantic bargaining that followed the end of the war, Gandhi was largely excluded and watched helplessly as plans were made to partition the country – a tragedy in his eyes. He toured the trouble spots, using his influence to calm intercommunity tensions and promote peace.

Gandhi stood almost alone in urging tolerance and the preservation of a single India, and his work on behalf of members of all communities inevitably drew resentment from some Hindu hardliners. On his way to a prayer meeting in Delhi on 30 January 1948, he was assassinated by a Hindu zealot.

India is strewn with Gandhi landmarks, which can still be visited. There's a memorial in Delhi at the site where he was assassinated, known as Gandhi Smriti (p130) as well as the Sabarmati Ashram (p722) in Ahmedabad and Delhi's Raj Ghat (p129), the site of his cremation. Other sites marking significant periods of the Mahatma's life are the Kirti Mandir (p752) in Porbandar; the Kaba Gandhi No Delo (p758) in Rajkot; Mani Bhavan (p778) in Mumbai (Bombay); the Gandhi National Museum (p828) in Pune; the Sevagram Ashram (p817) in Maharashtra; the Gandhi Memorial Museum (p1083) in Madurai; and a memorial (p1087) in Kanyakumari.

1965

Second India–Pakistan war over Kashmir

1966

Indira Gandhi becomes prime minister of India

east suffered the same fate. The army that was sent to maintain order proved totally inadequate and, at times, all too ready to join the sectarian carnage. By the time the Punjab chaos had run its course, more than 10 million people had changed sides and at least 500,000 had been killed.

INDEPENDENT INDIA

Jawaharlal Nehru, independent India's first prime minister, tried to steer India towards a policy of nonalignment, balancing cordial relations with Britain and Commonwealth membership with moves towards the former USSR. The latter was due partly to conflicts with China and US support for its archenemy Pakistan.

The 1960s and 1970s were tumultuous times for India. A border war with China in 1962, in what was then known as the North-East Frontier Area (NEFA; now the Northeast States) and Ladakh, resulted in the loss of Aksai Chin (Ladakh) and smaller NEFA areas. India continues to dispute sovereignty. Wars with Pakistan in 1965 (over Kashmir) and 1971 (over Bangladesh) also contributed to a sense among many Indians of having enemies on all sides.

In the midst of it all, the hugely popular Nehru died in 1964 and his daughter Indira Gandhi (no relation to Mahatma Gandhi) was elected as prime minister in 1966.

Indira Gandhi, like Nehru before her, loomed large over the country she governed. Unlike Nehru, however, she was always a profoundly controversial figure whose historical legacy remains hotly disputed.

In 1975, facing serious opposition and unrest, she declared a state of emergency (which later became known as the Emergency). Freed of parliamentary constraints, Gandhi was able to boost the economy, control inflation remarkably well and decisively increase efficiency. On the negative side, political opponents often found themselves in prison, India's judicial system was turned into a puppet theatre and the press was fettered.

Blind to the impact of her reforms, Gandhi was convinced that India was on her side. Her government was bundled out of office in the 1977 elections in favour of the Janata People's Party (JPP). The JPP founder, Jaya Prakash Narayan, 'JP', was an ageing Gandhian socialist who died soon after but is widely credited with having safeguarded Indian democracy through his moral stature and courage to stand up to Congress' authoritarian and increasingly corrupt rule.

Once it was victorious, it quickly became obvious that Janata had no other cohesive policies, nor any leader of Narayan's stature. Its leader, Morarji Desai, proved unable to come to grips with the country's problems. With inflation soaring, unrest rising and the economy faltering, Janata fell apart in late 1979. The 1980 election brought Indira Gandhi back to power with a larger majority than ever before.

CONTINUITY IN CONGRESS

Dependent upon a democracy that she ultimately resented, Indira Gandhi grappled unsuccessfully with communal unrest in several areas, violent attacks on Dalits (the Scheduled Caste or Untouchables), numerous cases of police brutality and corruption, and the upheavals in the northeast and Punjab. In 1984, following a very ill-considered decision to send in the Indian

The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian by Nirad C Chaudhuri simultaneously chronicles the life of an ordinary Indian and paints a portrait of his country against the backdrop of an at-times-confusing history.

In India's first post-Independence elections in 1951–52, the Congress Party won 364 of 489 seats but took just 45% of the popular vote.

The Dynasty: The Nehru-Gandhi Story by Jad Adams and Phillip Whitehead profiles post-Independent India's most famous political family, examining its successes and failures.

1975

Indira Gandhi declares state of emergency

1984

Indira Gandhi assassinated by Sikh bodyguards after Indian troops storm Amritsar's Golden Temple

army to flush out armed Sikh separatists (demanding a separate Sikh state to be called Khalistan) from Amritsar's Golden Temple, Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards. Her heavy-handed storming of the Sikhs' holiest temple was catastrophic and sparked brutal Hindu-Sikh riots that left more than 3000 people dead (mostly Sikhs who had been lynched). The quest for Khalistan has since been quashed.

Indira Gandhi's son Rajiv, a former pilot, became the next prime minister, with Congress winning in a landslide in 1984. However, after a brief golden reign, he was dragged down by corruption scandals and the inability to quell communal unrest, particularly in Punjab. In 1991 he, too, was assassinated in Tamil Nadu by a supporter of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE; a Sri Lankan armed separatist group).

Narasimha Rao assumed the by-now-poisoned chalice that was leadership of the Congress Party and led it to victory at the polls in 1991. In 1992 the economy was given an enormous boost after the finance minister, Manmohan Singh, took the momentous step of partially floating the rupee against a basket of 'hard' currencies. State subsidies were phased out and the once-moribund economy was also opened up, tentatively at first, to foreign investment, with multinationals drawn by an enormous pool of educated professionals and relatively low wages. The greatest exemplifier of this was India's emergence as a leading player in the world software industry (see p62).

A rapidly improving economy notwithstanding, the Rao government found itself mired in corruption scandals and failed to quell rising communal tension. It stumbled on until 1996, but was a shadow of the Congress Party governments that had guided India for most of its years as an independent country.

After losing the 1996 election, the Congress Party eventually swept back to power in 2004 under the leadership of another Gandhi – Sonia, the Italian-born wife of the late Rajiv Gandhi. The Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) planned national agitation campaign against the foreign origins of the Italian-born Congress leader was subverted by Sonia Gandhi's unexpected but widely lauded decision to step aside. The Congress Party's highly respected former finance minister, Manmohan Singh, was sworn in as prime minister.

RISING COMMUNAL TENSION

The defining moment for India in the 1990s came on 6 December 1992 when Hindu zealots destroyed a mosque, the Babri Masjid, in Ayodhya (revered by Hindus as the birthplace of Rama; p424) in Uttar Pradesh. Claiming the site as the former location of a Rama temple, the zealots used Ayodhya as an incendiary symbol for their call to 'return' India to its Hindu roots. The Hindu-revivalist BJP, which had become the main opposition party at the 1991 elections, egged on those responsible for the mosque's destruction. Rioting flared across the north, leaving thousands dead; 257 people were killed and an estimated 1100 were wounded after a series of bomb blasts in Mumbai alone.

After the 1996 national elections, the BJP emerged as the largest party but only governed for two weeks as secular parties banded together to defeat its attempts to build a viable coalition. However, with the upsurge of Hindu nationalism and the disarray within the ranks of the Congress Party, momentum was with the BJP. It won the elections in 1998 and again in 1999, thereby becoming the first nonsecular party to hold national power in India.

Political Resources – India (www.politicalresources.net/India.htm) contains extensive links to the major players and political parties in India.

In 1997 KR Narayanan became India's president, the first member of the lowest Untouchable Hindu caste to hold the position.

From 1989 to 2007, it's estimated that at least 70,000 people were killed during the conflict in Kashmir.

1991

Rajiv Gandhi assassinated by a supporter of the Sri Lanka-based Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) while campaigning in Tamil Nadu

1998

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) wins national elections

THE KASHMIR CONFLICT

Kashmir is the most enduring symbol of the turbulent partition of India. In the lead up to Independence, the delicate task of drawing the India–Pakistan border was complicated by the fact that the ‘princely states’ in British India were nominally independent. As part of the settlement process, local rulers were asked which country they wished to belong to. Kashmir was a predominantly Muslim state with a Hindu maharaja, Hari Singh, who tried to delay his decision. A ragtag Pashtun (Pakistani) army crossed the border, intent on racing to Srinagar and annexing Kashmir for Pakistan. In the face of this advance, the maharaja panicked and requested armed assistance from India. The Indian army arrived in time to prevent the fall of Srinagar, and the maharaja signed the Instrument of Accession, tying Kashmir to India, in October 1947. The legality of the document was immediately disputed by Pakistan and the two nations went to war, just two months after Independence.

In 1948 the fledgling UN Security Council called for a referendum (which remains a central plank of Pakistani policy) to decide the status of Kashmir. A UN-brokered ceasefire in 1949 kept the two countries on either side of a demarcation line, called the Line of Control (LOC), with little else being resolved. Two-thirds of Kashmir fell on the Indian side of the LOC, which remains the frontier, but neither side accepts this as the official border. The Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, as it has stood since that time, incorporates Ladakh (divided between Muslims and Buddhists), Jammu (with a Hindu majority) and the 130km-long, 55km-wide Kashmir Valley (with a Muslim majority and most of the state’s inhabitants). On the Pakistani side, three million Kashmiris live in Azad (Free) Kashmir.

Since the frontier was drawn, incursions across the LOC have occurred with dangerous regularity. Although India and Pakistan normalised relations in 1976, tensions remain incredibly high. Conflict within Kashmir itself began in earnest in 1989.

In the 1990s, skirmishes were an almost annual event. A militant fringe of Kashmiris turned to armed revolt against the Indian government, joined by waves of freedom fighters from Afghanistan and Pakistan. Unfortunately, civilians proved as popular a target as soldiers. India accused Pakistan of assisting and directing the insurgents, while Pakistan countered that India was denying Kashmiris the right to self-determination. India–Pakistan relations reached their nadir in 1998 when the new Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government detonated five nuclear devices in the deserts of Rajasthan, after which Pakistan responded in kind. When Pakistan mounted an incursion across the LOC near Kargil, the spectre of nuclear conflict in one of the world’s most volatile regions loomed.

Both parties stepped back from the brink amid a wave of international condemnation, although full-blown conflict remained a constant threat. The terrorist attack on the Indian parliament in December 2001 (the Indian government blamed Pakistan) led to new sabre-rattling, while allegations persist of human-rights abuses (including the unexplained disappearance of around 4000 people) by the Indian security forces in Kashmir. Uncertainty over the ability (and even willingness) of Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf to crack down on Pakistan-based fundamentalist Islamic groups also feeds anxiety over Kashmir’s future direction.

By the time of the election of the Congress Party government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2004, relations were strained but reasonably cordial. Confidence-building measures – the re-opening of cross-border transport links, an Indian decision to withdraw a small number of troops and Pakistan’s softening of its rhetoric – had helped to calm the situation, and despite two recent train bombings on Indian soil, both the Indian and Pakistani governments vowed not to let these terrorist attacks jeopardise ongoing peace talks.

And yet, both India and Pakistan see Kashmir as an inalienable part of their territory. The long-term viability of any substantive agreement will ultimately depend upon the extent to which the leaders of India and Pakistan can carry their countries along with them, for Kashmir has become a cause célèbre and a matter of intense national pride among both populations.

For more information read p350.

May 1998

The BJP government conducts nuclear tests, souring relations with Pakistan and attracting sanctions from the international community

26 January 2001

Gujarat is rocked by a massive earthquake; more than 20,000 people are killed

TSUNAMI TERROR

The catastrophic 26 December 2004 tsunami battered coastal parts of eastern and southern India as well as the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The country's worst-affected areas were parts of the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. At least 15,000 people are believed to have perished, with many thousands more injured and/or left homeless. Infrastructure and property reconstruction in India's tsunami-affected regions has made significant progress in some areas but still continues in others.

The apparent moderacy and measured tones of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee were constantly offset by the more belligerent posture of other members of his government and many of the BJP's grass-roots supporters. Although some attempts were made at quieting the fears of India's minority communities, friction with Pakistan increased and communal tensions remained high.

In early 2002, 52 Hindu activists returning home from Ayodhya were burned to death in a train near Godhra in Gujarat. The deaths were initially blamed on a Muslim mob, an accusation fed by the regional BJP government in Gujarat. The subsequent riots left at least 2000 people dead and 12,000 homeless, mainly Muslims. Government inquiries later cast considerable doubt on the cause of the fire, with an accident the most likely cause.

When Congress swept back to power in 2004, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was clearly passionate about resuming productive peace talks with Pakistan over the disputed territory of Kashmir. However these talks came to an abrupt halt when communal tensions soared following the July 2006 train bombings in Mumbai that left more than 200 people dead. The Indian government pointed the finger at Pakistan, claiming that its intelligence had played a hand in the blasts – an accusation that Islamabad vehemently denied. Singh later recommenced peace talks with Pakistan, but with suspicions running high on both sides of the border, the road to reconciliation was set to be a challenging one.

Adding further pressure to the peace process was the February 2007 terrorist bomb attack on a train travelling from Delhi to Lahore (Pakistan), which killed 68 commuters. The Indian and Pakistani governments vowed not to let the attack – designed to disrupt India–Pakistan relations – freeze bilateral peace talks. At the time of writing, investigations were being conducted by Indian authorities to identify and bring to justice the culprits.

In April 2003 the Gujarat state assembly followed Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Tamil Nadu in passing the Freedom of Religion Bill, designed to prevent religious conversions.

In 2004 Sikh prime minister, Manmohan Singh, became the first member of any religious minority community to hold India's highest elected office.

11 July 2006

Seven bombs are detonated on suburban trains in Mumbai (Bombay) leaving more than 200 people dead

18/19 February 2007

Bomb blasts on a train travelling from India to Pakistan kill 68 people

The Culture

THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

One of the first things travellers are likely to observe about India is how everyday life is intertwined with the spiritual: from the housewife who devoutly performs *puja* (prayers) each morning at a tiny shrine set up in a corner of the home, to the shopkeeper who – regardless of how many eager-to-buy tourists may have piled into the premises – rarely commences business until blessings have been sought from the gods.

Along with religion, family lies at the heart of Indian society. For the vast majority of Indians the idea of being unmarried and without children by one's mid-30s is unthinkable. Despite the steadily rising number of nuclear families – primarily in larger cities such as Mumbai (Bombay), Bengaluru (Bangalore) and Delhi – the extended family remains a cornerstone in both urban and rural India, with males – usually the breadwinners – generally considered the head of the household.

With religion and family considered so sacrosanct, don't be surprised or miffed if you are constantly grilled about these subjects yourself, especially beyond the larger cities, and receive curious (possibly disapproving) looks if you don't 'fit the mould'. The first question travellers are most commonly asked is which country they are from. This may well be followed by questions on subjects that might be considered somewhat inappropriate elsewhere, especially coming from a complete stranger. Apart from religion and marital status, frequently asked questions include age, qualifications, profession and possibly even income. Such questions aren't intended to offend and it's also perfectly acceptable for you to ask the same questions back.

National pride has always existed on the subcontinent but has swelled in recent years as India attracts increasing international kudos in the fields of information technology (IT), science, literature and film. The country's robust economy – one of the world's fastest growing – is another source of prolific pride. And then, of course, there's its ever-developing nuclear programme, which, although vehemently condemned by some, is widely embraced as a potent symbol of Indian pride and sovereignty – especially evident when relations with neighbouring Pakistan take a sour turn.

In 21st-century India the juxtaposition of time-honoured and New Age flies in the face of some common stereotypes about the country. Sure you'll find tandoori chicken and women decked out in technicoloured saris, but these days your tandoori chicken could well come atop a cheesy wood-fired pizza, and that reticent-looking, sari-clad lady you pass in the bazaar could be chitchatting about last night's rerun of *Sex and the City* on a flashy mobile phone that makes yours look like a fossil.

LIFESTYLE

Traditional Culture

MARRIAGE, BIRTH & DEATH

Marriage is a supremely auspicious event for Indians and although 'love marriages' have spiralled upwards in recent times (mainly in urban hubs), most Hindu marriages are arranged. Discreet inquiries are made within the community. If a suitable match is not found, the help of professional matchmakers may be sought, or advertisements may be placed in newspapers and/or the internet. The horoscopes are checked and, if propitious, there's a meeting between the two families. The legal marriage age in India is 18.

Matchmaking has embraced the cyber age with websites such as www.shaaadi.com and www.bharatmatrimony.com catering to tens of millions of Indians and NRIs (Non-Resident Indians).

Dowry, although illegal, is still a key issue in many arranged marriages (primarily in traditional-minded communities), with some families even plunging into debt to raise the required cash and merchandise. In 2005 there were 6787 registered cases of dowry-related deaths (many cases go unreported) either from the new bride committing suicide or, more commonly, being killed by her husband's family.

The wedding ceremony is officiated over by a priest and the marriage is formalised when the couple walk around a sacred fire seven times. Despite the existence of nuclear families, it's still the norm for a wife to live with her husband's family once married and assume the household duties outlined by her mother-in-law. Not surprisingly, the mother-daughter-in-law relationship can be a prickly one, as reflected in the many Indian TV soap operas which largely revolve around this theme.

Divorce and remarriage is becoming more common (predominantly in India's bigger cities) but is still not granted by courts as a matter of routine and is generally frowned upon by society. Among the higher castes, widows are expected not to remarry and are admonished to wear white and live pious, celibate lives. Also see p70.

The birth of a child is another momentous occasion, with its own set of special ceremonies, which take place at various auspicious times during the early years of childhood. These include the casting of the child's first horoscope, name-giving, feeding the first solid food, and the first hair cutting.

Hindus cremate their dead, and funeral ceremonies are designed to purify and console both the living and the deceased. An important aspect of the proceedings is the *sharadda*, paying respect to one's ancestors by offering water and rice cakes. It's an observance that's repeated at each anniversary of the death. After the cremation the ashes are collected and, 13 days after the death (when blood relatives are deemed ritually pure), a member of the family usually scatters them in a holy river such as the Ganges, or in the ocean.

THE CASTE SYSTEM

Although today the caste system is weakened, it still wields considerable power, especially in rural India, where the caste you are born into largely determines your social standing in the community. It can also influence one's vocational and marriage prospects. Castes are further divided into thousands of *jati*, groups of 'families' or social communities, which are sometimes but not always linked to occupation. Conservative Hindus will only marry someone of the same *jati*.

Caste is the basic social structure of Hindu society. Living a righteous life and fulfilling your dharma (moral duty) raises your chances of being born into a higher caste and thus into better circumstances. Hindus are born into one of four varnas (castes): Brahmin (priests and teachers), Kshatriya (warriors), Vaishya (merchants) and Shudra (labourers). The Brahmins were said to have emerged from the mouth of Lord Brahma at the moment of creation, Kshatriyas were said to have come from his arms, Vaishyas from his thighs and Shudras from his feet.

Beneath the four main castes are the Dalits (formerly known as Untouchables), who hold menial jobs such as sweepers and latrine cleaners. The word 'pariah' is derived from the name of a Tamil Dalit group, the Paraiyars. Some Dalit leaders, such as the late Dr Ambedkar, sought to change their status by adopting another faith; in his case it was Buddhism. At the bottom of the social heap are the Denotified Tribes. They were known as the Criminal Tribes until 1952, when a reforming law officially recognised 198 tribes and castes. Many are nomadic or seminomadic tribes, forced by the wider community to eke out a living on society's fringes.

In big cities, such as Mumbai (Bombay) and Delhi, the average cost of a wedding is pegged at around US\$12,000.

Two insightful books about India's caste system are *Interrogating Caste* by Dipankar Gupta and *Translating Caste* edited by Tapan Basu.

Of the 545 seats in the Lok Sabha (Lower House of India's bicameral parliament), 120 are reserved for Scheduled Castes and Tribes.

DOS & DON'TS

India has many time-honoured traditions and while you won't be expected to get everything 'right', common sense and courtesy will take you a long way. If in doubt about how you should behave (eg at a temple), watch what the locals do, or simply ask.

Dressing conservatively (women *and* men) wins a far warmer response from locals (women should also read p1160). Refrain from kissing and cuddling in public as this isn't condoned by society. Nudity in public is not on, and while bikinis may be acceptable on Goa's beaches, you should cover up (eg swim in shorts and a t-shirt) in less touristy places – use your judgement.

Religious Etiquette

Whenever visiting a sacred site, always dress and behave respectfully – don't wear shorts or sleeveless tops (this applies to men and women) and refrain from smoking. Loud and intrusive behaviour isn't appreciated, and neither are public displays of affection or kidding around.

Before entering a holy place, remove your shoes (tip the shoe-minder a few rupees when retrieving them) and check if photography is allowed. You're permitted to wear socks in most places of worship – often necessary during warmer months, when floors can be uncomfortably hot.

Religious etiquette advises against touching locals on the head, or directing the soles of your feet at a person, religious shrine or image of a deity. Religious protocol also advises against touching someone with your feet or touching a carving of a deity.

Head cover (for women and sometimes men) is required at some places of worship (especially Sikh temples), so carry a scarf just to be on the safe side. There are some sites that don't admit women and some that deny entry to nonadherents of their faith – inquire in advance. Women may be required to sit apart from men. Jain temples request the removal of leather items you may be wearing or carrying and may also request menstruating women not to enter.

Eating & Visiting Etiquette

If you're lucky enough to be invited to someone's home it's considered good manners to remove your shoes before entering the house and to wash your hands before the main meal. Wait to be served food or until you are invited to help yourself – if you're unsure about protocol, simply wait for your host to direct you.

It's customary to use your right hand for eating and other social acts such as shaking hands; the left hand is used for unsavoury actions such as toilet duties and removing dirty shoes. When drinking from a shared water container, hold it slightly above your mouth (thus avoiding contact between your lips and the mouth of the container).

Photography Etiquette

Exercise sensitivity when taking photos of people, especially women, who may find it offensive – obtain permission in advance.

Taking photos inside a shrine, at a funeral, at a religious ceremony or of people publicly bathing (including rivers) can be offensive – ask first. Flash photography may be prohibited in certain areas of a shrine, or may not be permitted at all.

Other Tips for Travellers

To augment your chances of receiving the most accurate response when seeking directions from people on the street, refrain from posing questions in a leading manner. For instance, it's often best to ask, 'Which way to the museum?' rather than pointing and asking, 'Is this the way to the museum?'. This is because you may well receive a fabricated answer (usually 'yes') if the person can't quite decipher your accent or simply didn't hear you properly. There is no malicious intent in this misinformation – they're just trying to be polite, as an unsympathetic 'no' sounds so unfriendly!

It's also worth noting that the commonly used sideways wobble of the head doesn't necessarily mean 'no'. It can translate to: yes, maybe, or I have no idea.

TRADITIONAL INDIAN ATTIRE

Commonly worn by Indian women, the elegant sari comes in a single piece (between 5m and 9m long and 1m wide) and is ingeniously tucked and pleated into place without the need for pins or buttons. Worn with the sari is the choli (tight-fitting blouse) and a drawstring petticoat. The *palloo* is that part of the sari draped over the shoulder. Also widely worn by women is the *salwar kameez*, a traditional dresslike tunic and trouser combination accompanied by a dupatta (long scarf). Saris and *salwar kameez* come in a wonderful range of fabrics and designs to suit all budgets.

Traditional attire for men includes the dhoti, and (in the south) the lungi and the *mundu* are also commonly worn. The dhoti is a loose garment pulled up between the legs like a long loincloth. The lungi is more like a sarong, with its end usually sewn up like a tube. The *mundu* is like a lungi but is always white.

There are regional and religious variations in costume – for example, you may see Muslim women wearing the all-enveloping burka.

To improve the Dalits' position, the government reserves considerable numbers of public-sector jobs, parliamentary seats and university places for them. Today these quotas account for almost 50% of sought-after government jobs. The situation varies regionally, as different political leaders chase caste vote-banks by promising to include them in reservations. The reservation system, while generally regarded in a favourable light, has also been criticised for unfairly blocking tertiary and employment opportunities for those who would have otherwise got positions on merit.

PILGRIMAGE

Devout Hindus are expected to go on *yatra* (pilgrimage) at least once a year. Pilgrimages are undertaken to implore the gods or goddesses to grant a wish, to take the ashes of a cremated relative to a holy river, or to gain spiritual merit. India has thousands of holy sites to which pilgrims travel; the elderly often make Varanasi their final one, as it's believed that dying in this sacred city releases a person from the cycle of rebirth.

Most festivals in India are rooted in religion and are thus a magnet for pilgrims. This is something that travellers should keep in mind when attending festivals, many of which have a somewhat carnivalesque sheen (see the boxed text, opposite).

Contemporary Issues

AIDS IN INDIA

According to the latest reports, India has surpassed South Africa as having the world's highest number of HIV-positive cases; there are currently 5.7 million reported cases in India; however analysts believe this is a conservative estimate as many go unreported. Apart from sex workers, truck drivers and intravenous drug users also fall into the high-risk category. There are believed to be at least 12,000 sex workers in Mumbai alone.

In a country of more than one billion people, health officials warn that unless the government radically increases educational programmes (especially promotion of condom use – something that prostitutes claim they can't enforce, as many clients refuse to wear condoms) the number of HIV-positive cases could climb to at least 12 million by 2010. Campaigners say that India's antigay laws (see p60) make it ambiguous to accurately assess the extent of the epidemic, and also hamper treatment and education efforts.

See also p1185.

CHILD LABOUR

Despite national legislation prohibiting child labour, human-rights groups believe India has an estimated 60 million (not the officially quoted 12 million) child labourers – the highest rate in the world. Poorly enforced laws, poverty and lack of a social-security system are cited as major causes of the problem. The harsh reality for many low-income families is that they simply can't afford to support their children, so they send them out to work in order to survive.

Recognising the need for tougher anti-child labour laws, in 2006 the government ordered a ban against the employment of children (aged below 14) as labourers in households and the hospitality trade. Combined, these areas are said to employ around 260,000 children, however activist groups put the figure closer to 20 million. Employers who contravene the ban face possible imprisonment of up to two years, a fine of Rs 20,000, or both. The government has promised to appropriately rehabilitate the displaced child labourers, however critics are sceptical about its ability to effectively do so. If rehabilitation is inadequate, they believe that many jobless children will turn to begging and/or crime. The government's latest ban is an addendum to existing legislation which already forbids the employment of children under the age of 14 in what it classifies as 'hazardous jobs' (eg glass factories, abattoirs).

The majority (approximately 53%) of India's child labourers work in the agricultural industry, while others work on construction sites, or as rag pickers, household servants, carpet weavers, brick makers and prostitutes. There are also a considerable number of children making *beedis* (small handmade cigarettes), inhaling large quantities of harmful tobacco dust and chemicals. Another hazardous industry employing children is that of fireworks manufacturing. Meanwhile in Kanchipuram (Tamil Nadu), an estimated 4000 school-aged children work full-time in the silk industry – see the boxed text, p1052.

GAY & LESBIAN ISSUES

Although difficult to accurately pinpoint, India is believed to have between 70 and 100 million gay, lesbian and transgender people. Section 377 of the national legislation forbids 'carnal intercourse against the order of nature' (that is, anal intercourse) and the penalties for transgression can be up to 10 years imprisonment plus a fine. Although this colonial-era law, which dates back to 1861, is rarely used to prosecute, it's allegedly used by authorities to harass, arrest and blackmail gay people.

In 2006 more than 100 high-profile personalities, including Nobel prize-winning economist, Amartya Sen, and literary stalwarts, Vikram Seth and Arundhati Roy, signed an open letter supporting a legal challenge that has been lodged with the Delhi High Court. The challenge seeks to overturn the country's antiquated antigay law; at the time of writing, a court decision had not been reached.

The South Indian state of Kerala has India's lowest rate of child labour (one in 100); the national average is eight in 100.

HIJRAS

India's most visible nonheterosexual group is the *hijras*, a caste of transvestites and eunuchs who dress in women's clothing. Some are gay, some are hermaphrodites and some were unfortunate enough to be kidnapped and castrated. Since it's traditionally unacceptable to live openly as a gay man, *hijras* get around this by becoming, in effect, a sort of third sex. They work mainly as uninvited entertainers at weddings and celebrations of the birth of male children, and as prostitutes.

Read more about *hijras* in *The Invisibles* by Zia Jaffrey and *Ardhanarishvara the Androgyne* by Dr Alka Pande.

While the more liberal sections of certain cities – such as Mumbai, Bengaluru, Delhi and Kolkata (Calcutta) – appear to be becoming more tolerant of homosexuality, gay life is still largely suppressed. As marriage is so highly regarded on the subcontinent, it's believed that most gay people stay in the closet or risk being disowned by their families and society. Nevertheless, freedom of expression is growing. For instance, in 2003 Mumbai hosted the Larzish festival – India's first queer film festival – now held annually in November. This was quite a coup for the gay community, considering the hullabaloo raised by religious zealots over Deepa Mehta's film *Fire* (with lesbian themes), which was famously banned by the ultraconservative Shiv Sena party in 1998 (read also p74).

For details about gay support groups and publications/websites see p1138.

POVERTY

Raising the living standards of India's poor has been high on the agenda for governments since Independence. However, India presently has one of the world's highest concentrations of poverty, with an estimated 350 million (and growing) Indians living below the poverty line, 75% of them in rural areas. Many others live in horrendously overcrowded urban slums. The worst affected states are Bihar, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, which also have the nation's fastest growing population rates.

The major causes of poverty include illiteracy and a population growth rate that is substantially exceeding India's economic growth rate. Although India's middle class is ballooning, there's still a marked disparity when it comes to the country's distribution of wealth.

In 2006 the average annual wage in India was US\$710. An estimated 35% to 40% of the population survive on less than US\$1 per day. Hardest hit are rural dwellers, who earn, on average, four times less than urban Indians. India's minimum daily wage, which varies from state to state, averages Rs 55 (US\$1.26), although this certainly isn't always the case in reality. Wages between industries vary, with state governments setting different minimums for different occupations, and there are sectors which have no minimum wages at all. Women are often paid less, especially in areas such as construction and farming.

Prostitution and poverty are closely linked, with a 2007 report indicating that India has upwards of 10 million prostitutes, with around 20% under the age of 18.

Poverty accounts for India's ever-growing number of beggars, mainly in the larger cities. For foreign visitors this is often the most confronting aspect of travelling in the subcontinent. Whether you give something is a matter of personal choice, though your money can often be put to better long-term use if given to a reputable charity. Or, you could work as a volunteer at a charitable organisation – for volunteering possibilities see p1155.

POPULATION

India has the world's second-largest population and is tipped to exceed China as the planet's most populous nation by 2035.

A population census is held every 10 years in India. The most recent was in 2001 and this revealed that India's population had risen by 21.34% in the previous decade. According to this census, Mumbai is India's most populated city, with an urban agglomeration population of 16.37 million; Kolkata ranks second with 13.22 million, with Delhi and Chennai (Madras) third and fourth respectively. Despite India's many urban centres, the nation is still overwhelmingly rural, with an estimated 75% of the population living in the countryside.

Although around a third of India's population subsists on less than US\$1 per day, the country has an estimated 85,000 (and growing) millionaires (in US dollars).

India has one of the world's largest diasporas – more than 25 million people in 130 countries – who pumped US\$23 billion into India's economy in 2005 alone.

A SOFTWARE SUPERPOWER

India's burgeoning information technology (IT) industry, born in the boom years of the 1990s and founded on India's highly skilled middle class and abundance of relatively inexpensive labour, has made India a major player in the world of technology.

The industry currently employs more than one million Indians, with that figure expected to rise to more than two million by 2008 and a further two million or so benefiting through indirect employment. When this is added to the trend towards large-scale outsourcing, whereby call centres attached to Western companies move offshore to India, the scale of the revolution in India's once-ramshackle economy starts to become apparent. In 2006 outsourcing was a very healthy US\$10 billion industry, a figure that is forecast to more than double by 2010.

The IT boom has transformed cities such as Hyderabad, nicknamed 'Cyberabad' by many locals, and Bengaluru (Bangalore), known as 'India's Silicon Valley', into IT world leaders. Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh now produce more than 50% of India's software exports, although the dominance of the south is being challenged by other growth centres such as Pune, Mumbai (Bombay), Kolkata (Calcutta) and Ahmedabad.

From the societal perspective, the IT boom has spawned a new breed of Indian yuppie. Many of these young professionals (most in their 20s or early 30s and unmarried) are ditching traditional spending patterns (eg household appliances and retirement) and spending a hefty chunk of their incomes on more hedonistic pursuits such as dining out at fancy restaurants, shopping and travelling overseas.

The average wage rise per annum in the Indian IT industry is 15%, with middle managers enjoying considerably higher increments. An Indian call-centre operator receives an average income of between Rs 10,000 and Rs 12,000 per month. This is at least several thousand rupees higher than that paid by the average Indian company, but a fraction of the cost of what the overseas-based company would pay back home. Meanwhile, talented young Indian managers who have worked with an international company for just a few years may be rewarded (and, from the company's perspective, hopefully deterred from being poached by other companies) with incomes of between Rs 150,000 and Rs 200,000 (even higher in some cases) per month – up to 80% more than the national average income for a middle manager.

Apart from the financial carrot, another incentive used by international companies to lure well-qualified job seekers is the high standard of workplace comfort (eg state-of-the-art equipment, modern cafeterias, and sometimes even gyms), which counter the drawbacks associated with the job (eg boredom, erratic working hours, verbal phone abuse from people who loathe call centres etc). Many call centres put their staff through rigorous training courses to get them up to speed with the countries they'll be calling (usually the UK, USA and Australia). These often include lessons on how to mimic foreign accents, and staff may also be given pseudo Western names as another means of bridging the cultural divide.

Despite the IT boom playing a critical role in boosting the economy, the industry does have its detractors, particularly those who claim that the country's IT growth is an entirely urban phenomenon with little discernible impact upon the lives of the vast majority of Indians. Whatever the pros and cons, IT will certainly go down in history as one of India's great success stories.

For further official statistics, see the Census of India website at www.censusindia.net and this book's Snapshot section (p37). For regional populations, see the Fast Facts boxes at the start of each regional chapter.

RELIGION

From a mother performing *puja* for her child's forthcoming exams, to a mechanic who has renounced his material life and set off on the path to self-realisation, religion suffuses every aspect of life in India.

India's major religion, Hinduism, is practised by approximately 82% of the population. Along with Buddhism, Jainism and Zoroastrianism, it is one of the world's oldest extant religions, with roots extending beyond 1000 BC.

Islam is India's largest minority religion; around 12% of the population is Muslim. Islam was introduced to northern India by invading armies (in the 16th and 17th centuries the Mughal empire controlled much of North India) and to the south by Arab traders.

Christians comprise around 2.3% of the population, with around 75% living in South India, while the Sikhs – estimated at around 1.9% of the population – are mostly found in the northern state of Punjab. Around 0.76% of the population is Buddhist, with Bodhgaya (Bihar) being a major pilgrimage destination. Jainism is followed by about 0.4% of the population, with the majority of Jains living in Gujarat and Mumbai. Parsis, adherents of Zoroastrianism, number between roughly 75,000 and 80,000 – a mere drop in the ocean of India's billion-plus population. Historically, Parsis settled in Gujarat and became farmers, however, during British rule they moved into commerce, forming a prosperous community in Mumbai – see the boxed text, p781. There are believed to be fewer than 8000 Jews left in India, most living in Mumbai and parts of South India.

Tribal religions have so merged with Hinduism and other mainstream religions that very few are now clearly identifiable. It's believed that some basic tenets of Hinduism may have originated in tribal culture.

Communal Conflict

Religion-based conflict has been a bloody part of India's history. The post-Independence partition of the country into Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan resulted in horrendous carnage and epic displacement – see p50.

Later bouts of major sectarian violence in India include the Hindu–Sikh riots of 1984, which led to the assassination of then prime minister, Indira Gandhi (p52), and the politically fanned 1992 Ayodhya calamity (p53), which sparked ferocious Hindu–Muslim clashes.

The ongoing dispute between India and Pakistan over Kashmir is also perilously entwined in religious conflict. Since Partition, India and Pakistan have fought two wars over Kashmir and have had subsequent artillery exchanges, coming dangerously close to war in 1999. The festering dispute over this landlocked territory continues to fuel Hindu–Muslim

ADIVASIS

India's Adivasis (tribal communities; Adivasi translates to 'original inhabitants' in Sanskrit) have origins that precede the Vedic Aryans and the Dravidians of the south. Today there are around 84.3 million Adivasis in India, with some 450 different tribal groups. The literacy rate for Adivasis, as per the last census (2001), is just 29.6%; the national average is 65.38%.

Historically, contact between Adivasis and Hindu villagers on the plains rarely led to friction as there was little or no competition for resources and land. However, in recent decades the majority of Adivasis have been dispossessed of their ancestral land and turned into impoverished labourers.

Although they still have political representation thanks to a parliamentary quota system, the shocking dispossession and exploitation of Adivasis has often been with the connivance of officialdom – a record the government would prefer to forget and one it fervently denies. Instead, it points to the millions of rupees said to have been sanctioned into Adivasi schemes. Although some of this has indeed been positively used, corruption has snatched a large portion and unless more is done, the Adivasis' future is uncertain, with one of the biggest threats being the erosion of their ancient traditions and culture.

Learn more about Adivasis in *The Todas of South India – A New Look* by Anthony Walker, *Tribes of India – The Struggle for Survival* by Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, *Archaeology and History: Early Settlements in the Andaman Islands* by Zarine Cooper and *The Tribals of India* by Sunil Janah.

animosity on both sides of the border – for more information, see the boxed text, p54.

Despite two recent train bomb attacks (one in 2006, the other in 2007; see p38), believed to have been conducted to sabotage India–Pakistan peace talks, the governments of both countries have refused to allow what they term ‘cowardly acts of terrorism’, to jeopardise ongoing bilateral dialogue.

Hinduism

Hinduism has no founder, central authority or hierarchy and isn’t a proselytising religion. Essentially, Hindus believe in Brahman, who is eternal, uncreated and infinite; everything that exists emanates from Brahman and will ultimately return to it. The multitude of gods and goddesses are merely manifestations – knowable aspects of this formless phenomenon.

Hindus believe that earthly life is cyclical; you are born again and again (a process known as *samsara*), the quality of these rebirths being dependent upon your karma (conduct or action) in previous lives. Living a righteous life and fulfilling your dharma will enhance your chances of being born into a higher caste and better circumstances. Alternatively, if enough bad karma has accumulated, rebirth may take animal form. But it’s only as a human that you can gain sufficient self-knowledge to escape the cycle of reincarnation and achieve *moksha* (liberation).

Shakunthala Jagannathan’s *Hinduism – An Introduction* unravels the basic tenets of Hinduism – if you have no prior knowledge, this book is a terrific starting point.

GODS & GODDESSES

All Hindu deities are regarded as a manifestation of Brahman, who is often described as having three main representations, the Trimurti: Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva.

Brahman

The One; the ultimate reality. Brahman is formless, eternal and the source of all existence. Brahman is *nirguna* (without attributes), as opposed to all the other gods, which are manifestations of Brahman and therefore *saguna* (with attributes).

Brahma

Only during the creation of the universe does Brahma play an active role. At other times he is in meditation. His consort is Saraswati, the goddess of learning, and his vehicle is a swan. He’s sometimes shown sitting on a lotus that rises from Vishnu’s navel, symbolising the interdependence of the gods. Brahma is generally depicted with four (crowned and bearded) heads, each turned towards a point of the compass.

Vishnu

The preserver or sustainer, Vishnu is associated with ‘right action’. He protects and sustains all that is good in the world. He is usually depicted with



OM

One of Hinduism’s most venerated symbols is ‘Om’. Pronounced ‘aum’, it’s a highly propitious mantra (sacred word or syllable). The ‘three’ shape symbolises the creation, maintenance and destruction of the universe (and thus the holy Trimurti). The inverted *chandra* (crescent or half moon) represents the discursive mind and the *bindu* (dot) within it, Brahman.

Buddhists believe that, if repeated often enough with complete concentration, it will lead to a state of blissful emptiness.

four arms, holding a lotus, a conch shell (as it can be blown like a trumpet it symbolises the cosmic vibration from which all existence emanates), a discus and a mace. His consort is Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, and his vehicle is Garuda, a half-bird, half-beast creature. The Ganges is said to flow from his feet. Vishnu has 22 incarnations, including Rama, Krishna and Buddha.

Shiva

Shiva is the destroyer, but without whom creation couldn't occur. Shiva's creative role is phallically symbolised by his representation as the frequently worshipped lingam. With 1008 names, Shiva takes many forms, including Pashupati, champion of the animals, and Nataraja, lord of the *tandava* (cosmic dance), who paces out the cosmos' creation and destruction.

Sometimes Shiva has snakes draped around his neck and is shown holding a trident (representative of the Trimurti) as a weapon while riding Nandi, his bull. Nandi symbolises power and potency, justice and moral order. Shiva's consort, Parvati, is capable of taking many forms.

Other Prominent Deities

The jolly elephant-headed Ganesh is the god of good fortune, remover of obstacles, and patron of scribes (the broken tusk he holds was used to write sections of the Mahabharata). His animal mount is a ratlike creature. How exactly Ganesh came to have an elephant's head is a story with several variations. One legend says that Ganesh was born to Parvati in the absence of his father (Shiva), and Ganesh grew up not knowing his father. One day, as Ganesh stood guard while his mother bathed, Shiva returned and asked to be let into Parvati's presence. Ganesh, who did not recognise Shiva, refused. Enraged, Shiva promptly lopped off Ganesh's head, only to later discover, much to his horror, that he had slaughtered his own son! He vowed to replace Ganesh's head with that of the first creature he came across. This happened to be an elephant.

Another prominent deity, Krishna, is an incarnation of Vishnu, sent to earth to fight for good and combat evil. His alliances with the *gopis* (milkmaids) and his love for Radha have inspired countless paintings and songs. Depicted with blue-hued skin, Krishna is often seen playing the flute.

Hanuman is the hero of the Ramayana and loyal ally of Rama; he embodies the concept of *bhakti* (devotion). Hanuman is the king of the monkeys, but is capable of taking on other forms.

Among the Shaivite (followers of the Shiva movement), Shakti – the goddess as mother and creator – is worshipped as a force in her own right. Those who follow her are known as *shaktis*. The concept of *shakti* is embodied in the ancient goddess Devi (mother and destroyer of evil), also known as Durga and, in another, fiercer incarnation, Kali. Other widely worshipped goddesses include Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth who is often depicted sitting or standing on a lotus flower, and Saraswati, the goddess of learning.

SACRED TEXTS

Hindu sacred texts fall into two categories: those believed to be the word of god (shruti, meaning heard) and those produced by people (smriti, meaning remembered).

The Vedas are regarded as shruti knowledge and are considered the authoritative basis for Hinduism. The oldest of the Vedic texts, the Rig-Veda, was compiled more than 3000 years ago. Within its 1028 verses are prayers for prosperity and longevity as well as an explanation of the universe's origins. The Upanishads, the last parts of the Vedas, reflect on the mystery of death and emphasise the oneness of the universe.

Shiva is sometimes characterised as the lord of yoga, a Himalaya-dwelling ascetic with matted hair, an ash-smeared body and a third eye symbolising wisdom.

There are around 330 million deities in the Hindu pantheon; which of these are worshipped is a matter of personal choice or tradition.

Two impressive publications containing English translations of holy Hindu texts are *The Bhagavad Gita* by S Radhakrishnan and *The Valmiki Ramayana* by Romesh Dutt.

The oldest of the Vedic texts were written in Vedic Sanskrit (related to Old Persian). Later texts were composed in classical Sanskrit, but many have been translated into the vernacular.

The smriti texts comprise a collection of literature spanning many centuries and include expositions on the proper performance of domestic ceremonies as well as the proper pursuit of government, economics and religious law. Among its better-known works are the great epics of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, as well as the Puranas, which expand on the epics and promote the notion of the Trimurti. Unlike the Vedas, reading the Puranas is not restricted to initiated males of the higher castes; they have wider popular appeal.

The Mahabharata

Thought to have been composed some time around the 1st millennium BC, the Mahabharata focuses on the exploits of Krishna. By about 500 BC the Mahabharata had evolved into a far more complex creation with substantial additions, including the Bhagavad Gita (where Krishna proffers advice to Arjuna before a battle).

The story centres on conflict between the heroic gods (Pandavas) and the demons (Kauravas). Overseeing events is Krishna, who has taken on human form. Krishna acts as charioteer for the Pandava hero Arjuna, who eventually triumphs in a great battle with the Kauravas.

The Ramayana

Composed around the 3rd or 2nd century BC, the Ramayana is believed to be largely the work of one person, the poet Valmiki. Like the Mahabharata, it centres on conflict between the gods and demons.

The story goes that Dasharatha, the childless king of Ayodhya, called upon the gods to provide him with a son. His wife duly gave birth to a boy. But this child, named Rama, was in fact an incarnation of Vishnu, who'd assumed human form to overthrow the demon king of Lanka, Ravana. The adult Rama, who won the hand of the princess Sita in a competition, was chosen by his father to inherit his kingdom. At the last minute Rama's stepmother intervened and demanded her son take Rama's place. Rama, Sita and Rama's brother, Lakshmana, were exiled and went off to the forests, where Rama and Lakshmana battled demons and dark forces. Ravana's sister attempted to seduce Rama. She was rejected and, in revenge, Ravana captured Sita and spirited her away to his palace in Lanka. Rama, assisted by an army of monkeys led by the loyal monkey god Hanuman, eventually found the palace, killed Ravana and rescued Sita. All returned victorious to Ayodhya, where Rama was crowned king.

SACRED ANIMALS & PLANTS

Animals, particularly snakes and cows, have long been worshipped in the subcontinent. The cow represents fertility and nurturing, while snakes

THE SACRED SEVEN

The number seven has special significance in Hinduism. There are seven sacred Indian cities, each of which are major pilgrimage centres: Varanasi (p425), associated with Shiva; Haridwar (p454), where the Ganges enters the plains from the Himalaya; Ayodhya (p424), birthplace of Rama; Dwarka (p753), with the legendary capital of Krishna thought to be off the Gujarat coast; Mathura (p410), birthplace of Krishna; Kanchipuram (p1051), site of Shiva temples; and Ujjain (p695), site every 12 years of the Kumbh Mela.

There are also seven sacred rivers: the Ganges (Ganga), Saraswati (thought to be underground), Yamuna, Indus, Narmada, Godavari and Cauvery.

(especially cobras) are associated with fertility and welfare. Naga stones (snake stones) serve the dual purpose of protecting humans from snakes and propitiating snake gods.

Plants can also have sacred associations, such as the banyan tree, which symbolises the Trimurti, while mango trees are symbolic of love – Shiva is believed to have married Parvati under one. Meanwhile, the lotus flower is believed to have emerged from the primeval waters and is connected to the mythical centre of the earth through its stem. Often found in the most polluted of waters, the lotus has the remarkable ability to blossom above their murky depths. The centre of the lotus corresponds to the centre of the universe, the navel of the earth; all is held together by the stem and the eternal waters. This is how Hindus are reminded their own lives should be – like the fragile yet resolute lotus, an embodiment of beauty and strength. So revered is the lotus that today it's India's national flower.

WORSHIP

Worship and ritual play a paramount role in Hinduism. In Hindu homes you'll often find a dedicated worship area, where members of the family pray to the deities of their choice. Beyond the home, Hindus worship at temples. *Puja* is a focal point of worship and ranges from silent prayer to elaborate ceremonies. Devotees leave the temple with a handful of *prasad* (temple-blessed food) which is humbly shared among friends and family. Other forms of worship include *aarti* (the auspicious lighting of lamps or candles) and the playing of soul-soothing bhajans (devotional songs).

A sadhu is someone who has surrendered all material possessions in pursuit of spirituality through meditation, the study of sacred texts, self-mortification and pilgrimage.

Islam

Islam was founded in Arabia by the Prophet Mohammed in the 7th century AD. The Arabic term *islam* means to surrender, and believers (Muslims) undertake to surrender to the will of Allah (God), which is revealed in the scriptures, the Quran. In this monotheistic religion, God's word is conveyed through prophets (messengers), of whom Mohammed is the most recent.

Following Mohammed's death, a succession dispute split the movement, and the legacy today is the Sunnis and the Shiites. Most Muslims in India are Sunnis. The Sunnis emphasise the 'well-trodden' path or the orthodox way. Shiites believe that only imams (exemplary leaders) can reveal the true meaning of the Quran.

All Muslims, however, share a belief in the Five Pillars of Islam: the shahada (declaration of faith: 'There is no God but Allah; Mohammed is his prophet'); prayer (ideally five times a day); the zakat (tax), in the form of a charitable donation; fasting (during Ramadan) for all except the sick, the very young, the elderly and those undertaking arduous journeys; and the haj (pilgrimage) to Mecca, which every Muslim aspires to do at least once.

Sikhism

Sikhism, founded in Punjab by Guru Nanak in the 15th century, began as a reaction against the caste system and Brahmin domination of ritual. Sikhs believe in one god and although they reject the worship of idols, some keep pictures of the 10 gurus as a point of focus. The Sikhs' holy text, the Guru Granth Sahib, contains the teachings of the 10 Sikh gurus, among others.

Like Hindus and Buddhists, Sikhs believe in rebirth and karma. In Sikhism, there's no ascetic or monastic tradition ending the eternal cycles of rebirth.

Fundamental to Sikhs is the concept of Khalsa, or belief in a chosen race of soldier-saints who abide by strict codes of moral conduct (abstaining from alcohol, tobacco and drugs) and engage in a crusade for *dharmayudha* (righteousness). There are five *kakkars* (emblems) denoting the Khalsa

To understand the intricacies of Sikhism read *A History of the Sikhs* by Khushwant Singh, which comes in Volume One (1469–1839) and Volume Two (1839–2004).

The Wonder That Was India by AL Basham offers detailed descriptions of the Indian civilisations, major religions, origins of the caste system and social customs – a good thematic approach to bring the disparate strands together.

brotherhood: *kesh* (the unshaven beard and uncut hair symbolising saintliness); *kangha* (comb to maintain the ritually uncut hair); *kaccha* (loose underwear symbolising modesty); *kirpan* (sabre or sword symbolising power and dignity); and *karra* (steel bangle symbolising fearlessness). Singh, literally 'Lion', is the name adopted by many Sikhs.

A belief in the equality of all beings lies at the heart of Sikhism. It's expressed in various practices, including *langar*, whereby people from all walks of life – regardless of caste and creed – sit side by side to share a complimentary meal prepared by hard-working volunteers in the communal kitchen of the gurdwara (Sikh temple).

Buddhism

Buddhism arose in the 6th century BC as a reaction against the strictures of Brahminical Hinduism. The Buddha (Awakened One) is believed to have lived from about 563 BC to 483 BC. Formerly a prince (Siddhartha Gautama), the Buddha, at the age of 29, embarked on a quest for emancipation from the world of suffering. He finally achieved nirvana (the state of full awareness) at Bodhgaya (Bihar), aged 35. Critical of the caste system and the unthinking worship of gods, the Buddha urged his disciples to seek truth within their own experiences.

Buddha taught that existence is based on Four Noble Truths – that life is rooted in suffering, that suffering is caused by craving worldly things, that one can find release from suffering by eliminating craving, and that the way to eliminate craving is by following the Noble Eightfold Path. This path consists of right understanding, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right awareness and right concentration. By successfully complying with these one can attain nirvana.

Buddhism had almost vanished in much of India by the turn of the 20th century. However, it saw a revival in the 1950s among intellectuals and Dalits who were disillusioned with the caste system. The number of followers has been further increased with the influx of Tibetan refugees.

KNOW YOUR GOMPAS

Sikkim, among other places, is famous for its ornate and colourful gompas (Buddhist monasteries). The best time to visit any gompa is during the morning *puja* (prayers), when monks and novices gather to chant passages from the sacred scriptures, accompanied by ringing cymbals, booming drums and honking Tibetan horns. Visitors are welcome to watch, but should dress and behave respectfully. The first *puja* takes place at dawn, but there's normally a second prayer meeting around 9am.

Another feature common to all gompas are masked *chaam*, dances held to celebrate major festivals. *Chaam* dancers wear ornate robes and magnificent painted masks, depicting characters from Tibetan legends. Popular figures include Mahakala, the Great Protector, who has fearsome fangs and a headdress of human skulls, and the mythical snow lion, believed to live high on the slopes of Khangchendzonga. These characters are often depicted with a third eye in the centre of their foreheads, signifying the need for inner reflection.

The main *chaam* usually take place in the run up to Losar (Tibetan New Year) in February/March (December/January in some regions) and Losoong (Sikkimese New Year) in December/January. If you can't visit when a *chaam* is taking place, politely request a monk to show you the room where the masks and costumes are stored.

Another fascinating activity at Buddhist monasteries is the production of butter sculptures. These elaborate and slightly psychedelic models are made from coloured butter and dough and feature sacred symbols from Tibetan mythology. The sculptures are deliberately left to decay, symbolising the impermanence of human existence.

THE WHEEL OF LIFE

By the main entrance to most Buddhist monasteries you'll find a mural of the Wheel of Life, which neatly explains the key elements of Buddhist philosophy. In the mural, a fearsome monster – representing the impermanence of earthly life – holds a disk depicting the six worlds where humans end up as the result of good and evil deeds.

The top world is the temporary heavenly abode of the gods and enlightened, flanked by the worlds of humans and warring deities, which are full of suffering. Below these are the worlds of hungry ghosts and animals, the destinations of the sinful and indifferent. The final scene depicts the hot and cold hells, reserved for people who commit truly evil deeds.

The hub of the wheel contains a rooster (representing greed), a snake (representing hatred) and a pig (representing ignorance) – the three root causes of all evil. Surrounding the hub are illustrations of the White Path, which leads to Enlightenment, and the Dark Path, which leads to damnation. The 12 'causes and effects' that can lead to rebirth in a higher or lower form of existence are pictured in the outer rim of the wheel.

You can find an excellent interactive description of the Wheel of Life on the website www.buddhanet.net/wheel1.htm.

Jainism

Jainism arose in the 6th century BC as a reaction against the caste restraints and rituals of Hinduism. It was founded by Mahavira, a contemporary of the Buddha.

Jains believe that liberation can be attained by achieving complete purity of the soul. Purity means shedding all *karman*, matter generated by one's actions that binds itself to the soul. By following various austerities (eg fasting and meditation) one can shed *karman* and purify the soul. Right conduct is essential, and fundamental to this is ahimsa (nonviolence) in thought and deed towards any living thing.

The religious disciplines of the laity are less severe than for monks, with some Jain monks going naked. The slightly less ascetic maintain a bare minimum of possessions including a broom, with which to sweep the path before them to avoid stepping on any living creature, and a piece of cloth that is tied over their mouth to prevent the accidental inhalation of insects.

Christianity

Christianity is said to have arrived in South India with St Thomas the Apostle in AD 52. However, scholars say it's more likely Christianity arrived around the 4th century with a Syrian merchant, Thomas Cana, who set out for Kerala with 400 families.

Catholicism established a strong presence in South India in the wake of Vasco da Gama's visit in 1498 and orders that have been active in the region include the Dominicans, Franciscans and Jesuits. Protestantism arrived with the English, Dutch and Danish.

Zoroastrianism

Zoroastrianism, founded by Zoroaster (Zarathustra), had its inception in Persia in the 6th century BC and is based on the concept of dualism, whereby good and evil are locked in continuous battle. Zoroastrianism isn't quite monotheistic: good and evil entities coexist, although believers are enjoined to honour only the good. Humanity therefore has a choice. Unlike Christianity, there is no conflict between body and soul: both are united in the good versus evil struggle. Humanity, although mortal, has components such as the soul, which are timeless; a pleasant afterlife depends on one's deeds, words and thoughts during earthly existence. But not every lapse is

Set in Kerala against the backdrop of caste conflict and India's struggle for independence, *The House of Blue Mangoes* by David Davidar spans three generations of a Christian family.

The Parsi death ritual involves the 'Towers of Silence' – three concentric circles where the corpse is exposed to vultures, which pick the bones clean.

Sati: A Study of Widow Burning in India by Sakuntala Narasimhan looks at the startling history of *sati* (widow's suicide on her husband's funeral pyre; now banned) on the subcontinent.

Based on Rabindranath Tagore's novel, *Chokher Bali*, directed by Rituparno Ghosh, is a poignant film about a young widow living in early-20th-century Bengal who challenges the 'rules of widowhood' – something unthinkable in that era.

entered on the balance sheet and the errant soul is not called to account on the day of judgement for each and every misdemeanour.

Zoroastrianism was eclipsed in Persia by the rise of Islam in the 7th century and its followers, many of whom openly resisted this, suffered persecution. In the 10th century some emigrated to India, where they became known as Parsis.

WOMEN IN INDIA

Women in India are entitled to vote and own property. Although the percentage of women in politics has risen over the past decade, they're still notably underrepresented in the national parliament, accounting for around only 10% of parliamentary members. In an ongoing bid to improve women's parliamentary representation, campaigners continue to fight for the Women's Reservation Bill (which proposes a 33% reservation of seats for women) to be passed.

Although the professions are still very much male dominated, women are steadily making inroads, especially in urban centres. Kerala was India's first state to break societal norms by recruiting female police officers back in 1938. It was also the first state to establish an all-female police station (1973). For village women it's much more difficult to get ahead, but groups such as the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in Gujarat have shown what's possible. Here, socially disadvantaged women have been organised into unions, offering at least some lobbying power against discriminatory and exploitative work practices (see the boxed text, p726).

In low-income families girls can be regarded as a liability because at marriage a dowry must often be supplied, posing an immense financial burden. For the urban, middle-class woman, life is materially much more comfortable, but pressures still exist. Broadly speaking, she is far more likely to be given an education, but once married is still usually expected to 'fit in' with her in-laws and be a homemaker above all else. Like her village counterpart, if she fails to live up to expectations – even if it's just not being able to produce a grandson – the consequences can sometimes be dire, as demonstrated by the practice of 'bride burning', wherein women are doused with flammable liquid by their husband or husband's family and set alight. It's claimed that for every reported case, around 250 go unreported and that less than 10% of the reported cases are pursued through the legal system.

According to reports, every six hours a married woman in India is beaten or burnt to death, or emotionally harassed to the point of suicide. In October 2006, following persistent civil women's rights campaigns, the Indian parliament passed a landmark bill (on top of existing legislation) which gives women who are suffering domestic violence increased protection and rights. Prior to this legislation, although Indian women could lodge police complaints against abusive spouses, they were not automatically entitled to a share of the marital property or to ongoing financial support. The new law purports that any form of physical, sexual (including marital rape), emotional and economic abuse entails not only domestic violence, but also human rights violations. Perpetrators face imprisonment and fines. Under the new law, abused women are now legally permitted to remain in the marital house; in the past many were thrown out and made destitute. In addition, the law prohibits emotional and physical bullying in relation to dowry demands. Although the government has been widely lauded for taking this long-overdue step, critics point out that a sizable proportion of women (especially in rural areas) will remain oblivious of their new rights until and unless there are sufficient government-sponsored awareness programmes. They also suggest that many women, especially those

outside India's larger cities, will be too frightened to seek legal protection because of the social stigma and alienation that is often a consequence of speaking out.

Although the constitution allows for divorcées (and widows) to remarry, few do so, simply because divorcées are generally considered outcasts from society. Even a woman's own family will often turn its back on a wife who seeks divorce. Divorce rates in India are among the worlds lowest, despite having risen from seven in 1000 in 1991 to 11 in 1000 in 2004. Although no reliable post-2004 statistics are yet available, divorce rates are reportedly growing by 15% per annum, with most cases registered in urban India.

Although sexual harassment has increased in recent years, India has fewer reported sex crimes than most Western nations. Authorities claim a rape occurs every 30 minutes in India (in the US it averages one every two minutes), with around 50% of victims aged under 18. Statistics can be deceiving, as most rapes in India go unreported. It's estimated that only one in every 70 rape cases is registered with authorities, with only 20% of the accused being convicted.

For further reading about women in India, there are some good websites including the All India Democratic Women's Association (Aidwa) at www.aidwa.org and SEWA's website, www.sewa.org.

Women travellers should also read p1160.

ARTS

Artistic beauty lies around almost every corner, whether it's the garishly painted trucks rattling down dusty rural roads or the exquisite, spidery body art of *mehndi* (henna). Indeed, a glowing highlight of subcontinental travel is its wealth of art treasures, from ancient temple architecture to the dynamic performing-arts scene.

Contemporary Indian artists have fused historical design elements with edgy modern influences, creating art (and music) that has received worldwide acclaim.

Dance

Dance is an ancient Indian art form and is traditionally linked to mythology and classical literature. Dance can be divided into two main forms: classical and folk.

Classical dance is essentially based on well-defined traditional disciplines and includes the following:

- Bharata Natyam (also spelt *bharatanatyam*), which originated in Tamil Nadu, has been embraced throughout India.
- Kathakali, which has its roots in Kerala, is sometimes referred to as 'dance' but essentially is not – see the boxed text, p1011.
- Kathak, which has Hindu and Islamic influences, and was particularly popular with the Mughals. Kathak suffered a period of notoriety when it moved from the courts into houses where nautch (dancing) girls tantalised audiences with renditions of the Krishna and Radha love story. It was restored as a serious art form in the early 20th century.
- Manipuri, which has a delicate, lyrical flavour, hails from Manipur. It attracted a wider audience in the 1920s when the Bengali writer Rabindranath Tagore invited one of its most revered exponents to teach at Shantiniketan (West Bengal).
- Kuchipudi is a 17th-century dance-drama that originated in the Andhra Pradesh village from which it takes its name. The story centres on the envious wife of Krishna.
- Odissi, claimed to be India's oldest classical dance form, was originally a temple art, and was later also performed at royal courts.

Chandni Bar, directed by Madhur Bhandarkar, offers a realistic and disturbing insight into the lives of women who, driven by poverty and often family pressure, work as dancers/prostitutes in Mumbai's seedy bars.

Indian Classical Dance by Leela Venkataraman and Avinash Pasricha is a lavishly illustrated book with good descriptions about the various Indian dance forms, including Bharata Natyam, Odissi, Kuchipudi and Kathakali.

Delve into India's vibrant performing-arts scene – especially Indian classical dance – at Art India (www.artindia.net).

India's second major dance form, folk, is widespread and varied. It ranges from the high-spirited bhangra dance hailing from Punjab (see the boxed text, opposite) to the theatrical dummy horse dances of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu and the graceful fishers' dance of Orissa.

Pioneers of modern dance forms in India include Uday Shankar (older brother of sitar master Ravi), who once partnered Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova. Rabindranath Tagore was another innovator; in 1901 he set up a school at Shantiniketan (p522) that promoted the arts, including dance.

Music

Indian classical music traces its roots back to Vedic times, when religious poems chanted by priests were first collated in an anthology called the Rig-Veda. Over the millennia classical music has been shaped by many influences, and the legacy today is Carnatic (characteristic of South India) and Hindustani (the classical style of North India) music. With common origins, both share a number of features. Both use the raga (the melodic shape of the music) and *tala* (the rhythmic meter characterised by the number of beats); *tintal*, for example, has a *tala* of 16 beats. The audience follows the *tala* by clapping at the appropriate beat, which in *tintal* is at beats one, five and 13. There's no clap at the beat of nine; that's the *khali* (empty section), which is indicated by a wave of the hand. Both the raga and the *tala* are used as a basis for composition and improvisation.

Both Carnatic and Hindustani music are performed by small ensembles, generally comprising three to six musicians, and both have many instruments in common. There's no fixed pitch, but there are differences between the two styles. Hindustani has been more heavily influenced by Persian musical conventions (a result of Mughal rule); Carnatic music, as it developed in South India, cleaves more closely to theory. The most striking difference, at least for those unfamiliar with India's classical forms, is Carnatic's greater use of voice.

One of the best-known Indian instruments is the sitar (large stringed instrument) with which the soloist plays the raga. Other stringed instruments include the sarod (which is plucked) and the sarangi (which is played with a bow). Also popular is the tabla (twin drums), which provides the *tala*. The drone, which runs on two basic notes, is provided by the oboelike *shehnai* or the stringed *tampura* (also spelt *tamboura*). The hand-pumped keyboard harmonium is used as a secondary melody instrument for vocal music.

Indian regional folk music is widespread and varied. Wandering musicians, magicians, snake charmers and storytellers often use song to entertain their audiences; the storyteller usually sings the tales from the great epics.

In North India you may come across Qawwali (Islamic devotional singing), performed at mosques or at musical concerts. Qawwali concerts usually take the form of a *mehfil* (gathering) with a lead singer, second singer, harmonium and tabla players and a thunderous chorus of junior singers and clappers, all sitting cross-legged on the floor. The singer whips up the audience with favourite lines of poetry, dramatic hand gestures and religious phrases as the two voices weave in and out, bouncing off each other to create an improvised, surging sound. On command the chorus dives in with a hypnotic and rhythmic refrain. Members of the audience sway and shout out in ecstatic appreciation.

A completely different genre altogether, filmi music entails musical scores from Bollywood movies. These days, a lot of filmi music consists of rather cheesy pop-techno tunes, rather than the lyrically poetic and mellow melodies of old times. Modern (slower paced) love serenades also feature among the predominantly hyperactive dance songs. With

BHANGRA

Originating in the north Indian state of Punjab, bhangra is a wildly rhythmic and innovative form of subcontinental music and dance. It first came about as part of Punjab's harvest-festival celebrations (dating back to around the 14th century) then later appeared at weddings and other joyous occasions.

In terms of dance movements, there are different variations but most entail the arms being held high in the air coupled with the energetic shaking of the shoulders and intermittent kicking of the legs. More traditional forms involve brightly costumed participants dancing in a circle. The most prominent musical instrument used in bhangra is the dhol (a traditional two-sided drum), while accompanying lyrics tend to revolve around the themes of love, marriage and assorted social issues.

In the 1980s and '90s, inventive fusion versions of traditional bhangra (which include elements of hip-hop, disco, techno, rap, House and reggae) made big waves on both the domestic and international music/dance arenas, especially in the UK.

Bollywood cranking out hundreds of movies a year, it's hardly surprising that filmi hits tend to come and go in the wink of an eye. To ascertain the latest filmi favourites as well as in-vogue Indian pop singers, simply ask at any music store.

Radio and TV have played a paramount role in broadcasting different music styles – from soothing bhajans to booming Bollywood hits – to even the remotest corners of India.

Cinema

India's film industry was born in 1897 when the first Indian-made motion picture, *Panorama of Calcutta*, was screened in Kolkata. India's first feature film, *Raja Harishchandra*, was made in the silent era in 1913 and it's ultimately from this that Indian cinema traces its vibrant lineage.

Today, India's film industry is the biggest in the world – larger than Hollywood – and Mumbai, the Hindi-language film capital, is affectionately dubbed 'Bollywood'. Bollywood has a worldwide audience of around 3.7 billion, as compared with Hollywood's estimated 2.6 billion. India's other major film-producing centres include Chennai, Hyderabad and Bengaluru, with a number of other centres producing films in their own regional vernaculars. Bollywood movies in particular have a huge Non-Resident Indian (NRI) following, which has largely been responsible for the recent success of Indian cinema on the international arena.

On average, 900 feature films are produced annually in India, each costing anywhere between Rs 2 million and upwards of Rs 500 million, although only a small percentage yield healthy profits. Big-budget films are often partly or entirely shot abroad, with some countries aggressively wooing Indian production companies because of the spin-off tourism revenue these films generate. Switzerland, with its lofty snow-capped mountains, has been particularly popular with Indian filmmakers in search of a credible Kashmir lookalike (picturesque but politically unstable Kashmir is too risky for shooting films).

Broadly speaking, there are two categories of Indian films. Most prominent is the mainstream movie – three hours and still running, these blockbusters are often tear-jerkers and are packed with dramatic twists interspersed with copious song-and-dance performances. There aren't explicit sex or kissing scenes (although nowadays smooching is creeping into some films) in Indian films made for the local market; however, lack of nudity is often compensated for by heroines writhing to music in clinging wet saris.

Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema by Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen comprehensively chronicles India's cinema history, spanning from 1897 to the 21st century.

Stay tuned to the latest Bollywood gossip at Bollywood World (www.bollywoodworld.com) and Bollywood Blitz (www.bollywoodblitz.com).

Directed by Mumbai-born Ismail Merchant, *The Mystic Masseur* is based on the novel by VS Naipaul. The film provides a fascinating account of Indians living in the multicultural melting pot that is mid-20th-century Trinidad.

For details about English-language Indian literature, from historical to contemporary times, check out Indian English Literature (www.indianenglishliterature.com).

The second Indian film genre is art house, which adopts Indian ‘reality’ as its base. The images are a faithful reproduction of what one sees in the subcontinent and the idiom in which it is presented is usually a Western one. Generally speaking they are, or at least supposed to be, socially and politically relevant. Usually made on infinitely smaller budgets than their commercial cousins, these films are the ones that win kudos at international film festivals. One example is India-born Canadian filmmaker Deepa Mehta’s widely acclaimed trilogy, *Earth, Fire and Water*. Although these films received accolades around the world – including a Best Foreign Language Film Oscar nomination for *Water* in 2007 – Mehta faced unexpected obstacles and widespread criticism back in India. For instance, in 2000, a few days into the initial Varanasi-based shoot for *Water*, Mehta’s crew was forced to abruptly pack up and leave. Set in 1938 in Varanasi, the script concerned the sorry plight of Hindu widows and some of its themes did not sit comfortably with Hindu nationalists, who demanded a stop to filming. Mehta later resumed shooting in Sri Lanka and *Water* eventually made its debut, amid rave reviews, in 2005. Mehta’s controversial film *Fire* also faced stiff opposition in India for its lesbian themes (see p60) with some nationalists even burning down cinemas that chose to screen the film, claiming that its themes maligned Hinduism and religiously revered figures (the screen names of the two lead female characters are Sita and Radha).

For specific film recommendations, see the boxed text, p26; for more information about Bollywood and working as a film extra, see the boxed text, p778; for the low down on some of Bollywood’s biggest stars see the boxed text, p790; and for details about Tamil films read the boxed text, p1040.

Literature

India has a long tradition of Sanskrit literature, although works in the vernacular have contributed to a particularly rich legacy. In fact, it’s claimed there are as many literary traditions as there are written languages.

Bengalis are credited with producing some of India’s most celebrated literature, a movement often referred to as the Indian or Bengal Renaissance, which flourished from the 19th century with works by Bankimchandra Chatterjee. But the man who to this day is credited with propelling India’s cultural richness onto the world stage is Rabindranath Tagore, a Bengali who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 for *Gitanjali* (see the boxed text, opposite).

India boasts an ever-growing number of internationally acclaimed authors who are especially revered for evoking a sense of place and emotion through deliciously sensuous and insightful language. Some particularly prominent writers include Vikram Seth, best known for his award-winning epic novel *A Suitable Boy*, and Amitav Ghosh, who has won a number of awards including the Prix Medici Etranger (one of France’s top literary awards) with his work *The Circle of Reason*, and the Sahitya Akademi Award (India’s most esteemed literary prize) for *The Shadow Lines*.

RK Narayan received various awards for his novels, many of which centre on the fictitious South Indian town of Malgudi – some of his best-known works include *Malgudi School days: The Adventures of Swami and his Friends*, *The Guide*, *Waiting for the Mahatma* and *The Painter of Signs*.

India’s latest shining literary star is India-born Kiran Desai who won the 2006 Man Booker Prize for her superb novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, which, through a handful of engaging characters, intimately explores a gamut of issues including migration, globalisation, economic disparity and identity. Her first novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, was also widely applauded.

RABINDRANATH TAGORE

The brilliant and prolific poet, writer, artist and patriot Rabindranath Tagore (or 'Rabi Babu' as he's known to Bengalis) has had an unparalleled impact on Bengali culture. Born to a wealthy, prominent family in Kolkata (Calcutta) in 1861, he began writing as a young boy and never stopped, dictating his last poem only hours before his death in 1941.

Tagore is also credited with introducing India's historical and cultural greatness to the Western world. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 with his mystical collection of poems *Gitanjali* (Song Offering), and in later years his lecture tours saw him carrying his message of human unity around Asia, America and Europe.

But for all his internationalism, Tagore's heart was firmly rooted in his homeland; a truth reflected in his many popular songs, sung by the masses, and in the lyrics of the national anthems of both India and Bangladesh. In 1915 Tagore was awarded a knighthood by the British, but he surrendered it in 1919 as a protest against the Amritsar massacre (see p48).

For a taste of Tagore's work, read his *Selected Short Stories*.

Kiran Desai, who is the youngest woman to ever win the Booker Prize, is the daughter of the award-winning Indian novelist Anita Desai, who has thrice been a Booker Prize nominee. In 1997, Kerala-born Arundhati Roy won the Booker Prize for *The God of Small Things*.

Trinidad-born Indian writer VS Naipaul has written widely about India and his book *A Million Mutinies Now* has to be one of the most penetrating insights into Indian life. Naipaul has won many awards including the Booker Prize (1971) and the Nobel Prize for Literature (2001). Also of wide international repute is Mumbai-born Salman Rushdie, who bagged the Booker Prize in 1981 for *Midnight's Children*. UK-born Bengali writer Jhumpa Lahiri won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *Interpreter of Maladies*, a tremendous collection of short stories.

For further recommendations of just some of the many brilliant Indian novels available, see p26.

Architecture

Travellers will come across various forms of exquisite temple architecture, India's most striking and revered form of construction. Although none of the wooden (occasionally brick) temples built in early times have survived the vagaries of the climate, by the advent of the Guptas (4th to 6th centuries AD) of North India, sacred structures of a new type were being constructed, and these set the standard for temples for several hundred years.

For Hindus, the square is the perfect shape and complex rules govern the location, design and building of each temple, based on numerology, astrology, astronomy and religious law. Essentially, a temple is a map of the universe. At the centre is an unadorned space, the *garbhagriha* (inner shrine), which is symbolic of the 'womb-cave' from which the universe emerged. This provides a residence for the deity to which the temple is dedicated.

Above the shrine rises a superstructure known as a *vimana* in South India, and a *sikhara* in North India. The *sikhara* is curvilinear and topped with a grooved disk, on which sits a pot-shaped finial, while the *vimana* is stepped, with the grooved disk being replaced with a solid dome. Some temples have a *mandapa* (temple forechamber) connected to the sanctum by vestibules. These *mandapas* may also contain *vimanas* or *sikharas*.

A *gopuram* is a soaring pyramidal gateway tower of a Dravidian temple. The towering *gopurams* of various South Indian temple complexes (eg Madurai's Sri Meenakshi Temple – p1082) took ornamentation and monumentalism to new levels.

Architecture buffs will appreciate *Masterpieces of Traditional Indian Architecture* by Satish Grover and *The History of Architecture in India* by Christopher Tadgell, both of which include insights into temple architecture.

TEMPLE TANKS

Commonly used for ritual bathing and religious ceremonies, as well as adding aesthetic appeal to places of worship, temple tanks have long been a focal point of temple activity.

These often-vast, angular, engineered reservoirs of water, sometimes fed by rain, sometimes fed – via a complicated drainage system – by rivers, serve both sacred and secular purposes. The waters of some temple tanks are believed to have extraordinary healing properties, while others are said to have the power to wash away sins.

Devotees (as well as travellers) may be required to wash their hands and feet in a temple tank before entering a place of worship.

From the outside, Jain temples can resemble Hindu ones, but inside they're often a riot of sculptural ornamentation, the very opposite of ascetic austerity. Meanwhile, Sikh gurdwaras can usually be identified by a *nishan sahib* (flagpole) flying a triangular flag with the Sikh insignia. Amritsar's sublime Golden Temple (p271) is Sikhism's holiest shrine.

Stupas, which characterise Buddhist places of worship, essentially evolved from burial mounds. They served as repositories for relics of the Buddha and, later, other venerated souls. A relatively recent innovation is the addition of a *chaitya* (hall) leading up to the stupa itself. Bodhgaya (p557), where the Buddha attained enlightenment, is an auspicious Buddhist centre. The gompas (Buddhist monasteries) found in Ladakh and Dharamsala are characterised by distinctly Tibetan motifs (see also the boxed text, p372).

India's Muslim invaders contributed their own architectural conventions, including arched cloisters and domes. The Mughals uniquely melded Persian, Indian and provincial styles. Examples include the tomb of Humayun in Delhi (p130), the fort at Agra (p400) and the city of Fatehpur Sikri (p408). But it is Shah Jahan who was responsible for some of India's most spectacular architectural creations, most notably the jaw-dropping Taj Mahal (p399).

One of the most striking differences between Hinduism and Islam is religious imagery. While Islamic art eschews any hint of idolatry or portrayal of God, it has evolved a rich heritage of calligraphic and decorative designs. In terms of mosque architecture, the basic design elements are similar worldwide. A large hall is dedicated to communal prayer and within the hall is a mihrab (niche) indicating the direction of Mecca. The faithful are called to prayer from minarets, placed at cardinal points.

Churches in India reflect the fashions and trends of typically European ecclesiastical architecture with many also displaying Hindu decorative flourishes. The Portuguese, among others, made impressive attempts to replicate the great churches and cathedrals of their day.

Painting

Around 1500 years ago artists covered the walls and ceilings of the Ajanta caves (p812) in western India with scenes from Buddha's life. The figures are endowed with an unusual freedom and grace, and contrast with the next major style that emerged from this part of India in the 11th century.

India's Jain community created some particularly lavish temple art. However, after the Muslim conquest of Gujarat in 1299, the Jains turned their attention to illustrated manuscripts, which could be hidden away. These manuscripts are the only known form of Indian painting that survived the Islamic conquest of North India.

The Indo-Persian style – characterised by geometric design coupled with flowing form – developed from Islamic royal courts, although the depiction

Discover more about India's diverse temple architecture (in addition to other temple-related information) at Temple Net (www.temple.net).

MAGNIFICENT MEHNDI

Mehndi is the traditional art of painting a woman's hands (and sometimes feet) with intricate henna designs for auspicious ceremonies such as marriage. If quality henna is used, the design, which is orange-brown, can last up to one month. The henna usually fades faster the more you wash it and apply lotion.

In touristy areas, *mehndi*-wallahs are adept at doing henna tattoo 'bands' on the arms, legs and even the navel area. If you're thinking about getting *mehndi* applied, allow at least a couple of hours for the design process and required drying time (during drying you can't use your hennaed hands).

It's always wise to request the artist to do a 'test' spot on your arm before proceeding, as nowadays some dyes contain chemicals that can cause allergies or even permanent scarring. If good henna is used, you should not feel any pain during or after the procedure.

of the elongated eye is one convention that seems to have been retained from indigenous sources. The Persian influence blossomed when artisans fled to India following the 1507 Uzbek attack on Herat (in present-day Afghanistan), and with trade and gift-swapping between the Persian city of Shiraz, an established centre for miniature production, and Indian provincial sultans.

The 1526 victory by Babur at the Battle of Panipat ushered in the era of the Mughals in India. Although Babur and his son Humayun were both patrons of the arts, it's Humayun's son Akbar who is generally credited with developing the characteristic Mughal style. This painting style, often in colourful miniature form, largely depicts court life, architecture, battle and hunting scenes, as well as detailed portraits. Akbar recruited artists from far and wide, and artistic endeavour first centred on the production of illustrated manuscripts (topics varied from history to mythology), but later broadened into portraiture and the glorification of everyday events. European paintings influenced some artists, and this influence occasionally reveals itself in experiments with motifs and perspective.

Akbar's son Jehangir also patronised painting, but he preferred portraiture, and his fascination with natural science resulted in a vibrant legacy of paintings of flowers and animals. Under Jehangir's son Shah Jahan, the Mughal style became less fluid, and although the bright colouring was eye-catching, the paintings lacked the vigour of before.

Various schools of miniature painting (small paintings crammed with detail) emerged in Rajasthan from around the 17th century. The subject matter ranged from royal processions to shikar (hunting expeditions), with many artists influenced by Mughal styles. The intense colours, still evident today in miniatures and frescoes in some Indian palaces, were often derived from crushed semiprecious stones, while the gold and silver colouring is in fact finely pounded pure gold and silver leaf.

By the 19th century, painting in North India was notably influenced by Western styles (especially English watercolours), giving rise to what has been dubbed the Company School, which had its centre in Delhi.

In the 21st century, paintings by contemporary Indian artists have been selling at record numbers (and prices) around the world. One very successful online art auction house, the Mumbai-based Saffronart (www.saffronart.com) has reportedly surpassed heavyweights such as Sotheby's and Christie's in terms of its online Indian art sales. Online auctions promote feisty global bidding wars, largely accounting for the high success rate of Saffronart, which also previews its paintings in Mumbai and New York prior to its major cyber auctions. Many bidders are wealthy NRIs who not only appreciate Indian art, but have also recognised its investment potential. However

Indian Art by Roy Craven provides a sound overview of India's art history, tracing its early beginnings in the Indus Valley to the development of various forms of Hindu, Islamic and Buddhist art.

KOLAMS

Kolams, the striking and breathtakingly intricate rice-flour designs (also called *rangoli*) that adorn thresholds, especially in South India, are both auspicious and symbolic. *Kolams* are traditionally drawn at sunrise and are sometimes made of rice-flour paste, which may be eaten by little creatures – symbolising a reverence for even the smallest living things. Deities are deemed to be attracted to a beautiful *kolam*, which may also signal to sadhus (spiritual men) that they will be offered food at a particular house. Some people believe that *kolams* protect against the evil eye.

Sprinkled with sumptuous colour illustrations, *Traditional Indian Textiles* by John Gillow and Nicholas Barnard explores India's stunning regional textiles and includes sections on tie-dye, weaving, beadwork, brocades, natural dyes and even camel girths.

there is also mounting demand from non-Indian collectors, with spiralling sales in Europe, the USA, UK, Southeast Asia and the Middle East. International auction houses are descending upon India, to either set up offices or secure gallery alliances, in order to grab a piece of the action of what they have identified as a major growth market. Although the bulk of demand, on both the domestic and international fronts, is for senior Indian artists' works, such as those of Francis Newton Souza, Tyeb Mehta, Syed Haider Raza, Akbar Padamsee, Ram Kumar and Maqbool Fida Husain, there's an escalating interest in young emerging Indian artists.

Handicrafts

Over the centuries India's many ethnic groups have spawned a vivid artistic heritage that is both inventive and spiritually significant. Many crafts fulfil a practical need as much as an aesthetic one.

Crafts aren't confined to their region of origin – artists migrate and have sometimes been influenced by the ideas of other regions – which means you can come across, for example, a Kashmiri handicraft emporium anywhere in India.

There's a vast range of handicrafts produced in India, with standouts including ceramics, jewellery, leatherwork, metalwork, stone carving, papier-mâché, woodwork and a dazzling array of textiles. For detailed information about what's on offer, see p1144.

SPORT Cricket

Cricket is, without a doubt, India's most beloved sport. Travellers who show even a slight interest in the game are likely to spark passionate conversations with locals from all walks of life. Indeed, cricket is more than just a sport – it's a matter of enormous national pride, especially evident whenever India plays against Pakistan. Matches between these two countries – which have had rocky relations since Independence – attract frenzied support, and the players of both sides are under colossal pressure to do their country proud.

Today cricket is big business in India, attracting juicy sponsorship deals and celebrity status for its players, especially for high-profile cricketers such as star batsman Sachin Tendulkar and Sikh ace-bowler Harbhajan Singh (fondly dubbed the 'turbanator'). The sport has not been without its dark side though, with Indian cricketers among those embroiled in match-fixing scandals some years back.

International matches are played at various Indian centres (usually from October to April), including Mumbai's Wankhede Stadium (p791). Match tickets are usually advertised in the local press (and often on the internet) a few weeks in advance.

India's first recorded cricket match was in 1721. It won its first test series in 1952 at Chennai against England.

Get up-to-date cricket information at **Cricinfo** (www.cricinfo.com).

Tennis

When it comes to the world of tennis, the biggest success story for India is the doubles team of Leander Paes and Mahesh Bhupathi, who won Wimbledon's prestigious title in 1999 – the first Indians ever to do so. Among more recent wins, Paes (partnered by the Czech Republic's Martin Damm) nabbed the 2006 US Open men's doubles, while Bhupathi (partnered by Switzerland's Martina Hingis) seized the 2006 Australian Open's mixed doubles.

Meanwhile, at the 2005 Dubai Open, Indian wild card Sania Mirza made waves when she thrashed US Open champion Svetlana Kuznetsova. Mirza, then ranked 97th, 90 spots behind Kuznetsova, became the first Indian woman to win a Women's Tennis Association Tour title. In the 2006 Doha Asian Games, Mirza won silver in the women's singles category and gold in the mixed doubles (her partner was Leander Paes). In early 2007 Sania Mirza's world ranking was 53rd in singles, 25th in doubles.

Keeping your finger on the pulse of Indian sporting news is just a click away on Sify Sports (www.sify.com/sports).

Polo

Polo flourished in India until Independence (especially among Indian royalty), after which patronage sharply declined due to lack of funds. However, today there's a renewed interest in the game thanks to beefed-up sponsorship, although it still remains an elite game and consequently fails to attract widespread public interest.

Travellers can catch a polo match, and hobnob with high society, during the cooler winter months at centres that include Delhi, Jaipur, Kolkata and Mumbai (check local newspapers for details). Polo is also popular in Ladakh (see p376).

It's believed that Emperor Akbar first introduced rules to the game, but polo, as it's played today, was largely influenced by a British cavalry regiment stationed in India during the 1870s. A set of international rules was implemented after WWI. One of the world's oldest polo clubs, established in 1862, is in Kolkata.

Hockey

Hockey doesn't enjoy the same following it once did, partly due to the unassailable popularity of cricket, which snatches most of India's sponsorship funding.

Some believe that the decline of hockey is largely due to the media, as the sport flourished in India before the live TV era; between 1928 and 1956, India won six consecutive Olympic gold medals (it has had none since 1980).

There have been recent initiatives aimed at generating renewed interest in the game, with high-profile hockey clubs encouraging high-school and university students to join, resulting in some success.

For those keen to tap into the hockey scene, two recommended websites are www.indianhockey.com and www.bharatihockey.org.

Through scintillating text and pictures, *The Illustrated History of Indian Cricket* by Boria Majumdar adeptly explores this popular sport, from its origins right up to modern times.

Other Sports

The world's second most populous nation has copped derisive criticism for its dismal performances in recent Olympic Games, with critics pointing the finger at paltry sponsorship commitment and lack of public interest. The weightlifter, Karnam Malleswari, was the only Indian to win a medal (bronze) at the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games, making her the first Indian woman to ever win an Olympic medal. Meanwhile, at the 2004 Athens Olympics, India only managed one medal (silver), won by Rajyavardhan Singh Rathore for the men's double-trap shooting.

Football (soccer) has a reasonably strong following, especially in the country's east and south. In 2007 India slipped to the 165th spot in the FIFA world rankings.

Horse racing, held primarily in the cooler winter months, is especially popular in Kolkata and Mumbai, but there are also tracks in other major cities (check locally to see if any events are taking place during the time of your visit).

Some traditional sports that have survived over time include *kho-kho* and kabaddi, both of which are essentially elaborate games of tag.

For online links to major Indian English-language newspapers, head straight to Samachar (www.samachar.com).

MEDIA

Despite often having allegiances to particular political parties, India's extensive print media enjoys widespread freedom of expression. There are more than 4500 daily newspapers and many thousand more weekly/monthly magazines and journals, in a range of vernaculars. For major English-language dailies and news magazines, see p1125. Most major publications have websites.

Indian TV was at one time dominated by the dreary national (government-controlled) broadcaster **Doordarshan** (www.ddindia.gov.in); the introduction of satellite TV in the early 1990s revolutionised viewing habits by introducing several dozen channels. Satellite TV offers a great variety of programming, from Indian and American soap operas to Hindi- and English-language current affairs. There are also a number of Indian regional channels broadcasting in local dialects.

Programmes on the government-controlled **All India Radio** (AIR; www.allindia.radio.org), one of the world's biggest radio service providers, include news, interviews, music and sport. There are also mushrooming nationwide private channels that offer more variety than the government broadcaster, including talkback on subjects, such as marital problems, once considered taboo.

Consult local newspapers for TV and radio programme details.

India's oldest English-language newspaper is the *Times of India* (title since 1850), first published biweekly in 1838 as the *Bombay Times & Journal of Commerce*.

Environment

THE LAND

India covers an area of 3,287,263 sq km, and encompasses some of the most dramatic landscapes on earth – steamy jungles and tropical rainforest, waterlogged marshlands and arid deserts, and the soaring peaks of the Himalaya.

The Himalaya

Creating an impregnable boundary between India and its neighbours to the north, the Himalaya are the world's highest mountains, as well as being some of the youngest. This mighty ridge began to rise in the Jurassic era (80 million years ago) when Laurasia, the main landmass in the northern hemisphere, tore away from Gondwanaland in the southern hemisphere. The Indian landmass was pulled across the divide by plate tectonics and thrust against the soft sedimentary crust of Laurasia, buckling the plate upwards to form the Himalaya. Fossils of sea creatures from this time are still found at 5000m above sea level. This continental collision is an ongoing process and the Himalaya are growing in height by up to 8mm each year. The highest point in India is Khangchendzonga (8598m) in Sikkim – the world's third-highest mountain.

Although it looks like a continuous range on a map, the Himalaya is actually a series of interlocking ridges, separated by broad valleys. Until the technology was created to run roads through the Himalaya, many of these valleys existed in complete isolation, preserving a diverse series of mountain cultures – Muslims dominate Kashmir, while Buddhists hold sway in Zaskar, Ladakh, Lahaul, Spiti, Sikkim and western Arunachal Pradesh, and Hindus dominate most of Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand (Uttaranchal). The final southern range of the Himalaya, the Siwalik Hills, ends abruptly in the great northern plain in the northwest.

The Northern Plains

Covering most of central India, the vast northern plains drop just 200m between Delhi and the waterlogged marshlands of West Bengal. The sacred Ganges River (Ganga) rises in Gangotri and joins forces with a host of tributaries as it crosses the northern plain, finally merging with the Brahmaputra River from India's northeast. In the far northwest, the Indus River defines the topography of Ladakh, flowing northwest into Pakistan.

The Northeast

The northeast boundary of India is made up of densely folded hills that spill over into neighbouring Myanmar (Burma). Until the creation of East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh), Indian territory extended to the Bay of Bengal. In culture and appearance, most states in the northeast are closer to Southeast Asia than the rest of India.

The Centre & the South

Heading south from the northern plains, the land rises to the Deccan plateau, marking the divide between the Mughal heartlands of North India and the Dravidian civilisations of the south. The plateau is bound on either side by the Western and Eastern Ghats, which come together in Tamil Nadu to form the Nilgiri Hills. The major rivers of the south are the Godavari and the Krishna, which rise in the Western Ghats and empty into the Bay of Bengal.

The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF; www.wwfindia.org) promotes environmental protection and wildlife conservation in India; see the website for offices around the country.

Northern India is still a volatile area for tectonic activity – Kashmir was rocked by a devastating earthquake in October 2005, killing 80,000 people; see p360.

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands comprise 572 islands and are the peaks of a vast submerged mountain range extending almost 1000km between Myanmar (Burma) and Sumatra.

India's national animal is the tiger, its national bird is the peacock and its national flower is the lotus. The national emblem of India is a column topped by three Asiatic lions.

Read about wildlife, conservation and the environment in *Sanctuary Asia* (www.sanctuaryasia.com), a slick publication raising awareness about India's precious natural heritage.

The West

The Himalaya form a natural land border between India and Pakistan in the northern state of Jammu and Kashmir. Further south, the plains of Punjab merge into the Great Thar Desert in western Rajasthan, the site of a vanished prehistoric forest. Gujarat in the far west of India is separated from Sindh (Pakistan) by the Rann of Kutch – in the wet season, this brackish marshland floods to become a vast inland sea, but in the dry season (November to April) the waters recede, leaving isolated islands perched on an expansive plain.

The Islands

Offshore from India are a series of island groups, politically part of India but geographically linked to the landmasses of Southeast Asia and islands of the Indian Ocean. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands sit far out in the Bay of Bengal, while the coral atolls of Lakshadweep (300km west of Kerala) are a northerly extension of the Maldives islands, with a land area of just 32 sq km.

WILDLIFE

With a staggering 89,451 recorded species of fauna, India has some of the richest biodiversity in the world. Understandably, wildlife watching has become one of the country's prime tourist activities and there are dozens of national parks offering opportunities to spot rare and unusual wildlife. If you're keen on getting close to nature, see the boxed text, p86, detailing where and when to view wildlife.

Animals

Indian wildlife is fascinating and diverse. The hills and plains of central and southern India hide a host of signature species – elephants, tigers, monkeys, leopards, antelopes and rhinos. Most of these species are severely endangered by human competition for land, water and other resources, particularly in the overpopulated plains. Elephants and buffaloes are widely pressed into service as beasts of burden, and dwindling numbers of wild elephants, as well as one-horned Indian rhinos, can be found in India's northern grasslands.

In east India, the Ganges and Yamuna Rivers merge and empty into the Bay of Bengal, creating the vast Sunderbans Delta – 80,000 sq km of swamps and watercourses that provide a home to tigers (estimated at 274 in 2004), aquatic reptiles, fish, wild boars, sea turtles and snakes. Chitals (spotted deer) have evolved the ability to secrete salt from their glands to cope with this salt-laden environment.

The deserts of Rajasthan and Gujarat provide a home for desert-adjusted species such as chinkaras (Indian gazelle), khurs (Asiatic wild asses), blackbucks (a large breed of antelope) and Indian wolves. The 1400-sq-km Sasan Gir Wildlife Sanctuary (p746) in Gujarat is the last refuge of the Asiatic lion, once found across India. Wilderness areas in the central plains provide a home to dholes (wild dogs), jackals, wolves, striped hyenas and numerous species of deer and antelope, including sambar, chitals and threatened mouse deer and muntjacs (barking deer).

India's primates range from the extremely rare hoolock gibbon and golden langur of the northeast to species which are so common as to be a pest – most notably the stocky and aggressive rhesus macaque and the elegant grey langur. In the south, the role of loitering around temples and tourist sites is filled by the bonnet macaque. Threatened species clinging on in the rainforests of the south include lion-tailed macaques, glossy black Nilgiri langurs and slender loris, an adept insect catcher with huge eyes for nocturnal hunting.

India has 238 species of snake, of which 50 are poisonous. There are various species of cobra, including the legendary king cobra, the world's largest venomous snake, which grows up to 5m. For obvious reasons, snake charmers stick to smaller species! Other poisonous snakes include the krait, Russell's viper and the saw-scaled viper. Nonvenomous snakes include the rat snake, the bright-green vine snake and the rock python. All live in the fear of the snake-killing mongoose, which has evolved ingenious techniques for hunting poisonous snakes, tricking the reptiles into striking repeatedly until they are exhausted, and then eating the head first to avoid being bitten.

In South India, the tropical forests of the Western Ghats contain one of the rarest bats on earth – the small Salim Ali's fruit bat – as well as flying lizards (technically gliders), sloth bears, leopards, jungle cats, hornbills, parrots and hundreds of other bird species – birders should check out the reserves listed on p90. Elephants and gaurs (Indian bison) abound, and the hills are the last remaining stronghold of the endangered Nilgiri tahr, or cloud goat.

The Himalaya harbours its own hardy range of creatures. Yaks (shaggy, horned oxen weighing up to a ton) and two-humped Bactrian camels are the main domesticated animals. Wild herbivores include the urials (wild sheep) and bharals (blue sheep), kiangs (Tibetan wild ass), Himalayan ibexes (a graceful mountain antelope), Himalayan tahrs (mountain goat) and rare Tibetan antelopes. Also found here are musk deers, hunted almost to extinction for the scent produced by glands in their abdomens. Recent attempts at captive breeding near Kedarnath (Uttarakhand) are providing some hope for this threatened species.

Predators of the Himalaya include black and brown bears, tigers, and the endangered snow leopard, an animal so elusive that many locals claim it can appear and disappear at will. Tiny populations cling on in Ladakh, Sikkim, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh and Arunachal Pradesh. The rare red panda inhabits the bamboo thickets of the eastern Himalaya, particularly in Sikkim and Bhutan.

Offshore, the Lakshadweep in the Indian Ocean and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal preserve classic coral atoll ecosystems. Bottlenose dolphins, coral reefs, sea turtles and tropical fish flourish beneath the water, while seabirds, reptiles, amphibians and butterflies thrive on land. The Andamans' small population of elephants has been known to swim up to 3km between islands. Another oddity found here is the coconut or robber crab, a 5kg tree-climbing monster that combs the beaches for broken coconuts.

ENDANGERED SPECIES

Despite its amazing biodiversity, Indian wildlife faces a growing challenge from the exploding human population. At last count, India had 569 threatened species, comprising 247 species of plants, 89 species of mammals, 82 species of birds, 26 species of reptiles, 68 species of amphibians, 35 species of fish and 22 species of invertebrates.

In 1972 the Wildlife Protection Act was introduced to stem the abuse of wildlife, followed by a string of similar pieces of legislation with bold ambitions but few teeth with which to enforce them. A rare success story has been Project Tiger, launched in 1973 to protect India's big mammals. The main threats to wildlife continue to be habitat loss due to human encroachment and poaching by criminals and even corrupt national park officials. The bandit Veerappan is believed to have killed 200 elephants and sold US\$22 million of illegally harvested sandalwood during his 20-year crime spree in Tamil Nadu.

India is the only country in the world with native lions and tigers, and the forests and mountains hide significant populations of leopards, snow

Cobras are believed to have power over the monsoon and the snakes are worshipped during the Naag Panchami festival each August; to the despair of animal-rights campaigners many snakes die from exhaustion and over-feeding.

Must-have books for bird-watchers include the *Pocket Guide to Birds of the Indian Subcontinent* by Richard Grimmett, Carol Inskipp and Tim Inskipp; *A Birdwatchers' Guide to India* by Krys Kazmierczak and Raj Singh; and *The Book of Indian Birds* by Salim Ali.

The Wildlife Protection Society of India (www.wpsi-india.org) is a prominent wildlife conservation organisation campaigning for animal welfare through education, lobbying and legal action against poachers.

leopards, panthers and jungle cats. However, all these species are facing extinction from habitat loss and poaching for the lucrative trade in skins and body parts for Chinese medicine. There are thought to be fewer than 3500 tigers, 1000 snow leopards and 300 Asiatic lions still out in the wild. Spurious health benefits are linked to every part of the tiger, from the teeth to the penis, and a whole tiger carcass can fetch upwards of US\$10,000. Government estimates suggest that India is losing 1% of its tigers every year to poachers.

Rhinos are also threatened by the medicine trade – rhino horn is highly valued as an aphrodisiac and as a material for making handles for daggers in the Persian Gulf. Elephants are regularly poached for ivory – we implore you not to support this trade by buying ivory souvenirs. Various species of deer are threatened by hunting for food and trophies, and the chiru, or Tibetan antelope, is threatened by furriers who weave its fur into wool for expensive shahtoosh shawls.

India's bear species are under threat and sloth bears are widely poached to be used as 'dancing bears' at tourist centres such as Agra and Jaipur – see the boxed text, p408. In the water, India's freshwater dolphins are in dire straits from pollution and human competition. The sea turtle population on the Orissa coast also faces problems – see the boxed text, p652.

Plants

India's total forest cover is estimated to be around 20% of the total geographic coverage, despite an optimistic target of 33% set by the Forest Survey of India. The country boasts 49,219 plant species, of which around 5200 are endemic.

Tropical forests occur in the Western Ghats of South India and in the Northeast States, as well as the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, but Indian rosewood, Malabar kino and teak have been virtually cleared from some part of the Western Ghats, and sandalwood is endangered across India due to illegal logging for the incense and wood-carving industries. A bigger threat to forestry is firewood harvesting, often carried out by landless peasants who squat on gazetted government land.

The foothills of the Himalaya preserve classic alpine species, including blue pine and deodar (Himalayan cedar) and deciduous forests of apple, chestnut, birch, plum and cinnamon. Kashmir is the only home of the chinar (Indian plane) while poplars are the main tree species in the high-altitude deserts of Zaskar, Ladakh, Lahaul and Spiti. Above the snowline hardy plants such as anemones, edelweiss and gentians grow, while orchids appear in mountain meadows and damp southern jungles. Distinctive trees of the lowlands include the hardwood sal and the Indian banyan (fig), with its dangling aerial roots.

India's hot deserts have their own unique species – the khejri tree and various strains of scrub acacia, adapted to the dry conditions. The hardy sea buckthorn bush is the main fruiting shrub in the deserts of the Himalaya. All these indigenous species face a challenge from introduced species such as the eucalyptus, a water-hungry species introduced by the British to dry out malarial swamps.

NATIONAL PARKS & WILDLIFE SANCTUARIES

India has 93 national parks and 486 wildlife sanctuaries, which constitute about 4.7% of Indian territory. There are also 14 biosphere reserves, overlapping many of the national parks and sanctuaries, providing safe migration channels for wildlife and allowing scientists to monitor biodiversity.

We strongly recommend visiting at least one national park/sanctuary on your travels – the experience of coming face to face with a wild elephant,

In the early 20th century there were believed to be at least 40,000 wild tigers in India. Current estimates suggest there are fewer than 3500.

Around 2000 plant species are described in Ayurveda (traditional Indian herbal medicine) and a further 91 plant species are used in *amchi* (Tibetan traditional medicine).

The Foundation for Revitalisation of Local Health Traditions has a search engine for medicinal plants at www.medicinalplants.in. Travellers with a serious interest should pick up CP Khare's *Encyclopedia Of Indian Medicinal Plants*.

rhino or tiger will stay with you for a lifetime. Wildlife reserves tend to be off the beaten track and infrastructure can be limited – book transport and accommodation in advance, and check opening times, permit-requirements and entry fees before you visit. Many parks close to conduct a census of wildlife in the off-season and monsoon rains can make wildlife-viewing tracks inaccessible.

Almost all parks offer jeep/van tours, but you can also search for wildlife on guided treks, boat trips and elephant safaris. For various safari possibilities, see p90.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

With more than one billion people, expanding industrialisation and urbanisation and chemical-intensive farming, India's environment is under threat. An estimated 65% of India's land is degraded in some way, and the government has fallen short on most of its targets for environmental protection. Many of the problems experienced today were a direct result of the Green Revolution of the 1960s when a quantum leap in agricultural output was achieved using chemical fertilisers and pesticides.

Despite numerous new environmental laws since the Bhopal disaster in 1984 (see p684), corruption continues to exacerbate environmental degradation – worst exemplified by the flagrant flouting of environmental rules by companies involved in hydroelectricity, mining, and uranium and oil exploration. Usually, the people most affected are low-caste rural farmers and Adivasis (tribal people) who have limited political representation and few resources to fight big business. Rather than decreeing from on high, some of the most successful environmental schemes have returned power to local communities through the creation of seed banks, micro-loan schemes and water-users' cooperatives. Organic and bio-dynamic farming – based on the use of natural compost and the timing of farming to lunar and other natural cycles – is also gaining ground (see www.biodynamics.in for details).

India's environmental problems are depressingly familiar. Between 11% and 27% of India's agricultural output is lost due to soil degradation from over-farming, rising soil salinity, loss of tree-cover and poor irrigation. Pollution from industry, human habitation and farming is further affecting the health and quality of life for India's rural poor. The human cost is heart-rending – crushing levels of debt and poverty drive thousands of Indian farmers to suicide every year. Lurking behind all these problems is a basic Malthusian truth: there are too many people for India to support at its current level of development.

While the Indian government could undoubtedly do more, some share of blame must also fall on Western farm subsidies that artificially reduce the cost of imported produce, undermining prices for Indian farmers. Western agribusiness may also like to take a cynical bow for promoting the use of nonpropagating, genetically modified (GM) seed stocks.

As anywhere, tourists tread a fine line between providing an incentive for change and making the problem worse. Many of the environmental problems in Goa (see the boxed text, p878) are a direct result of years of irresponsible development for tourism. Always consider your environmental impact while travelling in India, including while trekking (see p98) and diving (see p94).

Air Pollution

Air pollution from industry and vehicle emissions is an ongoing concern. Indian diesel reportedly contains around 50 to 200 times more sulphur than European diesel and the ageing engines of Indian vehicles would fail most emissions tests in Europe or America. However, there have been some positive

See our Indian Safari itinerary (p35) for recommended national parks or pick up a copy of *Indian National Parks & Sanctuaries* by Anand Khati.

Get the inside track on Indian environmental issues at Down to Earth (www.downtoearth.org.in), an online magazine that delves into stories overlooked by the mainstream media.

Air pollution in many Indian cities has been measured at more than double the maximum safe level recommended by the World Health Organization.

MAJOR NATIONAL PARKS & WILDLIFE SANCTUARIES

Park/Sanctuary	Page	Location	Features	Best time to visit
Bandhavgarh National Park	p711	Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh	plains: tigers, leopards, deer, jackals, nilgais & boars	Nov-Apr
Bhitarkanika Wildlife Sanctuary	p658	northeast Orissa	estuarine mangrove forests: saltwater crocodiles, water monitors, pythons, wild boars & chitals	Dec-Feb
Bondla Wildlife Sanctuary	p877	eastern Goa	botanical garden, fenced deer park & zoo: gaurs & sambars	Nov-Mar
Calimere (Kodikkarai) Wildlife & Bird Sanctuary	p1069	near Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu	coastal wetland: blackbucks, dolphins, crocodiles, deer teals, shovellers, curlews, gulls, terns, plovers, sandpipers, shanks, herons, koels, mynas & barbets	Nov-Jan
Chandaka Wildlife Sanctuary	p642	eastern Orissa	upland forest: elephants, leopards, chitals, sambars, crocodiles	Oct-May
Corbett Tiger Reserve	p472	near Ramnagar, Uttarakhand	forest & river plains: tigers, leopards, elephants, sloth bears, crocodiles, deer & 600 bird species	Mar-Jun
Debrigarh Wildlife Sanctuary	p656	near Sambalpur, Orissa	dry deciduous forest: tigers, leopards, deer, boars, sloth bears & bird life	Oct-May
Dubare Forest Reserve	p907	near Madikeri, Karnataka	interactive camp for retired working elephants	Sep-May
Govind Wildlife Sanctuary & National Park	p468	Saur-Sankri, Uttarakhand	mountain scenery: black & brown bears, snow leopards, deer & bird life	Apr-Jun & Sep-Nov
Great Himalayan National Park	p299	southeast of Kullu Valley, Himachal Pradesh	Himalayan mountains & community involvement: bears, leopards & snow leopards, deer, antelopes & more than 180 species of bird	Apr-Jun & Sep-mid-Nov
Indira Gandhi (Annamalai) Wildlife Sanctuary	p1093	near Pollachi, Tamil Nadu	forested mountains: elephants, gaurs, tigers, panthers, boars, bears, deer, porcupines & civet cats	year-round, except in periods of drought
Jaldhpara Wildlife Sanctuary	p527	northern West Bengal	forest & grasslands: Indian rhinos, deer & elephants	mid-Oct-May
Kanha National Park	p709	Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh	sal forest & lightly wooded grasslands: deer, tigers, chitals, gaurs, blackbucks, leopards & hyenas	Mar-Jun
Kaziranga National Park	p602	Assam, Northeast States	dense grasslands & swamp: rhinos, deer, buffaloes, elephants, tigers & bird life	Feb-Mar
Keoladeo Ghana National Park	p182	Bharatpur, Rajasthan	plains: bird life (incl eagles, cranes, flamingos, herons, storks & geese), pythons, jackals & deer	Oct-late Feb
Little Rann Sanctuary	p765	northwest Gujarat	desert region: khurs, wolves & caracals	Oct-Jun
Mahatma Gandhi Marine National Park	p1117	Andaman & Nicobar Islands	mangrove, rainforest & coral	Nov-Apr
Manas National Park	p600	near Guwahati, Assam	lowland forest & rivers: tigers, deer, rare birds, langurs, hispid hares & pygmy hogs	Feb-Mar
Marine National Park	p755	30km from Jamnagar, Gujarat	coral reefs & mangroves: porpoises, dolphins & turtles	Dec-Mar

Park/Sanctuary	Page	Location	Features	Best time to visit
Molem & Bhagwan Mahavir Wildlife Sanctuary	p878	eastern Goa	tree-top-viewing tower: gaurs, sambars, leopards, spotted deer & snakes	Nov-Mar
Nal Sarovar Bird Sanctuary	p727	near Ahmedabad, Gujarat	116-sq-km lake: indigenous & migratory birds, incl flamingos, pelicans & geese	Nov-Feb
Navagaon National Park	p816	east of Nagpur, Maharashtra	hilly forest & bamboo groves around man-made lake: leopards, sloth bears, deer & migratory birds	Oct-Jun
Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve (Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary & Bandipur, Nagarhole & Mudumalai Wayanad p1019 National Parks)	Mudumalai p1104, Bandipur p903, Nagarhole p904, Wayanad p1019	Tamil Nadu, Karnataka & Kerala	forest: elephants, tigers, deer, gaurs, sambars, muntjacs, chevrotains, chitals & bonnet macaques	Mar-May (some areas year-round)
Panna National Park	p681	near Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh	dry deciduous forest: tigers, leopards, nilgais, chitals, langur monkeys & sambars	Dec-Mar
Pench Tiger Reserve	p708	Madhya Pradesh	teak forest & grasslands: deer, hyenas, leopards & tigers	Feb-Apr
Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary	p988	Kumily, Kerala	highland deciduous forest & grasslands: langurs, elephants, gaurs, otters, wild dogs, tortoises, kingfishers & fishing owls	Nov-Apr
Pin Valley National Park	p344	Dhankar, Himachal Pradesh	pristine mountain scenery: snow leopards, ibexes, black bears & deer	Jul-Oct
Rajaji National Park	p459	near Haridwar, Uttarakhand	forested hills: elephants, tigers, leopards, deer & sloth bears	Mar-Jun
Ranganathittu Bird Sanctuary	p902	near Mysore, Karnataka	river & island: storks, ibises, egrets, spoonbills & cormorants	Jun-Nov
Ranthambore National Park	p197	south of Jaipur, Rajasthan	around crocodile-filled lake: bird life (incl painted storks), leopards, nilgais, chinkaras, crocodiles & tigers	Oct-Apr
Sanjay Gandhi National Park	p798	near Mumbai, Maharashtra	scenic area: water birds, butterflies & leopards	Aug-Apr
Sariska Reserve & National Park	p184	Sariska, Rajasthan	wooded valley: tigers have vanished, but still has sambars, nilgais, boars & bird life	Nov-Mar
Sasan Gir Wildlife Sanctuary	p746	near Junagadh, Gujarat	desert oasis: Asiatic lions, leopards, crocodiles & nilgais	Dec-Apr
Similipal National Park	p656	Balasore, Orissa	forest & waterfalls: tigers, leopards, elephants, crocodiles & bird life	Nov-Jun
Sunderbans Tiger Reserve	p517	southern West Bengal	mangrove forests: tigers, deer, monkeys & bird life	Oct-Mar
Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve	p816	south of Nagpur, Maharashtra	deciduous forest, grasslands & wetlands: tigers, chitals, nilgais & gaurs	Feb-May
Valley of Flowers National Park	p470	near Joshimath, Uttarakhand	3500m above sea level: musk deer, Himalayan bears & butterflies & around 300 species of wild flower	mid-Jul–mid-Aug & mid-Sep–end Oct
Vedantangal Bird Sanctuary	p1050	near Chengalpattu, Tamil Nadu	lake & island: cormorants, egrets, herons, storks, ibises, spoonbills, grebes & pelicans	Nov-Jan
Velavadar National Park	p737	near Bhavnagar, Gujarat	grasslands in delta region: blackbucks, nilgais & bird life	Oct-Jun

Noise pollution in major cities has been measured at over 90 decibels – more than one and a half times the recognised ‘safe’ limit. Bring earplugs!

developments – Delhi and Mumbai (Bombay) have both switched over much of their public transport to Compressed Natural Gas (CNG), while Agra has pioneered the use of nonpolluting electric vehicles and closed the area around the Taj Mahal to motorised traffic. Several Indian cities have banned polluting industry completely from urban areas, though often with limited compensation for affected workers.

Despite laws aimed at reducing toxic emissions, industry is still a major polluter. One of the worst industrial disasters in history occurred at Bhopal in 1984 (see the boxed text, p684). The massive growth of budget air travel is pumping even more greenhouse gases into the atmosphere – modern ideas such as carbon-balancing hold little truck in a nation embracing the freedom of the skies for the first time.

Climate Change

Changing climate patterns – linked to global carbon-emissions – have been creating dangerous extremes of weather in India. While India is a major polluter, in carbon emissions per capita it stands far behind America, Australia and Europe in the global league of polluting nations.

Elevated monsoon rainfall has caused widespread flooding and destruction, including the devastating Gujarat and Maharashtra floods in 2005. In the mountain deserts of Ladakh, increased rainfall is changing traditional farming patterns and threatening traditional mud-brick architecture. Conversely, other areas are experiencing reduced rainfall, causing drought and riots over access to water supplies. Offshore, several islands in the Lakshadweep group have been inundated by rising sea levels.

Deforestation

Since Independence, some 5.3 million hectares of Indian forests have been cleared for logging and farming or damaged by urban expansion, mining, industrialisation and river dams. The number of mangrove forests has halved since the early 1990s, reducing the nursery grounds for the fish that stock the Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal.

India’s first Five Year Plan in 1951 recognised the importance of forests for soil conservation, and various policies have been introduced to increase forest cover. Almost all have been flouted by officials, criminals and by ordinary people clearing forests for firewood and allowing grazing in forest areas. Try to minimise the use of wood-burning stoves while you travel (this is less of an issue in areas with fast growing pine species in the hills).

Denotification, a process allowing states to relax the ban on the commercial exploitation of protected areas, is another factor. Officially, the states are supposed to earmark an equivalent area for afforestation, but enforcement is lax and the land set aside may be unsuitable for forestry. On another front, invasive eucalyptus and other foreign plant species are swamping indigenous flora. Numerous small charities are working with rural communities to encourage tree planting and many religious leaders have joined the movement, including the Dalai Lama.

Plastic Waste

Ah, plastic! What a wonderful invention. Only a small proportion of plastic products can be reused or recycled and plastic rubbish persists in the environment for 1000 years before crumbling into a polluting chemical dust. Across India, plastic bags and bottles litter streets, streams and beaches; animals choke on the waste and the plastic clogs watercourses, increasing the risk of malaria and water-borne diseases. Campaigners estimate that about 75% of plastics used are discarded within a week and only 15% are recycled.

The popular guru Jaggi Vasudev has launched an ambitious project to plant 114 million new saplings in Tamil Nadu by 2016, increasing forest cover in the region by 10%.

A DAM TOO FAR?

The most controversial of India's many hydroelectric schemes is the Narmada Valley Development, a US\$6 billion scheme to build 30 hydroelectric dams along the Narmada River in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Gujarat. Despite bringing benefits in terms of irrigation to thousands of villages and reducing desert encroachment into rural areas, the project will flood the tribal homelands of some 40,000 Adivasi (tribal) villagers, many of whom worship the waters as a deity. The government has promised to provide alternative accommodation, but thus far only barren land unsuitable for farming has been offered as compensation. The World Bank refused to fund the ongoing development, but Britain's Barclays Bank stepped in with loans and the Indian government has overruled every legal challenge to the development, despite some high-profile names joining the anti-Narmada Dam movement – including Booker Prize winner Arundhati Roy. For the latest developments, see the Friends of River Narmada website – www.narmada.org.

Travellers may feel that efforts to avoid plastic are futile when locals toss rubbish from every bus window, but Western companies are the driving force behind disposable packaging and the switch from glass to plastic bottles by the Indian soft-drinks industry. A number of Indian states, particularly in the hills, have banned plastic bags to try and stem the tide of plastic waste.

You can do your bit to help by purifying your own water – see p1187 – or carrying a canteen and obtaining refills of purified water from local environmental organisations – towns leading the way include Leh (p370) and McLeod Ganj (p324). Set a good example by refusing plastic bags (and explaining why!) and insisting on soft drinks in recyclable glass bottles and tea in terracotta cups at train stations.

Water Resources

Arguably the biggest threat to public health in India is inadequate access to clean drinking water and proper sanitation. With the population set to double by 2050, agricultural, industrial and domestic water usage are all expected to spiral, despite government policies designed to control water use.

Ground water is being removed at an uncontrolled rate, causing an alarming drop in water-table levels and supplies of drinking water. Simultaneously, contamination from industry is rendering ground water unsafe to drink across the country. The soft drink manufacturer Coca-Cola faced accusations that it was selling drinks containing unsafe levels of pesticides, as well as allegations over water shortages near its plants, and of farmland being polluted with industrial chemicals. Although cleared of claims about the safety of its drinks, Coca-Cola has yet to be held to account on any of the other allegations.

Rivers are also affected by runoff, industrial pollution and sewage contamination – the Sabarmati, Yamuna and Ganges are among the most polluted rivers on earth. If you fancy a ceremonial dip in the Ganges, do it in Rishikesh, before the water has flowed through a dozen crowded cities. In recent years, drought has devastated parts of the subcontinent (particularly Rajasthan and Gujarat) and has acted as a driving force for rural-to-urban migration.

Water distribution is another volatile issue. Since 1947 an estimated 35 million people in India have been displaced by major dams, mostly built for hydroelectricity projects to provide energy for this increasingly power-hungry nation. While hydroelectricity is one of the greener power sources, valleys across India are being sacrificed to create new power plants and displaced people rarely receive adequate compensation – see the boxed texts, above and p295, for more on this issue.

Every argument has two sides: the pro-Narmada Dam lobby has launched its own campaign to publicise the virtues of the project – see www.supportnarmadadam.org and www.sardarsarovardam.org.

Activities

India covers every terrain imaginable, from rainforest and deserts to towering mountains. With all this to play with, the opportunities for adventurous activities are endless. Choose from trekking, paragliding, mountaineering, jungle safaris, scuba diving, elephant rides, river boats, yoga courses, meditation... the list goes on and on. It would take a whole book to cover all the options, but some of the most popular activities are covered in the following sections.

Choosing an Operator

Regardless of what you decide to do, you need to exercise a little caution when choosing an operator. We receive regular reports of dodgy operators taking poorly equipped tourists into dangerous situations. Remember that travel agents are only middlemen and the final decisions about safety and equipment come down to the people actually operating the trip. Check out all tour operators, trekking companies and activity providers carefully. Make sure that you know in advance what you are getting, then make sure you get what you paid for.

Where possible, stick to companies that provide activities themselves, using their own guides and teaching staff. If you go through an agency, look for operators who are accredited by the Travel Agents Association of India, the Indian Association of Tour Operators or the Adventure Tour Operators Association of India. Note that dodgy operators often change their names to sound like the trusted companies – consult official tourist offices for lists of government-approved operators and seek first-hand recommendations from fellow travellers.

Always check safety equipment before you set out and make sure you know what is included in the quoted price. If anything is substandard, let the operator know. If it refuses to make the necessary changes, go with another company. For any activity, make sure that you have adequate insurance – many travel insurance policies have exclusions for risky activities, including such commonplace holiday activities as skiing, diving and trekking (see p1139).

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

All sorts of activities are possible in the Indian outdoors, from trekking and mountaineering to jungle safaris and white-water rafting, along with more relaxing activities such as elephant rides, boat tours and pony treks.

MEETING THE WILDLIFE

India has some of the most amazing flora and fauna on earth – from lumbering elephants and growling tigers to desert orchids and trailing lianas. Here are some excellent ways to get up close and personal with Indian wildlife.

Bird-Watching

India has some of the world's major bird breeding and feeding grounds. The following are prime bird-watching sites:

Andaman & Nicobar Islands Spot rare drongos and golden orioles on Havelock Island (p1118).

Gujarat Top spots for twitchers include Khijadiya Bird Sanctuary (p755), the Little Rann Sanctuary (p765) and Nal Sarovar Bird Sanctuary (p727), best from November to April.

Himachal Pradesh Catch glimpses of 180 bird species at Great Himalayan National Park (p299).

Karnataka See storks, egrets, ibises and spoonbills; at Karanj Lake Nature Park (p898), Ranganathittu Bird Sanctuary (p902), Bandipur National Park (p903) and Nagarhole National Park (p904).

India Outdoors (www.indiaoutdoors.com) provides information on an incredible range of outdoor activities, from abseiling and rock-climbing to scuba diving and water skiing.

Kerala Catch Indian bird species from May to July and migratory birds from October to February in Kumarakom Bird Sanctuary (p987) and Thattekkad Bird Sanctuary (p1002).

Madhya Pradesh & Chhattisgarh Search for 250 species of birds at Pench Tiger Reserve (p708), Kanha National Park (p709), and Bandhavgarh National Park (p711).

Northeast States Try birding tours by raft at Potalali Eco-Camp (p602) near Tezpur in Assam.

Orissa Domestic species and migrating waterbirds – including flamingos – are a feature from November to January at Simlipal National Park (p656), Bhitarkanika Wildlife Sanctuary (p658) and Chilika Lake (p650).

Punjab & Haryana There are hundreds of bird species, including rare sarus cranes, at Sultanpur Bird Sanctuary (p278).

Rajasthan Birders can tick off numerous species at Keoladeo Ghana National Park (p182), Ranthambore National Park (p197) and Khichan (p243) for demoiselle cranes (September to March).

Sikkim Try the birding tours with Sikkim Tours & Travels (p574) in Gangtok and Khecheopalri Trekkers Hut (p585) at Khecheopalri Lake.

Tamil Nadu There's plenty to point binoculars at in Mudumalai National Park (p1104), Calimere (Kodikkarai) Wildlife & Bird Sanctuary (p1069) and Vedantangal Bird Sanctuary (p1050). Come here from December to January for multitudinous waterfowl.

West Bengal Bird-watching tours are offered by Kalimpong's Gurudongma Tours & Travels (p546).

Camel Treks

Camel safaris can be arranged in desert areas across India, from one-hour joy rides to bum-numbing multiday safaris. This can be a fabulous way to experience the desert, and longer trips set up camp each night beneath the stars. Rajasthan is the best place to get the hump, but camel treks are also possible in the remote Nubra Valley in Ladakh using Bactrian (two-humped) camels left behind from the Silk Road era. Good places to arrange safaris include the Nubra Valley (p385) in Ladakh and, in Rajasthan, Bikaner (p253), Jaisalmer (p248), Khuri (p252), Osian (p242), Pushkar (p193) and Shekhawati (p185).

Elephant Safaris

Elephant rides provide an amazing way to get close to Indian wildlife. Many of India's national parks have their own working elephants, which can be hired for safaris into areas that are inaccessible to jeeps and walkers. You might even find yourself just metres from a snarling Bengal tiger. As well as being a childhood dream for most travellers, elephant rides are much less disturbing to wildlife than noisy jeeps. To find out the best times to visit parks, see regional chapters and the boxed text, p84.

Bihar & Jharkhand Elephant safaris tour Jharkhand's Betla (Palamau) National Park (p567).

Goa Elephant rides go through spice plantations near Ponda (p877).

Karnataka Elephant safaris go to India's largest elephant reserve at Bandipur National Park (p903) near Mysore. You can also interact with retired working elephants at Dubare Forest Reserve (p907) near Madikeri.

Kerala There are elephant rides at Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary (p988) and Neyyar Dam Sanctuary (p968) near Trivandrum.

Madhya Pradesh & Chhattisgarh Tiger-spotting elephant safaris go through Panna National Park (p681), Pench Tiger Reserve (p708), Kanha National Park (p709) and Bandhavgarh National Park (p711).

Northeast States One-horned rhinos can be spotted on elephant safaris at Kaziranga National Park (p603) and other wildlife at Manas National Park (p600).

Rajasthan Elephant rides go to the hilltop fort in Amber (p178).

Uttarakhand (Uttaranchal) Tigers are spotted on elephant rides in Corbett Tiger Reserve (p472) and Rajaji National Park (p459).

West Bengal Try the jumbo rides around Jaldhapa Wildlife Sanctuary (p527) to spot one-horned Indian rhinos.

The website www.birding.in is a one-stop-shop for bird-watchers in India, with listings of bird-watching sites and all the species you are likely to see.

You don't have to stop at short rides through national parks – Mark Shand describes travelling across the country by elephant in *Travels On My Elephant*, a compelling travelogue of a jumbo-sized adventure.

Horse Riding

Horse riding is possible in most of the hill stations in North and South India, from gentle ambles through town to more serious trails through the forest. As well as these leisure rides, horses are used as transport on many *yatra* (pilgrimage) trekking routes – see the regional chapters for details. Good places to saddle up include the following:

Himachal Pradesh Shimla (p285), Manali (p310), Solang Nullah (p317), Dalhousie (p332) and Khajjiar (p334).

Jammu & Kashmir Gulmarg (p360) and Pahalgam (p361).

Maharashtra Matheran (p821).

Northeast States Dibrugarh (Assam; p606).

Rajasthan Udapiur (p222) and Kumbalgarh (p228).

Tamil Nadu Kodaikanal (p1091) and Ooty (Udhagamandalam; p1100).

Uttarakhand Nainital (p475) and Mussoorie (p451).

West Bengal Darjeeling (p538) and Mirik (p528).

Jeep Safaris

As well as elephant rides, there are numerous jeep safaris visiting national parks, tribal villages and remote temples and monasteries. You can normally arrange a custom itinerary, either with travel agents or directly with local jeep drivers – see the regional chapters for information. Here are some popular options:

Bihar & Jharkhand Jeep tours go to spot wild beasts in Betla (Palamau) National Park (p567).

Gujarat Safari jeep travel to spot Asiatic lions in Sasan Gir Wildlife Sanctuary (p747) and wild ass and flamingos at Little Rann Sanctuary (p765).

Jammu & Kashmir Jeeps tour to mountain passes and monasteries around Ladakh and Zaskar (see p378 and p373).

Himachal Pradesh Jeep trips go to monasteries, isolated villages and mountain viewpoints from Kaza (p342) in Lahaul and Spiti.

Karnataka Jungle Lodges & Resorts (p881) offers safaris to Nagarhole National Park, Bandipur National Park and other reserves.

Kerala Wildlife-spotting jeep tours drive through the forests of Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary (p1019).

Madhya Pradesh & Chhattisgarh Jeep safaris go tiger-spotting at Madhya Pradesh's national parks (see p710).

Northeast States Jeeps travel to tribal villages in the Northeast States from Guwahati (p598), or there are wildlife-spotting tours in Kaziranga National Park (p603) and Manas National Park (p601).

Orissa Animal-focused jeep safaris are offered in Similipal National Park (p656) and Badrama and Debrigarh Wildlife Sanctuaries (p656).

Rajasthan Spot wildlife by jeep in Ranthambore National Park (p198) and Sariska Reserve & National Park (p184) and the wildlife sanctuary at Kumbhalgarh (p228).

Sikkim Agencies in Gangtok (p574) arrange jeep tours to Buddhist villages and mountain valleys in north Sikkim.

Tamil Nadu Jeep tours are just one of several ways to spot the wildlife in Mudumalai National Park (p1104).

Uttarakhand Jeeps are used to spot tigers and deer in Rajaji National Park (p459) and Corbett National Park (p472).

ADVENTURE ACTIVITIES

India is paradise for adrenaline junkies and fans of the great outdoors. Trekking is possible throughout the country, from the southern jungles to the wind-scoured valleys of the Himalaya. Among other adrenaline-charged activities, thrill seekers can scuba dive, paraglide, raft, climb, kayak and zorb. See the following sections for some suggestions. Remember to take out adequate insurance cover for any adventure activities before you travel.

The Wildlife Protection Society of India (www.wpsi-india.org/tiger) is campaigning to save tigers in the wild – see the website of listings of tiger reserves.

Boat Tours

Boat tours are possible all over India – take your pick from slow river rides, languorous lake cruises or motorboat tours of offshore islands. Here are some options:

Andaman & Nicobar Islands Boat and ferry trips sail to outlying islands from Port Blair (p1116) and Mayabunder (p1121).

Goa Dolphin-spotting boat trips sail from Panaji (Panjim; p849), Fort Aguada and Candolim (p853), Calangute (p857), Arambol (p867), Colva (p872) and Palolem (p876).

Gujarat Bird-spotting boat tours are offered at Nal Sarovar Bird Sanctuary (p727) and coral reef cruises go to Jamnagar's Marine National Park (p755).

Jammu & Kashmir In Srinagar, hire gondola-like *shikaras* for tours around serene Dal Lake (p353).

Kerala Days of languorous drifting on the backwaters around Alleppey (p982), or canoe tours from Kollam (Quilon; p978) and bamboo-raft tours in Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary (p988).

Kolkata (Calcutta) Cruises leave to watch the immersion of the idols during the Durga Puja festival (October) in Kolkata (p503).

Madhya Pradesh & Chhattisgarh Cruises go to the Marble Rocks near Jabalpur (p708), there are crocodile-spotting trips at Raneh Falls (p681) and jollyboating on Bhopal's Upper Lake (p685).

Mumbai (Bombay) Boats cruise around Mumbai Harbour and Elephanta Island from Mumbai (p781).

Northeast States Steamboat cruises along the Brahmaputra River in Assam with Jungle Travels India (p598) and wildlife-spotting boat safaris at Manas National Park (p600).

Orissa Boat tours are available to look for crocodiles, freshwater dolphins and birds at Bhitarkanika Wildlife Sanctuary (p658) and Chilika Lake (p650).

Rajasthan Boat tours to the famous blue lake palace at Udaipur (p219).

Uttarakhand & Uttar Pradesh Dawn tours of the ghats at Varanasi (p427 and p431), rowboat tours on Nainital's Naini Lake (p474) and sacred river cruises in Allahabad (p420) and Mathura (p411).

West Bengal Boat tours to track tigers in the huge Sunderbans Tiger Reserve (p519).

Cultural Tours

Tours to tribal areas are permitted in several parts of India, providing a fascinating window onto the traditional way of life of India's Adivasis (tribal people). Some tours are quite exploitative but better tours employ tribal guides and try to minimise the effect of tourism on tribal people. Reputable tribal tours include the following:

Andhra Pradesh Tribal tours go to Adivasi communities around Visakhapatnam (p954).

Gujarat Stay with tribal Halepotra people in Gujarat's Shaam-e-Sarhad Rural Resort (p763) near Bhuj.

Jammu & Kashmir Travel agents in Leh (p373) can arrange tours and treks to tribal areas – also see the boxed text, p388.

Kerala Tours to Mannakudy tribal areas of Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary (p988).

Madhya Pradesh & Chhattisgarh There are tribal tours with the Chhattisgarh Tourism Board in Raipur (p712) and Jagdalpur (p713), and the Tola Trekking Club (p693) in Pachmarhi.

Northeast States You can arrange tours of fascinating tribal districts the northeast states with travel agencies in Guwahati (p598), Dibrugarh (p606), Kohima (p617), Aizawl (p623) and Bomidila (p621).

Orissa Tours to Orissa's tribal groups are available – see the boxed text, p654, and the Orissa Tourism entry, p627.

Rajasthan There are tours of Bishnoi tribal villages from Jodhpur (p237).

Uttarakhand Visits to Gujjar buffalo herders in Rajaji National Park through Mohan's Adventure Tours (p455) in Haridwar.

Cycling & Motorcycling

There are some sensational organised bicycle or motorcycle tours, or you can rent a bike or motorcycle and set your own itinerary. For recommended motorcycle tours, see p1176; towns offering motorcycle hire are mentioned

Adivasi (tribal people) make up more than 8% of the Indian population – more than 84 million people – and 532 scheduled tribes are recognised in the Indian constitution.

throughout the regional chapters. Top spots for pedal cycling include the following:

Andhra Pradesh You can rent bikes at Warangal (p952).

Goa Try the mountain-bike tours around Palolem (p876). Bike rental in Panaji (p849) and Colva (p872).

Gujarat Rental bikes are available in Diu (p743).

Himachal Pradesh You can rent mountain bikes in Manali (p310).

Jammu & Kashmir There are great mountain-bike tours around Ladakh (p378).

Karnataka Bikes are for hire in Hampi (p925) and Bidar (p934).

Kerala There are rental bikes in Munnar (p1001) and free use of bikes at budget guesthouses in and around Allepey (p980).

Madhya Pradesh & Chhattisgarh Rental bikes are available in Khajuraho (p681), Orchha (p673), Sanchi (p692), Pachmarhi (p695) and Mandu (p705).

Maharashtra Bikes are for rent in Aurangabad (p808), Murud (p818), Lonavla (p824) and Mahabaleshwar (p834).

Orissa Bike hire from guesthouses at Konark (p650) and shops in Puri (p648).

Punjab & Haryana Rental bikes are available in Chandigarh (p267).

Rajasthan Bikes are for rent in Pushkar (p197), Ranthambore National Park (p197), Bundi (p203) Udaipur (p228), Jaisalmer (p251) and Bikaner (p256).

Tamil Nadu Rent mountain bikes in Kodaikanal (p1092) and push-bikes in Pudukcherry (p1064).

Uttar Pradesh & Uttarakhand There is bike rental in Agra (p407) and cycle tours in Kausani (p482).

Dive India, the Andaman Islands' leading dive company, has a comprehensive list of dive sites on its website (www.diveindia.com/sites.html).

Diving, Snorkelling & Water Sports

The Andaman Islands are India's leading destination for scuba diving, with world-class dive sites on well-preserved coral reefs, particularly around Havelock Island. Visibility is clearest from December to March or April. On the far side of India, the Lakshadweep Islands offer more coral-atoll diving from mid-October to mid-May. Dive certification courses and recreational dives are also possible in Goa.

Growing numbers of surfers are discovering the breaks off the island of Little Andaman (p1110), with the best waves between mid-March and mid-May.

Andaman & Nicobar Islands India's best diving is around Havelock Island (p1110).

Goa There are numerous beach resorts offering diving courses, wind-surfing and other holiday watersports in Goa (p838).

Kerala There is world-class diving on the little-visited Lakshadweep Islands (p1024).

RESPONSIBLE DIVING

To help preserve the ecology and beauty of reefs, observe the following guidelines when diving:

- Never use anchors on the reef and take care not to ground boats on coral.
- Avoid touching or disturbing living marine organisms – they can be damaged by even the gentlest contact. If you must hold on to the reef, only touch exposed rock or dead coral.
- Be conscious of your fins. Even without contact, the surge from fin strokes near the reef can damage delicate organisms. Kicking up clouds of sand can smother organisms.
- Practise and maintain proper buoyancy control. Major damage can be done by divers descending too fast and colliding with the reef.
- Don't collect or buy corals or shells.
- Ensure that you take home all your rubbish and any litter you may find. Plastics in particular are a serious threat to marine life.
- Do not feed fish.
- Choose a dive company with appropriate environmental policies and practices.

Hang Gliding & Paragliding

Goa, Himachal Pradesh and Maharashtra are the flying capitals of India. You can bring your own gear or arrange courses and tandem flights. Safety standards have been variable in the past – the government of Himachal Pradesh shut down all paragliding operators from 2004–05 after a fatality – but things seem to be improving. It's still worth contacting the state tourism departments for a safety update before stepping into the blue beyond. Himachal Tourism conducts the Himalayan Hang Gliding Rally in Billing (p331) every May.

The best seasons for flying are October to June in Goa and Maharashtra and March to June, and September to December in Himachal Pradesh.

Goa There are paragliding flights at Arambol (p867) and Anjuna (p861).

Himachal Pradesh Leisure paragliding happens at Solang Nullah (p317) near Manali and Billing (p331) near Dharamshala.

Maharashtra You can do courses and tandem paragliding flights at Lonavla (p823).

Kayaking & River Rafting

Across India, mighty rivers charge down from the hills and mountains, offering some fantastic opportunities for white-water rafting. Things aren't quite as organised as in nearby Nepal, but rivers in West Bengal, Sikkim, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Ladakh provide the best rafting in North India, and Goa and Karnataka offer rafting trips down south. Rafting seasons for the different states are as follows:

- Goa and Karnataka – October to January
- Himachal Pradesh – April to July, September to October (April to September near Shimla)
- Jammu and Kashmir – April to September (July to September in Ladakh)
- Maharashtra – July to September
- Uttarakhand – September to June
- West Bengal – September to November, March to June

The level of rapids varies from modest Grade II to raging Grade IV and most rafting operators offer multiday rafting safaris as well short thrill rides. The five-day trip along the gorge of the Zaskar River in Ladakh is one of Asia's finest white-water runs. Catch these rivers while you can – India's rivers are being dammed for hydroelectric power at an alarming rate.

Goa You can arrange rafting tours on the Kali River in Calangute with Day Tripper (p857).

Himachal Pradesh White-water rafting trips on the Beas and Sutlej Rivers are organised through tour operators in Shimla (p285), Tattapani (p291), Kullu (p303), Bhuntar (p299) and Manali (p310).

Jammu & Kashmir In Leh, Splash Adventures (p372) arranges kayaking and rafting in Ladakh, including on the Zaskar River. You can arrange rafting trips on Kashmir's Lidder River through Highland Excursions (p362) in Pahalgam.

Karnataka Kayaking and rafting trips can be organised with Bangalore's Getoff ur ass (p887). White-water trips up to Grade IV are possible in Dubare Forest Reserve (p907).

Kerala Canoe trips on the backwaters of Kerala at Greenpalm Homes (p985) near Alleppey.

Mumbai Rafting in Maharashtra is organised through Mumbai-based Outbound Adventure (p779) which offers rafting trips in Maharashtra from June to September.

Uttarakhand White-water rafting and kayaking trips are possible on the Ganges and Alaknanda Rivers in Rishikesh (p463), Haridwar (p455) and Joshimath (p469).

West Bengal Arrange rafting on the Rangeet and Teesta Rivers through agents in Darjeeling (p537) and Teesta Bazaar (p548).

Rafting is possible on at least 12 different Indian rivers, from the jagged mountains of Ladakh to the steamy hinterland of Karnataka. See www.indiarafting.com for popular options.

Mark Shand's *River Dog* tells the diverting tale of a river journey along the Brahmaputra in Assam, in the company of a faithful hound.

Rock-Climbing & Mountaineering

For warm-weather climbers, there are some fabulous sandstone and granite climbing areas in Karnataka at Badami, Ramanagram, Savandurga and Hampi,

India's premier bouldering region (see the boxed text, p924). The Kullu Valley near Manali (p310) is another popular destination for sport climbers.

Climbing is on a mixture of bolts and traditional protection. Organised climbs can be arranged but serious climbers should bring gear from home – pack plenty of nuts, hexacentrics and cams, plus spare rolls of climbing tape for jamming cracks in sharp granite.

The main areas for proper mountaineering are Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Uttarakhand and Sikkim – see the boxed text below for more information. Other opportunities for climbing and mountaineering include the following:

Himachal Pradesh Mountaineering and rock-climbing trips can be organised in northern Himachal Pradesh from Manali (p310), Vashisht (p315) and McLeod Ganj (p324).

Jammu & Kashmir You can arrange mountaineering and trekking peak expeditions in Leh (p373) and Padum (p390). See also p367 and p379.

Sikkim Mountaineering and trekking expeditions can be organised in Khangchendzonga National Park in Gangtok (p574). See also the Goecha La Trek (p587).

Uttarakhand Arrange climbing and mountaineering expeditions – such as Nanda Devi Sanctuary (May to October) – in Uttarkashi (p467), Joshimath (p469), Nainital (p475), and Rishikesh (p463).

MOUNTAINEERING & CLIMBING COURSES

There are numerous private and government-run climbing organisations that offer mountaineering training courses, usually on set dates during the warmer summer months. Most include simple accommodation, meals and most of the equipment you need (bring your own warm-weather clothing). Reputable organisations include the following:

Directorate of Mountaineering & Allied Sports (<http://dmas.gov.in>; Manali) Mountaineering courses around Himachal Pradesh from May to October (p308).

Himalayan Mountaineering Institute (www.exploredarjeeling.com/hmidarj.htm; Darjeeling) Climbing and mountaineering courses from March to December (p538).

Jawahar Institute of Mountaineering & Winter Sports (Kashmir) Summer mountaineering courses at all levels (p362).

Nainital Mountaineering Club (near Nainital) Outdoor rock-climbing courses close to Nainital (p475).

Nehru Institute of Mountaineering (www.nimindia.org; Uttarkashi) Winter mountaineering courses with a 6000m expedition (p467).

Tenzing Norgay Climbing Club (Darjeeling) Indoor and outdoor climbing courses using modern equipment (p538).

MOUNTAINEERING IN INDIA

Mountaineers need permission from the **Indian Mountaineering Federation** (IMF; www.indmount.org) in Delhi to climb most peaks over 6000m, and the expedition royalties are significant – from US\$1500 to US\$8000 per expedition, depending on the height of the peak. Many peaks lie in restricted areas near the China border and climbers must pay additional fees for inner line and restricted-area permits, plus any national park fees that apply. Discounts are available for groups who make arrangements through approved travel agents inside India – contact the IMF for more information on any aspect of mountaineering in India.

Fortunately, you don't have to be rich to climb in India. There are numerous trekking peaks that can be climbed without permits or royalties, particularly in Ladakh, Zaskar, Lahaul, Spiti and Sikkim. The four-day ascent of Stok Kangri (6121m) – see p379 – is one of the most popular treks in India, providing a taste of high-altitude mountaineering without the expense. However, you should be alert for the symptoms of Acute Mountain Sickness (see p1188) on any trek above 3000m. If you fancy some training before you embark on an expedition, there are several mountaineering courses that can start you down the path to becoming the next Reinhold Messner – see the discussion of courses above.

Skiing & Snowboarding

India's ski industry is going from strength to strength. India's premier ski resort is at Gulmarg in Kashmir, but security concerns have pushed many skiers towards the smaller resorts in Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh. All skiing in India takes place on high-altitude meadows, with the best snows falling from January to March. There are runs for skiers of all levels and most ski lodges provide heaters to keep out the winter chill. Prices for equipment rental and ski passes are some of the lowest on the planet, but power cuts can stop the lifts for long periods.

Jammu & Kashmir In Gulmarg (p361), chair and tow lifts plus a gondola cableway provide access to high-altitude powder. Lessons and rental are available and there are ski runs to suit all levels of experience.

Uttarakhand Auli (p470) has a gondola cableway, chairlift and rope-tow that can take you up 5km of beginner and intermediate slopes. Rental and lessons are available, and all levels of experience catered for.

Himachal Pradesh There are several small lifts and ski lodges as well as a cable car under construction in Solang Nullah (p317). Lessons and ski hire are available and there's skiing for all levels. There are also expeditions to high-altitude powder on foot or by helicopter. Narkanda (p292) has less infrastructure than at Solang Nullah, but lessons are available and there's a portable ski-lift in season.

Trekking

India offers some amazing trekking, particularly in the foothills of the Himalaya, with temples, Buddhist monasteries, remote lakes and mountain passes as popular destinations. Many peaks above 5000m can be summited by trekkers as well as mountaineers. There are also wildlife-spotting treks and jungle walks in the plains and middle hills. However, the trekking industry is not as well developed as in nearby Nepal. Trekking lodges are only found on a handful of routes and trekkers must carry everything they need, including food, tents, sleeping bags and emergency equipment. Drinking water is not always available and trails are often poorly marked, with few people around to ask directions. Acute Mountain Sickness is also a risk on any routes over 3000m above sea level, including most routes in Ladakh, Zaskar and Lahaul and Spiti – see p1188 for more information.

Because of this, independent trekking can be risky. Most people opt for organised treks with local trekking agencies, though it is possible to hire your own porters, packhorses and guides through local tourist offices. If you do make your own arrangements, ensure that your guide speaks English and make an emergency plan for evacuation from the route. Tell someone at the trailhead where you are going and when you intend to be back, and never trek alone. On any organised trek, make sure that you have all the equipment you need and ensure that you know exactly what is included in the fee you pay. Proper travel insurance is essential – see p1139.

The following areas offer India's best trekking:

Andaman & Nicobar Islands There are bird-watching jungle treks on Havelock Island (p1118).

Himachal Pradesh You can arrange treks to mountain passes, lakes and medieval monasteries through agencies in Manali (p310), McLeod Ganj (p324), Bharmour (p337), Chamba (p336) and Kaza (p342). For popular routes see p282. Low-altitude treks are also possible in the Parvati Valley (p299) and the Great Himalayan National Park (p299) but see the boxed text, p303.

Jammu & Kashmir Treks can be organised in Ladakh and Zaskar through tour operators in Manali (p310), Leh (p373) and Padum (p390). For popular routes, see p379 and p391. Treks are also possible at Gulmarg (p360), Pahalgam (p361) and Sonamarg (p362) in Jammu and Kashmir, but check the security situation first.

Karnataka Interesting treks around Karnataka with Bengaluru- (Bangalore-) based Getoff ur ass (p887) and agents and guesthouses in Madikeri (p905).

Most of India's peaks have been climbed, but India's highest mountain, Khangchendzonga (8598m) is off-limits as a sign of respect to local Buddhists who worship the spirit of the mountain.

RESPONSIBLE TREKKING

To help in the preservation of India's natural beauty, consider the following tips when trekking. Try to choose trekking agencies and tour operators that have a focus on sustainable, low-impact tourism.

Rubbish

- Carry out all your rubbish (including cigarette butts, sanitary napkins, tampons and condoms) as well as any rubbish you may find. Set a good example as well as reducing pollution.
- Never bury rubbish: digging encourages erosion and buried rubbish may be dug up and consumed by animals (this can be harmful to them).
- Take reusable containers or stuff sacks. Avoid plastic bags and plastic water bottles.
- Carry a canteen and a water-filtration or purification system in remote areas. In villages, refill your canteen with boiled water or filtered water provided by local environmental organisations.

Human Waste Disposal

- To prevent the spread of disease, use toilets where provided. If there aren't any, bury your waste. Dig a small hole (15cm) at least 100m from any watercourse (bring a lightweight trowel) and adequately cover it with soil and a rock. Use minimal toilet paper (preferably none). In snow, dig down to the soil.
- If the area is inhabited, ask locals if they have any concerns about the site you've chosen for your toilet.
- Ensure that these guidelines are applied to portable toilet tents used by trekking groups. All members (including porters) should use it.

Washing

- Don't use detergents or toothpaste in or near watercourses, even if these products are biodegradable.
- For personal washing, use biodegradable soap and a water container at least 50m away from the watercourse. Disperse the waste water widely so the soil can adequately filter it.
- Wash cooking utensils 50m away from watercourses using a scourer, sand or snow instead of detergent.

Kerala There are guided wildlife-spotting treks in Kerala's Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary (p988) and Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary (p1019) and hill treks at Munnar (p999 and p1001).

Madhya Pradesh & Chhattisgarh Arrange guided hill walks with Tola Trekking Club (p693). **Rajasthan** Mt Abu (p231) is the trekking capital of Rajasthan, with forest treks to spot wild bears. Hill treks can also be arranged in Nawalgarh (p188), Udaipur (p222) and Ranakpur (p229).

Sikkim Travel agencies in Gangtok (p574) and Pelling (p582) arrange treks around Sikkim. For popular routes, see p587 and p587.

Tamil Nadu Guided treks in the buffer zone around Mudumalai National Park (p1104), and hill and jungle treks around Indira Gandhi (Annamalai) Wildlife Sanctuary (p1093), Ooty (Udhagamandalam; p1100) and Kodaikanal (p1090).

Uttarakhand You can organise treks to glaciers, mountain villages and Himalayan viewpoints, and pilgrimage treks to the Char Dham temples in Rishikesh (p463), Haridwar (p455), Uttarkashi (p467), Joshimath (p469) and Nainital (p475). See also p445.

Clothing, Fires & Cooking

- Bring clothing for the extreme cold of the mountains – research weather conditions and seek professional advice on clothes and equipment. This will reduce the need for fires for warmth.
- Cutting wood causes deforestation – a major problem in India – so avoid open fires and stay in lodgings that don't use wood to cook or heat water where possible.
- Use a lightweight kerosene, alcohol or Shellite (white gas) stove and avoid stoves powered by disposable butane gas canisters.
- If you must light an open fire, try to use existing fireplaces and only use dead, fallen wood. Fully extinguish a fire by spreading the embers and flooding them with sand or water.

Cultural Sensitivity

- Respect local cultural practices when interacting with communities, including attitudes to modesty.
- Observe official regulations in areas you visit. Many rules are there to protect the local way of life.
- Do not hand out pens, sweets or money to children; this promotes begging. If you want to give, donate to local schools and community centres.
- Always seek permission from landowners if you intend to enter private property.
- Where possible, trek with a local guide. This way, money from tourism will directly benefit the people it affects.

Flora & Fauna

- Always stick to existing tracks. Blazing new trails will create new watercourses, contributing to erosion. Walk through rather than around mud patches and puddles – walking around the edge increases the area being degraded.
- Don't pick flowers or other plants – covering vegetation plays a vital role in keeping the topsoil in place.
- Avoid disturbing wild or domesticated animals and shut any gates you open.
- Hunting is illegal in India and it adds to the pressure on species already endangered by loss of habitat – don't do it.
- Don't feed wildlife (or leave food scraps behind). Wild animals can become dependent on handouts and random feeding can lead to attacks on humans, unbalanced animal populations and disease. Place foodstuffs out of reach while you camp (tie packs to rafters or trees).

West Bengal Various high and low treks around Darjeeling (p542), include the dramatic Singalila Ridge.

Other Adventure Activities

There are many other activities available. Some of the more interesting options include the following.

CANYONING

In Meghalaya, Cherrapunjee Holiday Resort (p611) offers unusual canyoning trips that use surreal 'living bridges' woven from living trees by local tribes.

CAVING

Millennia of torrential monsoon rains have hollowed out an amazing system of caves underneath the northeastern state of Meghalaya, including the

22km-long Krem Um Im-Liat Prah/Krem Labbit system, India's longest cave. Caving trips can be arranged through tour agents in Shillong (p607). However, this is serious caving and it's best to bring equipment from home.

ZORBING

Zorbing – rolling down mountain meadows in a giant plastic ball – is taking off in a big way in Himachal Pradesh. Balls roll throughout the summer in Solang Nullah (p317) and Khajjiar (p334), near Dalhousie.

HOLISTIC & SPIRITUAL ACTIVITIES

Not all activities in India involve hauling yourself up mountains. Travellers with an interest in spirituality or alternative therapies will find a host of courses and treatments that focus on healing body and mind – after all, this is the country that gave the world meditation, massage and mantras! Meditation, Ayurveda (Indian herbal medicine) and yoga have gained respect even in mainstream circles and there are opportunities to practise and improve your technique all over India. Here are some good places to start.

AYURVEDA

Ayurveda is the ancient science of Indian herbal medicine and holistic healing, which focuses on treating the whole organism instead of just the illness, using herbal treatments, massage and other therapies. There are clinics, resorts and colleges all over India where you can learn Ayurvedic techniques and get massages and other treatments, including the following places:

Goa Therapies and residential courses in Ayurveda, reflexology, aromatherapy, acupressure and yoga are run at the Ayurvedic Natural Health Centre near Calangute (p857).

Gujarat Ayurvedic therapy and professional courses in Ayurvedic medicine are conducted at the famous Ayurvedic University in Jamnagar (p755).

Karnataka Naturopathy classes and Ayurvedic therapies are offered in Bengaluru (p887) and Mysore (p898).

Kerala You can do various classes and study Ayurvedic therapies in Varkala (p974).

Tamil Nadu Courses in Ayurvedic massage are available in Puducherry (p1061).

Spa Treatments

If you just want to enjoy the healing effects without the study, there are spas over all India, from Ayurvedic hospitals to luxurious health centres at five-star resorts. However, be cautious of one-on-one massages by private operators, particularly in tourist towns. Paying more for a massage in an established centre is better than getting a groping by a dodgy masseur.

Recommended spots for indulgence include the following:

Delhi Get the full Ayurvedic treatment at Delhi's Ashtaang (p138).

Goa There are numerous beach resorts offering massages and other spa services at Calangute and Baga (p856), Anjuna (p861), Colva and Benaolim (p872), Arambol (p866) and other locations.

Gujarat The are upmarket hotel spas in Ahmedabad (p724), and massages, steam baths and mud therapies at the Ayurvedic University in Jamnagar (p755).

AMCHI

Tibetan Buddhist areas have their own herbal medicine tradition – *amchi* – based on a mixture of astrology and treatments with herbs from the Himalaya. Despite the arrival of Western medicine, *amchi* is still the most popular form of medicine in many parts of Himachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir. You can arrange *amchi* treatments in McLeod Ganj (p324), Leh (p368) and Kaza (p342).

Himachal Pradesh Massages and other healing therapies are offered in Vashisht (p315), McLeod Ganj (p324) and Bhagsu (p329).

Karnataka You can get herbal rubs and scrubs in Bengaluru (p887), Mysore (p898) and Gokarna (p917).

Kerala Massages and herbal treatments at Varkala (p974), Kochi (Cochin; p1006) and therapeutic breaks at Janakanthi Panchakarma Centre (p978) and Thapovan Heritage Home (p973).

Kolkata (Calcutta) Exclusive Banyan Tree spa treatments don't come cheap at the Oberoi Grand (p505).

Maharashtra Massages, saunas and spa treatments at the Osho Meditation Resort (p827).

Mumbai The pampering of pamperings at Mumbai's finest spa – inside the ITC Hotel Grand Maratha Sheraton & Towers (p786).

Orissa There are plush resort spas in Bhubaneswar (p640) and Puri (p647).

Rajasthan There are Ayurvedic massage clinics in Jaipur (p171), Udaipur (p222) and Jaisalmer (p247).

Tamil Nadu Try the posh hotel spas in Thanjavur (p1072) and Kodaikanal (p1091), and the massage sessions in Mamallapuram (Mahabalipuram; p1048) and Puducherry (p1061).

Uttar Pradesh & Uttarakhand Get the works at the Ananda Spa (p466) near Rishikesh, Haveli Hari Ganga (p457) in Haridwar, the Hotel Madhuban (p447) in Dehra Dun, or Hotel Surya (p432) in Varanasi.

YOGA

Many places in India offer classes and courses in various types of yoga, often with meditation classes on the side. The most common yoga forms are hatha (following the *shatkarma*, or purification, system of postures and meditation), *ashtanga* (following the 'eight limbs' system of postures and meditation), pranayama (controlled yogic breathing) and Iyengar (a variation of *ashtanga* yoga using physical aids for advanced postures).

Yoga is one of the oldest therapies in human history, dating back 4000 years. Yoga as we know it today was kick-started in around 200 BC by the Hindu scholar Patanjali.

Yoga Courses

There are hundreds of yoga courses on offer and some outfits are more reputable than others (especially in tourist towns). Seek advice from tourist offices and other travellers and visit several to find one that suits your needs. Many ashrams (spiritual communities) also offer yoga courses – see p102, though some centres require a minimum time commitment and residents must adhere to strict rules on silence, diet and behaviour – see the boxed text, p102.

The following represent some of the many possibilities; for those that impose no fees, donations are appreciated.

Delhi Courses in various forms of meditation and yoga (hatha, asanas and pranayama) in Delhi (p138).

Goa A huge range of yoga courses are offered at hotels, spiritual centres and retreats in Anjuna (p861), Arambol (p867), Calangute (p857) and Palolem (p876).

Gujarat The Ayurvedic University in Jamnagar (p755) offers hatha yoga courses.

Himachal Pradesh Various courses in hatha yoga, reiki, and other healing arts are offered in Vashisht (p315), McLeod Ganj (p324) and Bhagsu (p329).

Jammu & Kashmir There are courses and classes in meditation and yoga in Leh (p372) and Choglamsar (p380).

Karnataka World-renowned courses in *ashtanga*, hatha and Iyengar yoga and meditation are held in Mysore (p898), and yoga classes held in Bengaluru (p887) and Gokarna (p918).

Kerala Hatha yoga courses are offered at Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Dhanwantari Ashram (p969) near Thiruvananthapuram (Trivandrum) as are yoga classes in Varkala (p974).

Kolkata Yoga courses and meditation in Kolkata (p502).

Madhya Pradesh & Chhattisgarh Hatha and other yoga classes are held in Khajuraho (p679).

Maharashtra Yogic healing is held at the Kaivalyadhama Yoga Hospital (p823) in Lonava and advanced Iyengar yoga courses (for experienced practitioners only) are offered at Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute (p828) in Pune.

Mumbai Classes in various styles of yoga are held in Mumbai (p780).

Rajasthan There are yoga, reiki, shiatsu and naturopathy courses in Pushkar (p194) and hatha yoga courses in Jaipur (p172) and Mt Abu (p231).

Tamil Nadu Various hatha yoga classes are available in Chennai (Madras; p1036). Various yoga classes and courses are available in Mamallapuram (Mahabalipuram; p1048) and Puducherry (p1061).

Uttar Pradesh & Uttarakhand Various classes in hatha, pranayama, Kriya and spiritual yoga are conducted in Varanasi (p432), Rishikesh (p462) and Haridwar (p462).

Ashrams

India has dozens of ashrams – places of communal living established around the philosophies of a guru (spiritual guide). Codes of conduct vary, so make sure you're willing to abide by them before committing. See the boxed text, below.

Andhra Pradesh Puttaparthi (Puttaparthi; p958) is the ashram of controversial but phenomenally popular guru Sri Sathya Sai Baba.

Kerala Matha Amrithanandamayi Mission (Alleppey; p982) is famed for its female guru Amma – 'The Hugging Mother'. Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Dhanwantari Ashram (Trivandrum; p969) is a famous yoga centre, renowned for its hatha yoga courses. Sivagiri Mutt (Varkala; p975) is the most important ashram devoted to Sree Narayana Guru.

Kolkata The Ramakrishna Mission has its headquarters at Belur Math (Kolkata; p501) with branches countrywide.

Maharashtra Brahmavidya Mandir Ashram (Sevagram; p818) was established by Gandhi's disciple Vinoba Bhave. The Osho Meditation Resort (Pune; p827) is founded and led by the teachings of the 'sex guru' Osho. Sevagram Ashram (Sevagram; p817) is the ashram established by Mahatma Gandhi.

Rajasthan The small Ashtang Yoga Ashram (Udaipur; p222) offers hatha yoga training. Brahma Kumaris Spiritual University (Mt Abu; p231) is the headquarters of the popular but proselytising Brahma Kumaris organisation.

Tamil Nadu Sri Aurobindo Ashram (Puducherry; p1061), founded by the famous Sri Aurobindo, has branches around India. The rural Isha Yoga Centre (Coimbatore; p1096) offers residential

ASHRAMS & GURUS

Many people visit India specifically to spend time at an ashram – literally a 'place of striving' – for spiritual and personal improvement. There are literally hundreds of gurus (the word means 'dispeller of darkness' or 'heavy with wisdom') offering their wisdom on the path to perfection to millions of eager followers. However, a little caution is required. Some ashrams tread a fine line between spiritual community and personality cult and there are regular reports of dodgy goings on at ashrams, frequently of a sexual nature. These allegations have touched some of the most popular spiritual communities, including the International Society for Krishna Consciousness and the International Sai Organisation of Sai Baba.

Choosing an ashram will depend on your spiritual leanings. Every guru has their own unique take on spiritual living, often with a focus on abstinence and meditation. All ashrams have a rigid code of conduct, and visitors are required to adhere to strict rules, which may include a strict dress code, a daily regimen of yoga or meditation, and charitable work at social projects run by the ashram. The diet is almost always vegetarian and you may also be asked to abstain from eggs, tobacco, alcohol, garlic, onions, and 'black drinks' – ie anything containing caffeine, including tea and coke. Sex may be prohibited or positively encouraged – make sure you are comfortable with this before you stay.

Ashrams are generally run as charitable projects – though many gurus are multimillionaires – and a donation is appropriate to cover the costs of your food, accommodation and the running costs of the ashram. Most ashrams accept new residents without advance notice, but call ahead to make sure. Gurus move around frequently so make sure the guru will be in attendance when you visit. Even if you lack spiritual conviction, it's interesting to visit an ashram for the day to see the workings of a modern-day spiritual movement.

courses and retreats. Sri Ramana Ashram (Tiruvannamalai; p1056) is the ashram founded by Sri Ramana Maharishi.

Uttarakhand There are various ashrams in Rishikesh (p462) and Haridwar (p462). The Rishikesh ashrams are generally more foreigner-orientated and less austere.

West Bengal International Society for Krishna Consciousness (Iskcon; Mayapura; p522) is the global headquarters of the Hare Krishna movement, but with a strong proselytising agenda; it has branches all over India.

BUDDHIST MEDITATION

In Buddhist areas such as Ladakh, Bihar and Himachal Pradesh, Buddhist centres offer courses, classes and retreats in *vipassana* or mindfulness meditation and Buddhist philosophy. Be aware that some courses require students to abide by a vow of silence and many also ban smoking, alcohol and sex. The centre for Buddhist teaching in India is McLeod Ganj (p319) – the home of the Dalai Lama. Public teachings are given by the Dalai Lama and 17th Karmapa at certain times of year.

Andhra Pradesh *Vipassana* meditation courses are held in Hyderabad (p944) and Vijayawada (p955).

Bihar & Jharkhand Various classes and longer courses are available in Buddhist philosophy and *vipassana* meditation in Bodhgaya (p559).

Gujarat Free meditation courses are held at Kutch Vipassana Centre (p764) in Bada.

Himachal Pradesh You can do courses in Tibetan massage and Buddhist meditation and philosophy in McLeod Ganj (p324).

Jammu & Kashmir There are various courses in *vipassana* meditation and Buddhist philosophy in Leh (p373) and residential retreats at the Mahabodhi Meditation Centre (p381) in Choglamsar.

Maharashtra Courses lasting 10 to 45 days are conducted here at the world's largest *vipassana* meditation centre at Igatpuri (p804).

Tamil Nadu There are various *vipassana* courses in Chennai (p1036).

Famous practitioners of *vipassana* yoga include the Dalai Lama, Richard Gere and novelist Graham Greene. See www.dhamma.org for listings of *vipassana* study centres around India.

Food & Drink

Through its food, you'll discover that India is a banquet expressed in colours, smells, flavours and personalities. Like so many aspects of India, its food, too, is an elusive thing to define because it's made up of so many regionally diverse dishes, all with their own preparation techniques and ingredients. It's the ancient vegetarian fare of the south, the meaty traditions of the Mughals, the glowing *tandoor* (clay oven) of Punjab and the Euro-Indian fusions of former colonies. It's the heavenly aroma of cooking spices, the juice of exotic fruits running down your chin and rich, fiery curries that will make your tastebuds stand to attention. Indeed it's the sheer diversity of what's on offer that makes eating your way through India so deliciously rewarding.

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Spices

Because of the prices it can fetch, saffron is frequently adulterated, usually with safflower – dubbed (no doubt by disgruntled tourists) as 'bastard saffron'.

Christopher Columbus was actually looking for the black pepper of Kerala's Malabar Coast when he stumbled upon America. The region still grows the finest quality of the world's favourite spice, and it's integral to most savoury dishes. Turmeric is the essence of most Indian curries, but coriander seeds are the most widely used spice and lend flavour and body to just about every savoury dish, while most Indian 'wet' dishes – commonly known as curries in the West – begin with the crackle of cumin seeds in hot oil. Tamarind is sometimes known as the 'Indian date' and is a popular souring agent in the south. The green cardamom of Kerala's Western Ghats is regarded as the world's best, and you'll find it in savouries, desserts and warming chai (tea). Saffron, the dried stigmas of crocus flowers grown in Kashmir, is so light it takes more than 1500 hand-plucked flowers to yield just one gram.

Just about every Indian dish is flavoured with a distinct combination of spices; there are as many masala (spice blend) recipes as there are villains in Bollywood movies.

Monisha Bharadwaj's *The Indian Kitchen* is a beautifully presented cookbook with more than 200 traditional recipes. It contains handy tips such as how to best store spices.

Rice

Rice is a common staple, especially in South India. Long-grain white rice varieties are the most popular, served hot with just about any 'wet' cooked dish. Rice is often cooked up in a pilau (or pilaf; spiced rice dish) or biryani. From Assam's sticky rice in the far northeast to Kerala's red grains in the extreme south, you'll find countless regional varieties that locals will claim to be the best in India, though this honour is usually conceded to basmati, which gets its name from the Hindi 'queen of fragrance'.

Khichdi (or khichri), mostly cooked in North India, is a blend of lightly spiced rice and lentils, vaguely resembling risotto. Rarely found on restaurant menus, it's mostly prepared in home kitchens to mollify raw tummies (we recommend it for Delhi Belly) – some restaurants may specially cook it if you give them adequate advance notice.

The Indian capital has two particularly good places to sample stuffed *parathas* (Indian-style flaky bread): Paratha Wali Gali (p146) and Not Just Parathas (p149).

Bread

While rice is paramount in the south, wheat is the mainstay in the north. Roti, the generic term for Indian-style bread, is a name used interchangeably with chapati to describe the most common variety, the irresistible unleavened round bread made with whole-wheat flour and cooked on a *tawa* (hotplate). It may be smothered with ghee (clarified butter) or oil, but is eaten plain by the health conscious or those who can't afford ghee. In some places, rotis may be bigger and thicker than chapatis and possibly cooked in a *tandoor*.

Puri is deep-fried dough puffed up like a soft, crispy balloon. *Kachori* is similar, but the dough has been pepped up with corn or dhal, which makes it thicker. Flaky, unleavened *paratha* can be eaten as is or jazzed up with fillings such as *paneer* (unfermented cheese). The thick, usually tear-drop-shaped, naan is cooked in a *tandoor* and is especially scrummy when laced with garlic.

Dhal

While the staple of preference divides north and south, the whole of India is united in its love for dhal (lentils or pulses). You may encounter up to 60 different pulses: the most common are *channa*, a slightly sweeter version of the yellow split pea; tiny yellow or green ovals called *moong dhal* (mung beans); salmon-coloured *masoor* (red lentils); the ochre-coloured southern favourite, *tuvar dhal* (yellow lentils; also known as *arhar*); *rajma* (kidney beans); *kabuli channa* (chickpeas); *urad* (black gram or lentils); and *lobhia* (black-eyed peas).

Meat

While India probably has more vegetarians than the rest of the world combined, it still has an extensive repertoire of carnivorous fare. Goat (known as mutton since the days of the Raj), lamb and chicken are the mainstays; religious taboos make beef forbidden to Hindus and pork to Muslims.

In northern India you'll come across meat-dominated Mughlai cuisine, which includes rich curries, kebabs, koftas and biryanis. This spicy cuisine traces its history back to the (Islamic) Mughal empire that once reigned supreme in India.

Tandoori meat dishes are another North Indian favourite. The name is derived from the clay oven, or *tandoor*, in which the marinated meat is cooked.

Fish & Seafood

With around 7000km of coastline, it's no surprise that fish and seafood are important staples on the subcontinent, and especially on the west coast, from Mumbai (Bombay) down to Kerala. Kerala is the biggest fishing state, Goa boasts huge, succulent prawns and fiery fish curries, and the fishing communities of the Konkan Coast – sandwiched between these two states – are renowned for their seafood creations. Few main meals in Orissa exclude fish, and in West Bengal, puddled with ponds and lakes, fish is king.

Fruit & Vegetables

Vegetables are served at every main meal, and *sabzi* (vegetables) is a word recognised in every Indian vernacular. They're generally cooked *sukhi* (dry) or *tari* (in a sauce) and within these two categories they can be fried, roasted, curried, stuffed, baked, mashed and combined (made into koftas) or wrapped in batter to make a deep-fried pakora (fritter).

Potatoes are ubiquitous and popularly cooked with various masalas, with other vegetables, or mashed and fried for the street snack *aloo tikka* (mashed potato patties). Onions are fried with other vegetables, ground into a paste for cooking with meats and used raw in relishes or as garnish. Heads of cauliflower are usually cooked dry on their own, with potatoes to make *aloo gobi* (potato-and-cauliflower curry), or with other vegetables such as carrots and beans. Fresh green peas turn up stir-fried with other vegetables in pilafs and biryanis and in one of North India's signature dishes, the magnificent *matar paneer* (peas and unfermented cheese in gravy). *Baigan* (eggplant/aubergine) can be curried or sliced and deep-fried. Also popular is *saag* (a generic

Thin and crispy, pappadams are circle-shaped lentil- or chickpea-flour wafers served either before or with a meal.

Technically speaking, there is no such thing as an Indian 'curry' – the word, an anglicised derivative of the Tamil word *kari* (black pepper), was used by the British as a term for any dish including spices.

Bengalis use the pith of the banana tree as a vegetable, and the *nendraparram* (a large reddish-coloured banana) of Kerala is used as a vegetable when raw.

term for leafy greens), which can include mustard, spinach and fenugreek. Something a little more unusual is the bumpy-skinned *karela* (bitter gourd) which, like *bhindi* (okra), is commonly prepared dry with spices.

You'll find fruit fashioned into a *chatni* (chutney) or pickle, or flavouring kulfi (firm-textured ice cream) or other sweet treats. Citrus fruit such as oranges (which are often yellow-green in India), tangerines, pink and white grapefruits, kumquats and sweet limes are widely grown. Himachal Pradesh produces delicious apples in autumn, while luscious strawberries abound in Kashmir during summer. Along the southern coast you'll find wonderful tropical fruits such as pineapples, papayas and mangoes.

India has more than 500 varieties of mangoes, and supplies almost 60% of the world with what is regarded as the king of fruit.

Pickles, Chutneys & Relishes

No Indian meal is really complete without one, and often all, of the above. A relish can be anything from a roughly chopped onion to a delicately crafted fusion of fruit, nuts and spices. One of the most popular accompaniments is raita (mildly spiced yogurt, often with shredded cucumber, carrot or diced pineapple; served chilled), which makes a refreshing counter to spicy meals. *Chatnis* can come in any number of varieties (such as sweet and salty) and can be made from many different vegetables, fruits, herbs and spices. But proceed with caution before polishing off that pickled speck on your thali; it'll quite possibly be the hottest thing you've ever tasted.

Dairy

Milk and milk products make a staggering contribution to Indian cuisine: *dahi* (curd/yogurt) is commonly served with meals and is great for countering heat; *paneer* is a godsend for the vegetarian majority; lassi (yogurt-based drink) is one in a host of nourishing sweet and savoury drinks; ghee is the traditional and pure cooking medium; and the finest sweets are made with milk.

Sweets

India has a colourful jumble of, often sticky and squishy, *mithai* (sweets), most of them sinfully sweet. The main categories are *barfi* (a fudgelike milk-based sweet), halwa (made with vegetables, cereals, lentils, nuts or fruit), *laddoos* (gram flour and semolina sweetmeats, usually ball-shaped) and those made from *chhana* (unpressed *paneer*) such as *rasgulla* (sweet cream-cheese balls flavoured with rose-water). There are also simpler – but equally scrumptious – offerings such as *jalebis* (orange-coloured whorls of deep-fried batter dunked in syrup) that you'll see all over the country.

Kheer (called *payasam* in the south) is one of India's favourite desserts. It's a creamy rice pudding with a light, delicate flavour, and might be flavoured with cardamom, saffron, pistachios, flaked almonds, cashews or dried fruit.

Each year, at least 13 tonnes of pure silver are converted into the edible foil that's added to Indian sweets for decoration.

PAAN

Meals are often rounded off with *paan*, a fragrant mixture of betel nut (also called areca nut), lime paste, spices and condiments wrapped in an edible, silky *paan* leaf. Peddled by *paan*-wallahs, who are usually strategically positioned outside busy restaurants, *paan* is eaten as a digestive and mouth-freshener. The betel nut is mildly narcotic and some aficionados eat *paan* the same way heavy smokers consume cigarettes – over the years these people's teeth can become rotted red and black.

There are two basic types of *paan*: *mitha* (sweet) and *saadha* (with tobacco). A parcel of *mitha paan* is a splendid way to finish a satisfying meal. Pop the whole parcel in your mouth and chew slowly, letting the juices secrete around your gob.

Gulab jamuns are deep-fried balls of dough soaked in rose-flavoured syrup. *Kulfi* is a firm-textured ice cream made with reduced milk and flavoured with any number of nuts (often pistachio), fruits and berries.

REGIONAL SPECIALITIES

North India

PUNJAB

You're probably familiar with the hearty food of Punjab because many of its staple dishes have come to represent Indian food internationally. A paste of onions, garlic and ginger forms the basis of most dishes. Chillies, tomatoes, cumin, garam masala, dried fenugreek leaves and *kalonji* (a black seed similar to caraway; also called onion seed) are added in varying combinations. The main meal of the day might consist of hot rotis with dollops of unsalted butter, a bowl of dhal and a vegetable dish such as the favourite *saag*, or *aloo gobi*, *baigan bharta* (roasted eggplant fried with onions and tomatoes) or *aloo maitar* (a curry made with potatoes and green peas). An integral part of Punjabi cooking is the *tandoor*, open at the top and fired by charcoal below, that turns out piping-hot naan and a gamut of kebabs: *sheekh* (mincemeat on iron skewers), *tangri* (plump chicken drumsticks), *boti* (spicy bite-sized bits of boneless lamb), chicken tikka (succulent chunks of chicken) and, of course, the ubiquitous tandoori chicken.

RAJASTHAN

The largely arid landscape of Rajasthan has led to a spicy cuisine derived from meagre resources. Boosted with limited fresh vegetables, fruits or fish, Rajasthanis make the most of cereals, pulses, spices and milk products to produce a surprisingly elaborate cuisine. Wheat flour is used to make rotis, *puris*, *parathas* and the state's most remarkable dish, *bati* (baked balls of wholemeal flour). Along with *bati* goes *churma* (fried whole-wheat flour balls pounded with sugar and nuts) to make the classic Rajasthani combination, *dhal bati churma*. *Besan* (gram or chickpea flour) is another staple, and is used to make salted snacks. In the stark deserts of Jaisalmer, Jodhpur and Bikaner, meats are often cooked without water, using milk, curd, buttermilk and plenty of ghee. *Murg ko khaato* (chicken cooked in a curd gravy), *achar murg* (pickled chicken) and *kacher maas* (dry lamb cooked in spices) are classic Rajasthani desert dishes.

KASHMIR

Many migrants from Kashmir have moved to Delhi and other Indian cities, where you can sample their unique cuisine, identified by its spice mixes and the fact that meats are usually cooked in curd or milk, which gives them a whitish colour and smooth texture. Chilli is sometimes added to give curries a fiery red tinge.

UTTAR PRADESH & UTTARAKHAND (UTTARANCHAL)

Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand showcase a variety of cuisines, including pure Hindu vegetarian, majestic Nawabi and simple hill fare. Places of pilgrimage such as Varanasi are predominantly vegetarian; a standard meal comprises *phulkas* (small puffed chapatis), *dhal chawal* (dhal and rice) and seasonal vegetable dishes. Lucknow, Varanasi's Islamic counterpart, is associated with the most majestic Nawabi cuisine and is famous for its kebabs made with mincemeat or meat paste (while the kebabs in Punjab and Delhi come from the barbecue tradition of skewered bits). The *shami* kebab (boiled mincemeat, ground with chickpeas and spices) is popular in Uttar Pradesh homes.

Sweet-tooths will love

The Book of Indian

Sweets by Satarupa

Banerjee, which contains

a lip-smacking array of

regional recipes, from

Bengali *rasgullas* to Goan

bebinca.

Punjab, affectionately

dubbed India's bread-

basket, contributes

around 60% of the

country's wheat and 40%

of its rice.

The Chef's Special series

has excellent (light-

weight) cookbooks

showcasing various

regional cuisines. Titles

include *Bengali Kitchen*,

Delhi Kitchen, *Goan*

Kitchen, *Gujarati Kitchen*,

Kashmiri Kitchen, *Punjabi*

Kitchen and *South Indian*

Kitchen.

For recipes online, go to:

www.indiaexpress
.com/cooking

www.indiacurry.com

www.thokalath
.com/cuisine

Primarily used in North India in powdered form, pomegranate seeds add a sour tang to dishes.

The word 'balti' (of the ubiquitous-in-England 'balti house') was created as a marketing ploy by clever restaurateurs – balti is the northwestern name for the common Indian wok, better known as a *kadhai*.

WEST BENGAL

The people of West Bengal are fiercely proud of their cuisine, which they believe is the epitome of refined taste. A plethora of fish is found in the rivers and ponds of Bengal and it is fried, curried in onions, stewed lightly with vegetables or made into spicy *jhaal* (fish with ground mustard seeds and chillies). Bengali sweets are among the finest in India; the best known is *rasgulla*.

BIHAR

Bihar's cuisine is rustic and wholesome. *Sattu* (roasted chickpea flour) is the unifying theme; it's cheap, filling and nutritious. Its preparation ranges from the absolutely coarse to the subtly refined – a labourer carries it knotted in his *gamchha* (handloom towel) and mixes it with onion and chilli for a makeshift meal, while a middle-class housewife may dip Bihar's most well-known food, *littis* (balls of spiced *sattu* covered in dough and baked on coals), in a bowl of warm ghee before serving them.

SIKKIM

Like much of Sikkimese culture, local cuisine is reminiscent of Tibet's and Nepal's. *Thukpa* (hearty noodle soup), *momos* (steamed or fried dumplings stuffed with vegetables or meat) and *gyakho* (stew) are ubiquitous foods. Salt-butter tea is fun to make using the photogenic, traditional *sudah* plunger-churn. No trip to Sikkim is complete without trying *tongba*, a Himalayan millet beer (see the boxed text, p576).

NORTHEAST STATES

The variety of the Northeast States' cuisines is enormous, with each tribe or community developing its own signature dishes. In Assam they're particularly fond of sour tastes and, like the Thais, use lots of lime and lime leaves in their cooking. *Tenga*, the favourite Assamese fish stew, is made of pieces of sweet-tasting *rohu* (a type of carp), lightly sautéed with onions and simmered in a watery gravy that's zested with lemon juice. The major community in Meghalaya, the Khasis, specialises in rice-based dishes such as *putharo* (rice-batter crepe), *pukhen* (sweet fried rice cakes) and *pusla* (steamed rice cakes wrapped in leaves). In Tripura, the locals are passionately fond of both fresh and dried-fish dishes, such as *nona ilish paturi* (salted pieces of hilsa fish, wrapped in an edible leaf and fried) and *pithali* (dried-fish stew). *Shidol* (a fermented preserve made of tiny freshwater fish) is quintessentially Tripuri and a mainstay of every kitchen. Fish is equally important in Manipur, and the fish preserve made here is known as *ngari*. Nagas have a taste for pork, and several other similarities exist with Chinese food such as the use of spring onions, garlic, ginger and monosodium glutamate (MSG). You'll come across many typical Tibetan dishes in Arunachal Pradesh, including *momos*, *churpee* (chewy bits of dried yak cheese) and *thukpa*.

MADHYA PRADESH

The food of Madhya Pradesh is typically North Indian, with broad divisions between 'nontribal' and 'tribal' styles. The food in the dry belt that runs from Gwalior to Indore, known as the Malwa cuisine, is grain- and dhal-based, with few vegetables and a lot of oil and ghee. The capital Bhopal, however, has a long tradition of Islamic rule, and korma, *rizala* (a chilli-flavoured, greenish-white mutton dish), *ishtu* (spicy stew), *achar gosht* (a famous picklelike meat dish of Hyderabad) and kebabs are cooked in most Muslim homes.

GUJARAT

Vegetarians constitute almost 90% of Gujarat's population, largely due to the number of Jains who call this state home. A typical Gujarati thali is arguably the

most balanced and nutritious meal in India. The meal generally consists of rice, chapati, a salad (could be finely diced tomatoes and cucumbers) or vegetable relish (shredded cabbage or bean sprouts with grated coconut), raita, a dry vegetable (such as stir-fried beans), a curried vegetable (such as potatoes and eggplant), dhal, *kadhi* (a sour dhal-like dish made of curd and *besan*), pickle and *mithai*. All the items are served at once and savoured a little at a time.

South India

Though it would be a travesty to lump all South Indian cuisine together, there are common culinary themes – the predominant use of rice and the unflinching regularity of *sambar* (dhal with cubed vegetables and purée) and *rasam* (dhal-based broth flavoured with tamarind) – although each staple is made differently in each state.

Dosas, a family of large rice-flour crepes, usually served with a bowl of hot *sambar* and another bowl of cooling coconut *chatni*, are a South Indian breakfast speciality that can be eaten at any time of day. The most popular is the masala dosa (stuffed with spiced potatoes), but there are also other dosa varieties – the *rava* dosa (batter made with semolina), the Mysore dosa (like masala dosa but with more vegetables and chilli in the filling) and the *pesarettu* dosa (batter made with mung-bean dhal) from Andhra Pradesh.

Idlis are another popular South Indian snack; low-cal and highly nutritious, they provide a welcome alternative to oil, spice and chilli. *Idlis* are spongy, round, white fermented rice cakes that you dip in *sambar* and coconut *chatni*. Other widely eaten snacks include *vadas* (doughnut-shaped deep-fried lentil savouries) and *appams* or *uttappams* (crisp-collared rice-flour and coconut-milk pancakes).

The fiery cuisine of the Karnatak coastal city of Mangalore deserves special mention because it has carved a name for itself nationwide, particularly for its flavour-packed seafood dishes. Mangalorean cuisine is characterised by its liberal use of chilli and fresh coconut.

MAHARASHTRA

Much of the Deccan Plateau, the heart of Maharashtra, is arid and barren, giving rise to a simple diet based on pulses and grains. Marathi Brahmin food is the epitome of minimalist cuisine; probably nowhere else in India is dhal quite so simple – it's boiled with salt and turmeric and then flavoured with a hint of ghee, asafoetida and jaggery. Vegetables, too, are just tossed with mustard seeds, curry leaves and grated coconut. Fish is the staple of nonvegetarian Marathi food; Maharashtra's favourite fish is *bombil*, or Bombay duck, a misnomer for this slimy, pikelike fish, which is eaten fresh or sun-dried. The snack most synonymous with Maharashtra, particularly Mumbai, is *bhelpuri*, a riotous mix of sweet, sour, hot, soft and crunchy sensations. Tossed up on a leaf plate or a square of newspaper are puffed rice, slivers of boiled potatoes, chopped onions, peanuts, fine hairlike *besan* sticks, sweet tamarind *chatni*, a piquant green-coriander-and-chilli *chatni* and a generous squeeze of lime.

ANDHRA PRADESH

In Andhra Pradesh, you'll find most of India's Muslim-created specialities, with a unique Andhra twist, often in the form of heat or spice. Hyderabad's oven-baked biryani, with layers of vegetables, meat, nuts and spices, is quite different to North Indian biryanis. Andhra Pradesh's other major cuisine, that of the Andhras, is made up of a wide variety of lentil, vegetable, meat and fish preparations. A sour touch, provided by tamarind, is added to most dishes.

The legendary Madhur Jeffrey has written best-selling cookbooks including *A Taste of India*; her fascinating memoir, *Climbing the Mango Trees*, includes 32 family recipes.

In the south, coconut is called *shrihal* (the fruit of the gods) and is used in Hindu ceremonies as a reminder that we should all strive to make our lives full and rewarding.

The Anger of Aubergines: Stories of Women and Food by Bulbul Sharma is an amusing culinary analysis of social relationships interspersed with tempting recipes.

ORISSA

In Orissa, fish is given pride of place – it can be fried, curried with onions or cooked with a mustard-and-curd paste. *Ambul* is a popular mustard fish preparation that derives its tang from the inclusion of dried mangoes. Tamarind adds a lovely sour touch to dishes and okra is often cooked in a sour gravy of tamarind and tomatoes.

GOA

The unique cuisine of coast-hugging Goa evolved from the intermingling of the highly developed Goan culture and around 450 years of Portuguese rule. It's little wonder that seafood is the Goan staple, which includes many varieties of freshwater and saltwater fish and succulent prawns. A typical Goan lunch may start with a mildly spicy side dish such as *caldeen* (fish simmered in coconut milk, ginger and cumin). The Portuguese influence usually shows up more prominently in the evening meal, when the main course might be *assado de bife* (roast beef) or a hot pork vindaloo (spicy pork curry). Goans specialise in elaborate puddings, cakes and sweet snacks; don't miss the famous *bebinca* (the layered 40-egg sweet, rich with ghee and coconut milk). The cuisine of the western coast of Karnataka, the Konkani Coast, is reminiscent of Goan fare, with plenty of fish and coconut.

Copra (dried coconut flesh) is pressed and made into coconut oil, a very popular cooking medium in Kerala.

KERALA

Seafood is also a favourite in Kerala, and virtually every meal will include it in a fried or curried form – favourites include *meen pollichathu* (fish cooked in banana leaves) and *molee* (fish or seafood cooked in coconut milk and spices). Most food is cooked in coconut oil, and dishes are abundantly garnished with freshly scraped coconut or coconut milk. Vegetables are rarely overcooked, and are simply steamed or stir-fried to retain their natural flavours and nutrients.

DRINKS

Nonalcoholic Drinks

The highest-quality Darjeeling tea is graded as SFTGFOP, which stands for Special Fine Tippy Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe.

Chai (tea), the much-loved drink of the masses, is made with copious amounts of milk and sugar. A glass of steaming, frothy chai is the perfect antidote to the vicissitudes of life on the Indian road; the disembodied voice droning '*garam chai, garam chai*' (hot tea, hot tea) will become one of the most familiar and welcome sounds of your trip.

While chai is the choice of the nation, South Indians have long shared their loyalty with coffee. In recent years, though, the number of coffee-drinking North Indians has skyrocketed, with swanky coffee chains such as Barista and Café Coffee Day widely found in what were once chai strongholds.

Masala soda is the quintessentially Indian soft drink that's available at many drinks stalls. It's a freshly opened bottle of soda, pepped up with lime, spices, salt and sugar. *Jal jeera* is perhaps India's most therapeutic and refreshing indigenous drink, made of lime juice, cumin, mint and rock salt.

Karnataka is the largest producer of commercial coffee in India; as a whole, though, India contributes only 3% of the global output of coffee.

Sweet and savoury lassi is very popular nationwide and is another wonderfully rejuvenating beverage. *Falooda* is a rose-flavoured drink made with milk, cream, nuts and strands of vermicelli, while *badam* milk (served hot or cold) is flavoured with almonds and saffron.

On the streets there are multitudes of fresh-fruit vendors; if the juice is ridiculously cheap, then it may have been adulterated and you might just get a combination of water, ice and essence. Some restaurants think nothing

of adding salt and sugar to juice to intensify the flavours; ask the waiter to leave them out if you don't want them.

For information about safely drinking water in India, see the boxed text, p1187.

Alcoholic Drinks

An estimated three-quarters of India's drinking population quaffs 'country liquor' such as the notorious arak (liquor distilled from coconut-palm sap, potatoes or rice) of the south. The same stuff comes with names such as Amanush (Inhuman) and Asha (Hope) in the north. This is the poor-man's drink and millions are addicted to the stuff. It's cheap, gives an instant high and tastes, well, pretty ghastly. Each year, hundreds of people are blinded or even killed by the methyl alcohol in illegal arak.

About a quarter of India's drinks market comprises Indian Made Foreign Liquors (IMFLs), made with a base of rectified spirit. Recent years have seen a rise in the consumption of imported spirits, with more and more city bars and restaurants flaunting both domestic and foreign labels.

A local drink is a clear spirit with a heady pungent flavour called *mahua*, distilled from the flower of the *mahua* tree. It's brewed in makeshift village stalls all over central India during March and April, when the trees bloom. *Mahua* is safe to drink as long as it comes from a trustworthy source. There have been cases of people being blinded after drinking *mahua* adulterated with methyl alcohol.

Rice beer is brewed all over east and northeast India. In the Himalaya you'll find a grain alcohol called *raksi*, which is strong, has a mild charcoal flavour and tastes vaguely like scotch whisky.

Toddy, the sap from the palm tree, is drunk in coastal areas, especially Kerala. Feni is the primo Indian spirit, and the preserve of laid-back Goa. Coconut feni is light and unexceptional but the much more popular cashew feni – made from the fruit of the cashew tree – is worth a try.

Beer is widely guzzled around India with the more upmarket bars and restaurants stocking an impressive selection of Indian and foreign brands (Budweiser, Heineken, Corona and the like). Most of the domestic brands are straightforward Pilsners around the 5% alcohol mark; travellers champion Kingfisher.

Wine-drinking culture in India is steadily on the increase, despite the domestic wine-producing industry still being at its infancy stages – there is a long way to go before the industry is globally competitive. It's estimated that current wine consumption in India per capita is a drop above half a teaspoon per year, clearly indicating that the majority of India's drinking population is yet to jump on the wine bandwagon. Nevertheless, the favourable climate and soil conditions in certain parts of the country have spawned some admirable Indian wineries, such as Chateau Indage (Maharashtra), Grover Vineyards (Karnataka) and Sula Vineyards (Maharashtra; also see the boxed text, p804). Domestic offerings include Chardonnay, Chenin Blanc, Sauvignon Blanc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz and Zinfandel.

A portal to websites about Indian wine, www.indianwine.com has notes on manufacturers, information on growing regions and more.

Solan beer from Himachal Pradesh is brewed in the highest-altitude brewery in the world – 2440m.

TIP FOR BEER DRINKERS

Indian beer often contains the preservative glycerol, which can cause headaches. To avoid a thumping head, open the bottle and quickly tip it upside down, with the top immersed, into a full glass of water. An oily film (the glycerol) descends into the water – when this stops, remove the bottle and enjoy a glycerol-free beer.

CELEBRATIONS

Although most Hindu festivals have a religious core, many are also great occasions for spirited feasting. Sweets are considered the most luxurious of foods and almost every special occasion is celebrated with a mind-boggling range. *Karanjis*, crescent-shaped flour parcels stuffed with sweet *khoya* (milk solids) and nuts, are synonymous with Holi, the most rambunctious Hindu festival, and it wouldn't be the same without sticky *malpuas* (wheat pancakes dipped in syrup), *barfis* and *pedas* (multicoloured pieces of *khoya* and sugar). Pongal (Tamil for 'overflowing') is the major harvest festival of the south and is most closely associated with the dish of the same name, made with the season's first rice, along with jaggery, nuts, raisins and spices. Diwali, the festival of lights, is the most widely celebrated national festival, and some regions have specific Diwali sweets; if you're in Mumbai dive into delicious *anarsa* (rice-flour cookies).

Ramadan is the Islamic month of fasting, when Muslims abstain from eating, drinking or smoking between sunrise and sunset. Each day's fast is often broken with dates – considered auspicious – followed by fruit and fruit juices. On the final day of Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr, an extravagant feast celebrates the end of the fast with nonvegetarian biryanis and a huge proliferation of special sweets.

WHERE TO EAT

India has oodles of restaurants – or 'hotels' – their signage often identifying them as either 'veg', 'pure veg' or 'nonveg'. Most midrange restaurants serve one of two basic genres: South Indian (which usually means the vegetarian food of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka) and North Indian (which comprises Punjabi/Mughlai food). You'll also find the cuisines of neighbouring regions and states. Indians frequently migrate in search of work and these restaurants cater to the large communities seeking the familiar tastes of home.

Not to be confused with burger joints and pizzerias, restaurants in the south advertising 'fast food' are some of India's best. They serve the whole gamut of tiffin (snack) items and often have separate sweet counters. Many upmarket hotels have outstanding five-star restaurants, usually with pan-Indian menus so you can explore regional cuisines. Although they're not cheap, they're within splurging reach of most travellers. Some of India's more cosmopolitan cities, such as Mumbai, Delhi and Bengaluru (Bangalore), have a flourishing restaurant scene with menus sporting everything from Indian and Italian to Chinese and Mediterranean – see the Eating sections of those chapters for more details.

Most cities and larger towns have good bakeries, cafés, sweet shops and juice bars and the ubiquitous milk shop, which sells a wide range of dairy goodies. *Dhabas* (snack bars; literally 'wayside eateries') are oases to millions of truck drivers, bus passengers and sundry travellers going anywhere by road.

See p1136 for details of India's major festivals.

Rice is used to symbolise purity and fertility in Hindu wedding ceremonies and is often used as *puja* (offerings) in temples.

TOP FIVE INDIAN WINEMAKERS IN 2006

- Chateau Indage
- Grover Vineyards
- Sula Vineyards
- Sankalp Winery
- Renaissance Winery

The original *dhabas* dot the North Indian landscape, but you'll find versions of them throughout the country. The rough-and-ready but lip-smacking food served in these happy-go-lucky shacks has become a genre on its own known as '*dhaba food*'.

Street Food

Whatever the time of day, food vendors are frying, boiling, roasting, peeling, juicing, simmering, mixing or baking some type of food and drink to lure peckish passers-by. Small operations usually have one special that they serve all day, while other vendors have different dishes for breakfast, lunch and dinner. The fare varies as you venture between neighbourhoods, towns and regions; it can be as simple as puffed rice or peanuts roasted in hot sand, as unexpected as a fried-egg sandwich, or as complex as the riot of different flavours known as *chaat* (snack food seasoned with *chaat* – spiced fruit and vegetable – masala).

Devilishly delicious deep-fried fare is the staple of the streets, and you'll find enticing samosas (pyramid-shaped pastries filled with spiced vegetables and less often meat), and *bhajia* (vegetable fritters) in varying degrees of spiciness, along with *puris* and *kachoris*. Sublime kebabs doused in smooth curd and wrapped in warm bread are most commonly found in neighbourhoods with a large Muslim community.

Platform Food

One of the thrills of travelling by rail is the culinary circus that greets you at every station. Roving vendors accost arriving trains, yelling and scampering up and down the carriages; fruit, *namkin* (savoury nibbles), omelettes and nuts are offered through the grills on the windows; and platform cooks try to lure you from the train with the sizzle of fresh samosas. Frequent rail travellers know which station is famous for which food item: Lonavla station in Maharashtra is known for *chikki* (nut and jaggery toffee), Agra for *peitha* (crystallised pumpkin) and Dhaund near Delhi for biryani.

Street Foods of India by Vimla and Deb Kumar Mukerji gives recipes of some of the subcontinent's favourite munchies, from samosas and *bhelpuri* to *jalebis* and *kulfi*.

STREET FOOD DOS & DON'TS

You should exercise caution when eating street food but as long as you use your common sense you should be fine. Remember, fortune favours the brave.

- Give yourself a few days to adjust to the local cuisine, especially if you're not used to spicy food.
- You know the rule about following a crowd – if the locals are avoiding a particular vendor, you should too. Also take notice of the profile of the customers – any place frequented by women and families will probably be your safest bet.
- Check how and where the vendor is cleaning the utensils, and how and where the food is covered. If the vendor is cooking in oil, have a peek to check it's clean. If the pots or surfaces are dirty, there are food scraps about or too many buzzing flies, don't be shy to make a hasty retreat.
- Don't be put off when you order some deep-fried snack and the cook throws it back into the wok. It's common practice to partly cook the snacks first and then finish them off once they've been ordered. In fact, frying them hot again will kill any germs.
- Unless a place is reputable (and busy), it's best to avoid eating meat from the street.
- Juice stalls are widespread and they're usually safe if the vendor presses the juice in front of you. Never have what is stored in the jug.
- Don't be tempted by glistening presliced melon and other fruit, which keeps its luscious veneer with the regular dousing of (often unfiltered) water.

WHERE TO DRINK

Gujarat is India's only dry state but there are drinking laws in place all over the country, and each state may have regular dry days when the sale of alcohol from liquor shops is banned. To avoid paying high taxes, head for Goa, where booze isn't subject to the exorbitant levies of other states.

You'll find good watering holes in most major cities such as Mumbai, Bengaluru, Kolkata (Calcutta) and Delhi, which are usually at their liveliest on weekends. The more upmarket bars serve a very impressive selection of domestic and imported beverages as well as draught beer. Many bars turn into music-thumping nightclubs anytime after 8pm although there are quiet lounge-bars to be found in some cities. In smaller towns the bar scene can be a seedy, male-dominated affair – not the kind of place thirsty female travellers should venture into alone. For details about a city's bars, see the Drinking sections of this book's regional chapters.

Stringent licensing laws discourage drinking in some restaurants but places that depend on the tourist rupee may covertly serve you beer in teapots and disguised glasses – but don't assume anything, at the risk of causing offence. Very few vegetarian restaurants serve alcohol.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

India produces some of the best vegetarian food you'll find anywhere on the planet. There's little understanding of veganism (the term 'pure vegetarian' means without eggs), and animal products such as milk, butter, ghee and curd are included in most Indian dishes. If you are vegan your first problem is likely to be getting the cook to completely understand your requirements.

For further details see the Vegan World Network website at www.vegansworldnetwork.org – click on the Directory link, then on India (the India section contains other useful web links).

HABITS & CUSTOMS

Three main meals a day is the norm in India. Breakfast is usually fairly light, maybe *idlis* and *sambar* in the south, and *parathas* in the north. The health-conscious (mostly the upper echelons of society) may restrict breakfast to fruit and/or cereal. Lunch can be substantial (perhaps the local version of the thali) or light, especially for time-restricted office workers. Dinner is usually the main meal of the day. It's generally comprised of a few different preparations – several curried vegetable (maybe also meat) dishes and dhal, accompanied by rice and/or chapatis. Dishes are served all at once rather than as courses. Desserts are optional and most prevalent during festivals or other special occasions. Fruit often wraps up a meal. In many Indian homes dinner can be a late affair (up to 10pm or even 11pm) depending on personal preference and possibly the season (eg late dinners during the warmer months). Restaurants usually spring to life after 9pm.

Food & Religion

For many in India, food is considered just as critical for fine-tuning the spirit as it is for sustaining the body. Broadly speaking, Hindus avoid foods that are thought to inhibit physical and spiritual development, although there are few hard-and-fast rules. The taboo on eating beef (the cow is holy to Hindus) is the most rigid restriction. Devout Hindus (and Jains) also avoid alcohol and foods such as garlic and onions, which are thought to heat the blood and arouse sexual desire. You may come across vegetarian restaurants that make it a point to advertise the absence of onion and garlic in their dishes for this reason. These items are also banned from most ashrams.

India has the world's biggest whisky market with an annual growth rate of around 10%.

Legend says that Buddha, after falling asleep during meditation, decided to cut his eyelids off in an act of penance. The lids grew into the tea plant, which, when brewed, banished sleep.

Food which is first offered to the gods then shared among devotees is known as *prasad*.

EATING INDIAN-STYLE

Most Indians eat with their right hand. In the south, they use as much of the hand as is necessary, while elsewhere they use the tips of the fingers. The left hand is reserved for toilet duties and other unsanitary actions such as removing grotty shoes. You can use your left hand for holding drinks and serving yourself from a communal bowl, but it shouldn't be used for bringing food to your mouth. Before and after a meal, it's good manners to wash your hands.

Once your meal is served, mix the food with your fingers. If you are having dhal and *sabzi* (vegetables), only mix the dhal into your rice and have the *sabzi* in small scoops with each mouthful. If you are having fish or meat curry, mix the gravy into your rice and take the flesh off the bones from the side of your plate. Scoop up lumps of the mix and, with your knuckles facing the dish, use your thumb to shovel the food into your mouth.

Indian children grow up with spicy food so there are rarely separate menus for them in restaurants. However there are plenty of dishes that don't have a spicy kick – roti, rice, dhal, curd, soup, cheese sandwiches etc – just ask if you're unsure. Small portions may be available at some restaurants.

Some foods, such as dairy products, are considered innately pure and are eaten to cleanse the body, mind and spirit. Ayurveda, the ancient and complex science of life, health and longevity, also influences food customs (see the boxed text, p975).

Pork is taboo for Muslims and stimulants such as alcohol are avoided by the most devout. Halal is the term for all permitted foods, and haram for those prohibited. Fasting is considered an opportunity to earn the approval of Allah, to wipe the sin-slate clean and to understand the suffering of the poor.

Buddhists and Jains subscribe to the philosophy of ahimsa (nonviolence) and are mostly vegetarian. Jainism's central tenet is ultra-vegetarianism, and rigid restrictions are in place to avoid even potential injury to any living creature – Jains abstain from eating vegetables that grow underground because of the potential to harm insects during cultivation.

India's Sikh, Christian and Parsi communities have few or no restrictions on what they can eat.

COOKING COURSES

You might find yourself so inspired by Indian food that you want to take home a little Indian kitchen know-how – the listings below represent just a few of the ever-increasing number of places offering cooking courses. Some are professionally run, others are very informal, and each is of varying duration. Most require at least a few days' advance notice.

Bhimens' Cooking Class (p325; McLeod Ganj, Himachal Pradesh)

Cook & Eat (p1006; Kochi, Kerala)

Deepa (c/o Saraswati Music School) (p194; Pushkar, Rajasthan)

Hot Stimulating Café (p538; Darjeeling, West Bengal)

Hotel Jamuna Resort (p189; Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan)

Hotel Krishna Niwas (p222; Udaipur, Rajasthan)

India on the Menu (p846; Panaji, Goa)

Kali Travel Home (p502; Kolkata, West Bengal)

KUK@EASE (p828; Pune, Maharashtra)

Lhamo's Kitchen (p325; McLeod Ganj, Himachal Pradesh)

Noble Indian Cooking Class (p222; Udaipur, Rajasthan)

Parul Puri's Cooking Classes (p138; Delhi)

Sangye's Kitchen (p325; McLeod Ganj, Himachal Pradesh)

Spice Box (p222; Udaipur, Rajasthan)

Taste of India (p325; McLeod Ganj, Himachal Pradesh)

If you're interested in exploring the captivating science of Ayurveda, there are loads of books available but none better than *Ayurveda: Life, Health & Longevity* by Dr Robert E Svoboda.

For a comprehensive travellers' guide to India's cuisine, grab Lonely Planet's *World Food India*.

EAT YOUR WORDS**Useful Phrases****Do you accept credit cards?***kyaa aap kredit kaard lete/letee haing? (m/f)***What would you recommend?***aap ke kyaal meng kyaa achchaa hogaa?***I'm (a) vegetarian.***maing ... hoong shaakaahaaree***I'd like the ..., please.***muje ... chaahiye***Please bring a/the ...***... laaiye***bill***bil***fork***kaangtaa***glass***glaas***glass of wine***sharaab kee kaa glaas***knife***chaakoo***menu***menyoo***mineral water***minral vaatar***plate***plet***spoon***chammach***I don't eat ...***maing ... naheeng kaataa/kaatee (m/f)***Could you prepare a***kyaa aap ... ke binaa kaanaa taiyaar kar sakte/***meal without ...?***saktee haing? (m/f)***beef***gaay ke gosht***dairy products***dood se banee cheezong***fish***machlee***meat stock***gosht ke staak***pork***suar ke gosht***poultry***murgee***red meat (goat)***bakree***I'm allergic to ...***muje ... kee elarjee hai***nuts***meve***seafood***machlee***shellfish***shellfish***Food & Drink Glossary***achar*

pickle

*aloo*potato; also *alu**aloo tikka*

mashed-potato patty

appam

South Indian rice pancake

arak

liquor distilled from coconut milk, potatoes or rice

badam

almond

*baigan*eggplant/aubergine; also known as *brinjal**barfi*

fudgelike sweet made from milk

besan

chickpea flour

*betel*nut of the betel tree; chewed as a stimulant and digestive in *paan*; also called *areca nut**bhajia*

vegetable fritter

*bhang lassi*blend of *lassi* and *bhang* (a derivative of marijuana)*bhelpuri*thin fried rounds of dough with rice, lentil, lemon juice, onion, herbs and *chutney**bhindi*

okra

biryani

fragrant spiced steamed rice with meat or vegetables

bonda

mashed-potato patty

*chaat*snack, usually seasoned with *chaat masala**chach*

buttermilk beverage

<i>chai</i>	tea
<i>channa</i>	spiced chickpeas
<i>chapati</i>	round unleavened Indian-style bread; also known as <i>roti</i>
<i>chatni</i>	chutney
<i>chawal</i>	rice
<i>cheiku</i>	small, sweet brown fruit
<i>dahi</i>	curd/yogurt
<i>dhal</i>	curried lentil dish; a staple food of India
<i>dhal makhani</i>	black lentils and red kidney beans with cream and butter
<i>dhansak</i>	Parsi dish; meat, usually chicken, with curried lentils and rice
<i>dosa</i>	large South Indian savoury crepe
<i>falooda</i>	rose-flavoured drink made with milk, cream, nuts and vermicelli
<i>faluda</i>	long chickpea-flour noodles
<i>farsan</i>	savoury nibbles
<i>feni</i>	Goan liquor distilled from coconut milk or cashews
<i>ghee</i>	clarified butter
<i>gobi</i>	cauliflower
<i>gram</i>	legumes
<i>gulab jamun</i>	deep-fried balls of dough soaked in rose-flavoured syrup
<i>halwa</i>	soft sweetmeat made with vegetables, cereals, lentils, nuts and fruit
<i>idli</i>	South Indian spongy, round, fermented rice cake
<i>imli</i>	tamarind
<i>jaggery</i>	hard, brown, sugarlike sweetener made from palm sap
<i>jalebi</i>	orange-coloured whorls of deep-fried batter dunked in sugar syrup
<i>karela</i>	bitter gourd
<i>keema</i>	spiced minced meat
<i>kheer</i>	creamy rice pudding
<i>khichdi</i>	blend of lightly spiced rice and lentils, vaguely resembling risotto; also <i>khichri</i>
<i>kofta</i>	minced vegetables or meat; often ball-shaped
<i>korma</i>	currylike braised dish
<i>kulcha</i>	soft leavened Indian-style bread
<i>kulfi</i>	flavoured (often with pistachio) firm-textured ice cream
<i>ladoo</i>	sweetmeat ball made with gram flour and semolina; also <i>ladu</i>
<i>lassi</i>	refreshing yogurt-and-iced-water drink
<i>masala dosa</i>	large South Indian savoury crepe (<i>dosa</i>) stuffed with spiced potatoes
<i>mattar paneer</i>	unfermented cheese and pea curry
<i>methi</i>	fenugreek
<i>misthi dhoi</i>	Bengali sweet; curd sweetened with jaggery
<i>mithai</i>	Indian sweets
<i>molee</i>	Keralan dish; fish pieces poached in coconut milk and spices
<i>momo</i>	Tibetan steamed or fried dumpling stuffed with vegetables or meat
<i>murli</i>	white radish
<i>naan</i>	<i>tandoor</i> -cooked flat bread
<i>namak</i>	salt
<i>namkin</i>	savoury nibbles
<i>pakora</i>	bite-sized piece of vegetable dipped in chickpea-flour batter and deep-fried
<i>palak paneer</i>	unfermented cheese chunks in a puréed spinach gravy
<i>paneer</i>	soft, unfermented cheese made from milk curd
<i>pani</i>	water
<i>pappadam</i>	thin, crispy lentil or chickpea-flour circle-shaped wafer; also <i>papad</i>
<i>paratha</i>	Indian-style flaky bread (thicker than <i>chapati</i>) made with ghee and cooked on a hotplate; often stuffed with grated vegetables, <i>paneer</i> etc
<i>phulka</i>	a <i>chapati</i> that puffs up when briefly placed on an open flame
<i>pilaf</i>	see <i>pilao</i>
<i>pilao</i>	rice cooked in stock and flavoured with spices; also <i>pulau</i> or <i>pilaf</i>

<i>pudina</i>	mint
<i>puri</i>	flat savoury dough that puffs up when deep-fried; also <i>poori</i>
<i>raita</i>	mildly spiced yogurt, often containing shredded cucumber, carrot or diced pineapple; served chilled
<i>rasam</i>	<i>dhal</i> -based broth flavoured with tamarind
<i>rasgulla</i>	sweet little balls of cream cheese flavoured with rose-water
<i>rogan josh</i>	rich, spicy lamb curry
<i>saag</i>	leafy greens
<i>sabzi</i>	vegetables
<i>sambar</i>	South Indian soupy lentil dish with cubed vegetables
<i>samosa</i>	deep-fried pastry triangles filled with spiced vegetables/meat
<i>sonf</i>	aniseed seeds; used as a digestive and mouth-freshener usually comes with the bill after a meal; also <i>saunf</i>
<i>tandoor</i>	clay oven
<i>tawa</i>	flat hotplate/iron griddle
<i>thali</i>	all-you-can-eat meal; stainless steel (sometimes silver) compartmentalised plate for meals
<i>thukpa</i>	hearty Tibetan noodle soup
<i>tiffin</i>	snack; also refers to meal container often made of stainless steel
<i>tikka</i>	spiced, often marinated, chunks of chicken, <i>paneer</i> etc
<i>toddy</i>	alcoholic drink, tapped from palm trees
<i>tsampa</i>	Tibetan staple of roast-barley flour
<i>uttapam</i>	thick savoury South Indian rice pancake with finely chopped onions, green chillies, coriander and coconut
<i>vada</i>	South Indian doughnut-shaped deep-fried lentil savoury
<i>vindaloo</i>	Goan dish; fiery curry in a marinade of vinegar and garlic