

# [***How India got stuck in its own unusual time zone***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6C08-XJR1-DY7V-G03H-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; Nine hours and 30 minutes ahead of New York. Five hours and 30 minutes ahead of London. Three hours and 30 minutes behind Tokyo.

For more than a century, India's clocks have officially fallen short of the full hour in calculating any time difference it has with most countries.

And while it is part of a small group of nations and territories that shares that 30-minute gap - including Iran, Myanmar and parts of Australia - India is perhaps the most unlikely outlier.

The huge South Asian nation geographically spans what would normally be two time zones, but much to the frustration of some groups, it clings to its unusual clock settings, refusing to part ways with a system that has a very complicated past.

India's half-hour zone dates back to colonial rule of India and the era when ever-faster steamships and trains were shrinking the world.

Until the 19th century, India - like most places around the world - operated on very localized times, which were often different not just from city to city, but from village to village. But playing a key role in the background was East India Company, a ruthless and powerful British-owned trading organization that gradually seized control of large parts of the subcontinent.

The East India Company was managing the one of Asia's first observatories, in Madras (now known as Chennai) by 1792. A decade later, the first official astronomer at this observatory declared Madras time to be "the basis of Indian Standard Time."

It took a few decades, the advent of steam-powered locomotives and the commercial interests of the East India Company to make that stick, though.

"The railroads had immense sway over the colonial powers," says Geoff Gordon, a senior researcher in public international law at the University of Amsterdam.

"Before the railroads won the contest for Madras time, there was a contest among the powerful cities - Bombay, Kolkata," adds Gordon. "That fight didn't last long."

Meanwhile, similar debates around the world, driven by the need to better coordinate transcontinental rail travel and improve maritime navigation, led to the establishment of the first international time zones at a conference in Washington D.C. in 1884.

The zones were based around the Greenwich Meridian, a line of longitude that runs north-south through the Greenwich Observatory in London. Time zones to the east of the Meridian are typically later than Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) in hourly increments.

It took a while for the system to be adopted globally. In India, people were still arguing over Madras Time. Despite the time's adoption by the country's railways, it faced considerable opposition from workers and local communities unwilling to have rigid new timings imposed on them.

"There's less room to maneuver as your working rhythms are linked up no longer with your boss down the street, the church bell, and the 20 other people that you go to work with," says Gordon. "But it's now determined by the railroad that arrives once a day."

Eventually, Madras Time was established nationwide by 1905, with only a few remaining holdouts.

The start of the 20th century saw some push from scientific associations to calibrate India's time to GMT.

The Royal Society in London [*proposed*](https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/86283) two time zones for India, both in full-hour increments from GMT and one another: Six hours ahead of GMT for the east and five hours for the west of the country.

That recommendation was rejected by the colonial government, which opted for a unified time that sat squarely in the middle: five and a half hours ahead of GMT.

"It strikes me as sort of typical of the colonial mindset," says Gordon.

And so, in 1906, India's British rulers introduced what is now known as Indian Standard Time.

**The *politics* of time**

While the 30-minute difference is a lingering remnant of India's colonial past, some countries have changed their own time zones more recently.

Venezuela's former president Hugo Chavez set clocks back by half an hour in 2007 to give schoolchildren more daylight time, a move that was later reversed by current leader Nicolas Maduro.

In 2015, North Korea moved out of sync with South Korea by creating "[*Pyongyang Time*](https://www.cnn.com/2015/08/07/asia/north-korea-time-zone/index.html)," putting the country eight and a half hours ahead of GMT instead of nine.

India's colonial-era time zone decision making, however, reflected a chorus of political, scientific and commercial voices both from within the government and outside of it, Gordon says.

He compares India during this period to "Brazil," the 1985 dark dystopian sci-fi fantasy film directed by Terry Gilliam, or the comically complicated contraptions drawn by US cartoonist Rube Goldberg.

"It's just this unbelievably haphazard Rube Goldberg-esque construction, that is built up through lots of different inputs, lots of people acting opportunistically, lots of people acting naively," he adds. "There was a lot of weirdness and wildness."

**The consequences of a single time zone**

India's single time-zone has been the subject of much debate over the years, with populations in the northeast demanding a separate time zone given how wide the country is.

Though this problem isn't unique to India: geographically, China is the third largest in the world and still only has one time zone, which a 2014 [*study*](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0961463X14521489) argues is symbolic of the state's centralized control over people's everyday lives.

India's official timekeepers, the National Physical Laboratory, even called for two separate time zones on account of this issue, citing reports of India's time "badly affecting" the lives of people in the northeast.

It proposed two time zones instead: five and a half hours ahead of GMT for one side of India, and six and a half hours for another, specifically what they've described as "extreme northeast regions," including areas like Assam and Arunachal Pradesh.

"Despite geographical differences-such as the sun rising and setting nearly two hours earlier in the northeast compared to Gujarat-both regions adhere to the same time-zone," says Maulik Jagnani, an assistant professor of economics at Tufts University.

Jagnani published a widely cited paper in 2019 highlighting the impact of sunlight on natural circadian rhythms in India, with a focus on children.

"This setup affects children's sleep patterns [...] children exposed to later sunsets go to bed later," adds Jagnani. "Fixed school and work start times do not allow for corresponding adjustments in wake-up times, leading to reduced sleep and poorer educational outcomes."

The NPL also recognized this issue, adding that the circadian rhythm's impact on health and work efficiency, is tied to the "overall socio-economic development of the region."

However, it looks like India's unusual time zone is here to stay. When the question of introducing two time zones was put to India's parliament in 2019, a government committee rejected the concept over unspecified "strategic reasons."

By Dhruv Tikekar, CNN

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