**INDIA**

**India**, [country](https://www.britannica.com/topic/nation-state) that occupies the greater part of [South Asia](https://www.britannica.com/place/South-Asia). It is made up of 28 states and eight [union territories](https://www.britannica.com/topic/union-territory), and its national capital is [New Delhi](https://www.britannica.com/place/New-Delhi), built in the 20th century just south of the historic hub of Old Delhi to serve as India’s administrative center. Its government is a [constitutional](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/constitutional) [republic](https://www.britannica.com/topic/republic-government) that represents a highly [diverse](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/diverse) population consisting of thousands of ethnic groups and hundreds of languages. India became the world’s most populous country in 2023, according to estimates by the [United Nations](https://www.britannica.com/topic/United-Nations).

It is known from archaeological evidence that a highly sophisticated urbanized culture—the [Indus civilization](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Indus-civilization)—dominated the northwestern part of the subcontinent from about 2600 to 2000 bce. From that period on, India functioned as a virtually self-contained political and cultural arena, which gave rise to a distinctive tradition that was associated primarily with [Hinduism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hinduism), the roots of which possibly can be traced to the Indus civilization. Other religions, notably [Buddhism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Buddhism) and [Jainism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Jainism), originated in India—though their presence there is now quite small—and throughout the centuries residents of the subcontinent developed a rich [intellectual](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intellectual) life in such fields as mathematics, astronomy, architecture, literature, music, and the fine arts.

Throughout its history, India was intermittently disturbed by incursions from beyond its northern mountain wall. Especially important was the coming of [Islam](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islam), brought from the northwest by Arab, Turkish, Persian, and other raiders beginning early in the 8th century ce. Eventually, some of those raiders stayed; by the 13th century much of the subcontinent was under Muslim rule, and the number of Muslims steadily increased. Only after the arrival of the Portuguese navigator [Vasco da Gama](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Vasco-da-Gama) in 1498 and the [subsequent](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/subsequent) establishment of European maritime supremacy in the region did India become exposed to major external influences arriving by sea, a process that culminated in the decline of the ruling Muslim elite and absorption of the subcontinent within the [British Empire](https://www.britannica.com/place/British-Empire).

Direct administration by the British, which began in 1858, effected a political and economic unification of the subcontinent. When British rule came to an end on August 14-15, 1947, celebrated annually as [Independence Day](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Independence-Day-Indian-holiday), the subcontinent was partitioned along religious lines into two separate countries—India, with a majority of Hindus, and [Pakistan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Pakistan), with a majority of Muslims; the eastern portion of Pakistan later split off to form [Bangladesh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bangladesh). Many British institutions stayed in place (such as the [parliamentary system](https://www.britannica.com/topic/parliamentary-system) of government); English continued to be a widely used lingua franca; and India remained within the [Commonwealth](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Commonwealth-association-of-states). Hindi became the official language (and a number of other local languages achieved official status), while a vibrant English-language intelligentsia [thrived](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/thrived).

India remains one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world. Apart from its many religions and sects, India is home to innumerable castes and tribes, as well as to more than a dozen major and hundreds of minor linguistic groups from several language families unrelated to one another. Religious minorities, including Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jains, still account for a significant proportion of the population. Earnest attempts have been made to instill a spirit of nationhood in so varied a population, but tensions between neighboring groups have remained and at times have resulted in outbreaks of violence. Yet social legislation has done much to [alleviate](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/alleviate) the disabilities previously suffered by formerly “[untouchable](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Dalit)” castes, tribal populations, women, and other traditionally disadvantaged segments of society. At independence, India was blessed with several leaders of world stature, most notably [Mohandas Karamchand (Mahatma) Gandhi](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mahatma-Gandhi) and [Jawaharlal Nehru](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jawaharlal-Nehru), who were able to [galvanize](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/galvanize) the masses at home and bring [prestige](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prestige) to India abroad. The country has played an increasing role in global affairs.

Contemporary India’s increasing physical prosperity and cultural dynamism—despite continued domestic challenges and economic inequality—are seen in its well-developed [infrastructure](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/infrastructure) and a highly diversified industrial base, in its pool of scientific and engineering personnel (one of the largest in the world), in the pace of its agricultural expansion, and in its rich and vibrant cultural exports of music, literature, and cinema. Though the country’s population remains largely rural, India has three of the most populous and [cosmopolitan](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cosmopolitan) cities in the world—[Mumbai](https://www.britannica.com/place/Mumbai) (Bombay), [Kolkata](https://www.britannica.com/place/Kolkata) (Calcutta), and [Delhi](https://www.britannica.com/place/Delhi). Three other Indian cities—[Bengaluru](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bangalore-India) (Bangalore), [Chennai](https://www.britannica.com/place/Chennai) (Madras), and [Hyderabad](https://www.britannica.com/place/Hyderabad-India)—are among the world’s fastest-growing high-technology centers, and most of the world’s major information technology and software companies now have offices in India.

The history section of the articles [Pakistan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Pakistan) and [Bangladesh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bangladesh) discuss those countries since their creation.

**LAND**

India’s frontier, which is roughly one-third coastline, abuts six countries. It is bounded to the northwest by [Pakistan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Pakistan), to the north by [Nepal](https://www.britannica.com/place/Nepal), [China](https://www.britannica.com/place/China), and [Bhutan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bhutan); and to the east by [Myanmar](https://www.britannica.com/place/Myanmar) (Burma). [Bangladesh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bangladesh) to the east is surrounded by India to the north, east, and west. The [island](https://www.britannica.com/science/island) country of [Sri Lanka](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sri-Lanka) is situated some 40 miles (65 km) off the southeast coast of India across the [Palk Strait](https://www.britannica.com/place/Palk-Strait) and [Gulf of Mannar](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gulf-of-Mannar).

The land of India—together with Bangladesh and most of Pakistan—forms a well-defined subcontinent, set off from the rest of Asia by the [imposing](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/imposing) northern mountain rampart of the [Himalayas](https://www.britannica.com/place/Himalayas) and by adjoining mountain ranges to the west and east. In area, India ranks as the seventh largest country in the world.

Much of India’s territory lies within a large peninsula, surrounded by the [Arabian Sea](https://www.britannica.com/place/Arabian-Sea) to the west and the [Bay of Bengal](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bay-of-Bengal) to the east; [Cape Comorin](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cape-Comorin)(Kanniyakumari), the southernmost point of the Indian mainland, marks the dividing line between those two bodies of water. India has two [union territories](https://www.britannica.com/topic/union-territory) composed entirely of islands: [Lakshadweep](https://www.britannica.com/place/Lakshadweep), in the Arabian Sea, and the [Andaman and Nicobar Islands](https://www.britannica.com/place/Andaman-and-Nicobar-Islands), which lie between the Bay of Bengal and the [Andaman Sea](https://www.britannica.com/place/Andaman-Sea).

**Relief**

It is now generally accepted that India’s geographic position, continental outline, and basic geologic structure resulted from a process of [plate tectonics](https://www.britannica.com/science/plate-tectonics)—the shifting of enormous, rigid crustal plates over the Earth’s [underlying](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/underlying) layer of molten material. India’s landmass, which forms the northwestern portion of the [Indian-Australian Plate](https://www.britannica.com/science/Indian-Australian-Plate), began to drift slowly northward toward the much larger Eurasian Plate several hundred million years ago (after the former broke away from the ancient southern-hemispheric supercontinent known as [Gondwana](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gondwana-supercontinent), or Gondwanaland). When the two finally collided (approximately 50 million years ago), the northern edge of the Indian-Australian Plate was thrust under the Eurasian Plate at a low angle. The collision reduced the speed of the oncoming plate, but the underthrusting, or subduction, of the plate has continued into contemporary times.

The effects of the [collision](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/collision) and continued subduction are numerous and extremely complicated. An important consequence, however, was the slicing off of crustal rock from the top of the underthrusting plate. Those slices were thrown back onto the northern edge of the Indian landmass and came to form much of the Himalayan mountain system. The new mountains—together with vast amounts of sediment eroded from them—were so heavy that the Indian-Australian Plate just south of the range was forced downward, creating a zone of crustal subsidence. Continued rapid erosion of the Himalayas added to the sediment accumulation, which was subsequently carried by mountain streams to fill the subsidence zone and cause it to sink more.

India’s present-day relief features have been [superimposed](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/superimposed) on three basic structural units: the Himalayas in the north, the [Deccan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Deccan) (peninsular plateau region) in the south, and the [Indo-Gangetic Plain](https://www.britannica.com/place/Indo-Gangetic-Plain) (lying over the subsidence zone) between the two. Further information on the geology of India is found in the article [Asia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Asia).

**The**[**Himalayas**](https://www.britannica.com/place/Himalayas)**of India**

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/27/173827-050-DC76A2F3/Portion-Himalayas-Jammu-and-Kashmir-India-state.jpg)

[Himalayas](https://cdn.britannica.com/27/173827-050-DC76A2F3/Portion-Himalayas-Jammu-and-Kashmir-India-state.jpg)

Portion of the Himalayas in Ladakh union territory, India.

The Himalayas (from the Sanskrit words *hima*, “snow,” and *alaya*, “abode”), the loftiest mountain system in the world, form the northern limit of India. That great, geologically young mountain arc is about 1,550 miles (2,500 km) long, stretching from the peak of [Nanga Parbat](https://www.britannica.com/place/Nanga-Parbat) (26,660 feet [8,126 meters]) in the Pakistani-administered portion of the [Kashmir](https://www.britannica.com/place/Kashmir-region-Indian-subcontinent) region to the Namcha Barwa peak in the [Tibet Autonomous Region](https://www.britannica.com/place/Tibet) of [China](https://www.britannica.com/place/China). Between those extremes the mountains fall across India, southern Tibet, [Nepal](https://www.britannica.com/place/Nepal), and [Bhutan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bhutan). The width of the system varies between 125 and 250 miles (200 and 400 km).

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/13/1613-050-C2DFD001/Houseboats-shore-state-Srinagar-Nagin-Lake-India.jpg)

[Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir, India: Nagin Lake](https://cdn.britannica.com/13/1613-050-C2DFD001/Houseboats-shore-state-Srinagar-Nagin-Lake-India.jpg)

Houseboats along the shore of Nagin Lake, Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir, India.(more)

Within India the Himalayas are divided into three [longitudinal](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/longitudinal) belts, called the Outer, Lesser, and Great Himalayas. At each extremity there is a great bend in the system’s alignment, from which a number of lower mountain ranges and hills spread out. Those in the west lie wholly within [Pakistan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Pakistan) and [Afghanistan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Afghanistan), while those to the east straddle India’s border with [Myanmar](https://www.britannica.com/place/Myanmar) (Burma). North of the Himalayas are the [Plateau of Tibet](https://www.britannica.com/place/Plateau-of-Tibet) and various Trans-Himalayan ranges, only a small part of which, in the [Ladakh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ladakh) [union territory](https://www.britannica.com/topic/union-territory) (in the Indian-administered portion of [Kashmir](https://www.britannica.com/place/Kashmir-region-Indian-subcontinent)), are within the territorial limits of India.

Because of the continued [subduction](https://www.britannica.com/science/subduction) of the Indian peninsula against the Eurasian Plate, the Himalayas and the associated eastern ranges remain tectonically active. As a result, the mountains are still rising, and [earthquakes](https://www.britannica.com/science/earthquake-geology)—often accompanied by [landslides](https://www.britannica.com/science/landslide)—are common. Several since 1900 have been devastating, including one in 1934 in what is now [Bihar](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bihar) state that killed more than 10,000 people. In 2001 another tremor (the [Bhuj earthquake](https://www.britannica.com/event/Bhuj-earthquake-of-2001)), farther from the mountains, in [Gujarat](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gujarat) state, was less powerful but caused extensive damage, taking the lives of more than 20,000 people and leaving more than 500,000 homeless. Still others—notably the [2005 quake in Pakistani-administered Kashmir](https://www.britannica.com/event/Kashmir-earthquake-of-2005) and the [2015 temblor in Nepal](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Nepal-earthquake-of-2015)—principally affected those regions but also caused widespread damage and hundreds of deaths in [adjacent](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/adjacent) parts of India. The relatively high frequency and wide distribution of earthquakes likewise have generated controversies about the safety and advisability of several hydroelectric and irrigation projects.

**The**[**Outer Himalayas**](https://www.britannica.com/place/Siwalik-Range)**(the Siwalik Range)**

The southernmost of the three mountain belts are the Outer Himalayas, also called the [Siwalik (or Shiwalik) Range](https://www.britannica.com/place/Siwalik-Range). Crests in the Siwaliks, averaging from 3,000 to 5,000 feet (900 to 1,500 meters) in elevation, seldom exceed 6,500 feet (2,000 meters). The range narrows as it moves east and is hardly discernible beyond the [Duars](https://www.britannica.com/place/West-Bengal-Duars), a plains region in [West Bengal](https://www.britannica.com/place/West-Bengal) state. Interspersed in the Siwaliks are heavily [cultivated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cultivated) flat valleys (*dun*s) with a high population density. To the south of the range is the [Indo-Gangetic Plain](https://www.britannica.com/place/Indo-Gangetic-Plain). Weakly indurated, largely deforested, and subject to heavy rain and intense erosion, the Siwaliks provide much of the sediment transported onto the plain.

**The**[**Lesser Himalayas**](https://www.britannica.com/place/Lesser-Himalayas)

To the north of the Siwaliks and separated from them by a fault zone, the [Lesser Himalayas](https://www.britannica.com/place/Lesser-Himalayas) (also called the Lower or Middle Himalayas) rise to heights ranging from 11,900 to 15,100 feet (3,600 to 4,600 meters). Their ancient name is Himachal (Sanskrit: *hima*, “snow,” and *acal*, “mountain”). The mountains are composed of both ancient crystalline and geologically young rocks, sometimes in a reversed stratigraphic sequence because of thrust faulting. The Lesser Himalayas are [traversed](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/traversed) by numerous deep gorges formed by swift-flowing streams (some of them older than the mountains themselves), which are fed by [glaciers](https://www.britannica.com/science/glacier) and snowfields to the north.

**The**[**Great Himalayas**](https://www.britannica.com/place/Great-Himalayas)

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/75/155675-050-55BBC46F/Kanchenjunga-world-border-state-Great-Himalayas-Sikkim.jpg)

[Kanchenjunga](https://cdn.britannica.com/75/155675-050-55BBC46F/Kanchenjunga-world-border-state-Great-Himalayas-Sikkim.jpg)

Kanchenjunga, the world's third highest mountain, in the Great Himalayas on the border between Nepal and Sikkim state, India.(more)

The northernmost Great, or Higher, Himalayas (in ancient times, the Himadri), with crests generally above 16,000 feet (4,900 meters) in elevation, are composed of ancient crystalline rocks and old marine sedimentary formations. Between the Great and Lesser Himalayas are several fertile longitudinal vales; in India the largest is the [Vale of Kashmir](https://www.britannica.com/place/Vale-of-Kashmir), an ancient lake basin with an area of about 1,700 square miles (4,400 square km). The Great Himalayas, ranging from 30 to 45 miles (50 to 75 km) wide, include some of the world’s highest peaks. The highest in the range, [Mount Everest](https://www.britannica.com/place/Mount-Everest) (at 29,035 feet [8,850 meters]; *see* [Researcher’s Note: Height of](https://www.britannica.com/place/India/additional-info#Researchers-Note)[Mount](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/Mount) Everest), is on the China-Nepal border, but India also has many lofty peaks. Notable among those is [Kanchenjunga](https://www.britannica.com/place/Kanchenjunga) (28,169 feet [8,586 meters]) on the border of Nepal and the state of [Sikkim](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sikkim), which is the world’s third tallest peak and India’s highest point. Other high mountains in India include [Nanda Devi](https://www.britannica.com/place/Nanda-Devi) (25,646 feet [7,817 meters]), [Kamet](https://www.britannica.com/place/Kamet) (25,446 feet [7,755 meters]), and Trisul (23,359 feet [7,120]) in [Uttarakhand](https://www.britannica.com/place/Uttarakhand). The Great Himalayas lie mostly above the line of perpetual snow and thus contain most of the Himalayan glaciers.

**Associated ranges and hills**

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/11/75511-050-9F3F471F/mountains-Ladakh-India-Jammu-and-Kashmir.jpg)

[India: Ladakh mountain range](https://cdn.britannica.com/11/75511-050-9F3F471F/mountains-Ladakh-India-Jammu-and-Kashmir.jpg)

Barren mountains of Ladakh, India.

In general, the various regional ranges and hills run parallel to the Himalayas’ main [axis](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/axis). Those are especially prominent in the northwest, where the [Zaskar Range](https://www.britannica.com/place/Zaskar-Range) and the [Ladakh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ladakh-Range) and [Karakoram](https://www.britannica.com/place/Karakoram-Range) ranges (all in India-administered Kashmir) run to the northeast of the Great Himalayas. Also in the Kashmir region is the [Pir Panjal Range](https://www.britannica.com/place/Pir-Panjal-Range), which, extending along the southwest of the Great Himalayas, forms the western and southern flanks of the [Vale of Kashmir](https://www.britannica.com/place/Vale-of-Kashmir).

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/22/1622-050-7EBB01ED/Boatman-canal-Logtak-Lake-Imphal-India-Manipur.jpg)

[Imphal, Manipur, India: canal near Loktak Lake](https://cdn.britannica.com/22/1622-050-7EBB01ED/Boatman-canal-Logtak-Lake-Imphal-India-Manipur.jpg)

Boatman on a canal south of Loktak Lake, near Imphal, Manipur, India.(more)

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/23/1623-050-DF0E60B5/Morning-mist-hillsides-Shillong-India-Meghalaya.jpg)

[Shillong, Meghalaya, India: southern hillsides](https://cdn.britannica.com/23/1623-050-DF0E60B5/Morning-mist-hillsides-Shillong-India-Meghalaya.jpg)

Morning mist and frosty hillsides south of Shillong, Meghalaya, India.(more)

At its eastern extremity, the Himalayas give way to a number of smaller ranges running northeast-southwest—including the heavily forested Patkai Range and the [Naga](https://www.britannica.com/place/Naga-Hills) and [Mizo](https://www.britannica.com/place/Mizo-Hills) hills—which extend along India’s borders with Myanmar and the southeastern panhandle of [Bangladesh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bangladesh). Within the Naga Hills, the reedy Loktak Lake, in the [Manipur River valley](https://www.britannica.com/place/Manipur-River-valley), is an important feature. Branching off from those hills to the northwest are the Mikir Hills, and to the west are the [Jaintia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Jaintia-Hills), [Khasi](https://www.britannica.com/place/Khasi-Hills), and [Garo](https://www.britannica.com/place/Garo-Hills) hills, which run just north of India’s border with Bangladesh. Collectively, the latter group is also [designated](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/designated) as the [Shillong (Meghalaya) Plateau](https://www.britannica.com/place/Shillong-Plateau).

**The**[**Indo-Gangetic Plain**](https://www.britannica.com/place/Indo-Gangetic-Plain)

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/55/152855-004-E3FE12B4/ganges-river-varanasi-india.jpg)

[Varanasi, India: Ganges river](https://cdn.britannica.com/55/152855-004-E3FE12B4/ganges-river-varanasi-india.jpg)

Banks of the Ganges river at Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh state, India

The second great structural component of India, the Indo-Gangetic Plain (also called the North Indian Plain), lies between the Himalayas and the [Deccan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Deccan). The plain occupies the Himalayan foredeep, formerly a seabed but now filled with river-borne alluvium to depths of up to 6,000 feet (1,800 meters). The plain stretches from the Pakistani provinces of [Sindh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sindh-province-Pakistan) and [Punjab](https://www.britannica.com/place/Punjab-province-Pakistan) in the west, where it is watered by the [Indus River](https://www.britannica.com/place/Indus-River) and its tributaries, eastward to the [Brahmaputra River](https://www.britannica.com/place/Brahmaputra-River) valley in [Assam](https://www.britannica.com/place/Assam) state.

The [Ganges (Ganga) River](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ganges-River) basin (in India, mainly in [Uttar Pradesh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Uttar-Pradesh) and Bihar states) forms the central and principal part of the plain. The eastern portion is made up of the [combined](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/combined) [delta](https://www.britannica.com/science/delta-river-system-component) of the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers, which, though mainly in Bangladesh, also occupies a part of the adjacent Indian state of West Bengal. That deltaic area is characterized by annual flooding attributed to intense [monsoon](https://www.britannica.com/science/monsoon) rainfall, an exceedingly gentle gradient, and an enormous discharge that the alluvium-choked rivers cannot contain within their channels. The [Indus River](https://www.britannica.com/place/Indus-River) basin, extending west from [Delhi](https://www.britannica.com/place/Delhi), forms the western part of the plain; the Indian portion is mainly in the states of [Haryana](https://www.britannica.com/place/Haryana) and [Punjab](https://www.britannica.com/place/Punjab-state-India).

The overall gradient of the plain is virtually imperceptible, averaging only about 6 inches per mile (95 mm per km) in the Ganges [basin](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/basin) and slightly more along the Indus and Brahmaputra. Even so, to those who till its soils, there is an important distinction between *[bhangar](https://www.britannica.com/science/bhangar)*—the slightly elevated, terraced land of older alluvium—and [*khadar*](https://www.britannica.com/science/khadar), the more fertile fresh alluvium on the low-lying floodplain. In general, the ratio of *bhangar* areas to those of *khadar* increases upstream along all major rivers. An exception to the largely monotonous relief is encountered in the southwestern portion of the plain, where there are gullied badlands centering on the [Chambal River](https://www.britannica.com/place/Chambal-River). That area was famous for harboring violent gangs of criminals called *dacoit*s, who found shelter in its many hidden ravines till the early 2000s.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/55/4655-050-0EC12E24/pilgrims-Pushkar-Great-Indian-Desert-India-Rajasthan.jpg)

[Pushkar, Rajasthan, India: Hindu pilgrims](https://cdn.britannica.com/55/4655-050-0EC12E24/pilgrims-Pushkar-Great-Indian-Desert-India-Rajasthan.jpg)

Hindu pilgrims gathering at Pushkar in the Great Indian Desert (Thar Desert), Rajasthan, India.(more)

The Great Indian, or [Thar](https://www.britannica.com/place/Thar-Desert), Desert forms an important southern [extension](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/extension) of the Indo-Gangetic Plain. It is mostly in northwestern India but also extends into eastern Pakistan and is mainly an area of gently undulating terrain, and within it are several areas dominated by shifting sand dunes and numerous isolated hills. The latter provide visible evidence of the fact that the thin surface deposits of the region, partially alluvial and partially wind-borne, are underlain by the much older Indian-Australian Plate, of which the hills are structurally a part.

**The**[**Deccan**](https://www.britannica.com/place/Deccan)**of India**

The remainder of India is designated, not altogether accurately, as either the [Deccan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Deccan) plateau or peninsular India. It is actually a topographically variegated region that extends well beyond the peninsula—that portion of the [country](https://www.britannica.com/topic/nation-state) lying between the [Arabian Sea](https://www.britannica.com/place/Arabian-Sea) and the Bay of Bengal—and includes a substantial area to the north of the [Vindhya Range](https://www.britannica.com/place/Vindhya-Range), which has popularly been regarded as the divide between [Hindustan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Hindustan-historical-area-Asia) (northern India) and the Deccan (from Sanskrit *dakshina*, “south”).

Having once [constituted](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/constituted) a segment of the ancient continent of [Gondwana](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gondwana-historical-region-India), that land is the oldest and most geologically stable in India. The plateau is mainly between 1,000 and 2,500 feet (300 to 750 meters) above [sea level](https://www.britannica.com/science/sea-level), and its general slope descends toward the east. A number of the hill ranges of the Deccan have been eroded and rejuvenated several times, and only their remaining summits testify to their geologic past. The main peninsular block is composed of gneiss, granite-gneiss, schists, and granites, as well as of more geologically recent basaltic lava flows.

**The**[**Western Ghats**](https://www.britannica.com/place/Western-Ghats)

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/33/1633-050-AB1FAD82/Monsoon-forest-forests-Anaimalai-Hills-Western-Ghats.jpg)

[Western Ghats, Tamil Nadu, India: Anaimalai Hills](https://cdn.britannica.com/33/1633-050-AB1FAD82/Monsoon-forest-forests-Anaimalai-Hills-Western-Ghats.jpg)

Village in the Anaimalai Hills, Western Ghats, Tamil Nadu state, India.(more)

The Western [Ghats](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ghats), also called the Sahyadri, are a north-south chain of mountains or hills that mark the western edge of the Deccan [plateau](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/plateau) region. They rise abruptly from the coastal plain of the Arabian Sea as an escarpment of variable height, but their eastern slopes are much more gentle. The Western Ghats contain a series of residual plateaus and peaks separated by saddles and passes. The hill station (resort) of [Mahabaleshwar](https://www.britannica.com/place/Mahabaleshwar), located on a laterite plateau, is one of the highest elevations in the northern half, rising to 4,700 feet (1,430 meters). The chain attains greater heights in the south, where the mountains terminate in several uplifted blocks bordered by steep slopes on all sides. Those include the [Nilgiri Hills](https://www.britannica.com/place/Nilgiri-Hills), with their highest peak, [Doda Betta](https://www.britannica.com/place/Doda-Betta) (8,652 feet [2,637 metres]); and the [Anaimalai](https://www.britannica.com/place/Anaimalai-Hills), [Palni](https://www.britannica.com/place/Palni-Hills), and [Cardamom](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cardamom-Hills) hills, all three of which radiate from the highest peak in the Western Ghats, [Anai Peak](https://www.britannica.com/place/Anai-Peak) (Anai Mudi, 8,842 feet [2,695 meters]). The Western Ghats receive heavy rainfall, and several major rivers—most notably the [Krishna](https://www.britannica.com/place/Krishna-River) (Kistna) and the two holy rivers, the [Godavari](https://www.britannica.com/place/Godavari-River) and the [Kaveri](https://www.britannica.com/place/Kaveri-River) ([Cauvery](https://www.britannica.com/place/Kaveri-River))—have their headwaters there.

**The**[**Eastern Ghats**](https://www.britannica.com/place/Eastern-Ghats)

The Eastern Ghats are a series of discontinuous low ranges running generally northeast-southwest parallel to the coast of the [Bay of Bengal](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bay-of-Bengal). The largest single sector—the remnant of an ancient mountain range that eroded and subsequently rejuvenated—is found in the [Dandakaranya](https://www.britannica.com/place/Dandakaranya) region between the [Mahanadi](https://www.britannica.com/place/Mahanadi-River) and Godavari rivers. That narrow range has a central ridge, the highest peak of which is Arma Konda (5,512 feet [1,680 meters]) in northeastern [Andhra Pradesh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Andhra-Pradesh) state. The hills become subdued farther southwest, where they are [traversed](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/traversed) by the [Godavari River](https://www.britannica.com/place/Godavari-River) through a gorge 40 miles (65 km) long. Still farther southwest, beyond the [Krishna River](https://www.britannica.com/place/Krishna-River), the Eastern Ghats appear as a series of low ranges and hills, including the [Erramala](https://www.britannica.com/place/Erramala-Range), [Nallamala](https://www.britannica.com/place/Nallamala-Range), [Velikonda](https://www.britannica.com/place/Velikonda-Range), and [Palkonda](https://www.britannica.com/place/Palkonda-Hills). Southwest of the city of [Chennai](https://www.britannica.com/place/Chennai) (Madras), the Eastern Ghats continue as the [Javadi](https://www.britannica.com/place/Javadi-Hills) and Shevaroy hills, beyond which they merge with the Western Ghats.

**Inland regions**

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/44/124444-050-58843B9A/Aravalli-Range-India.jpg)

[Aravalli Range](https://cdn.britannica.com/44/124444-050-58843B9A/Aravalli-Range-India.jpg)

Aravalli Range, northern India.

[[](https://www.britannica.com/quiz/the-country-quiz)](https://www.britannica.com/quiz/the-country-quiz)

**[Britannica Quiz](https://www.britannica.com/quiz/the-country-quiz)**

[The Country Quiz](https://www.britannica.com/quiz/the-country-quiz)

The northernmost portion of the Deccan may be termed the peninsular foreland. That large ill-defined area lies between the peninsula proper to the south (roughly demarcated by the Vindhya Range) and the [Indo-Gangetic Plain](https://www.britannica.com/place/Indo-Gangetic-Plain) and the [Great Indian Desert](https://www.britannica.com/place/Thar-Desert) (beyond the [Aravalli Range](https://www.britannica.com/place/Aravalli-Range)) to the north.

The Aravalli (or Aravali) Range runs southwest-northeast for more than 450 miles (725 km) from a highland node near [Ahmadabad](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ahmadabad), [Gujarat](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gujarat), northeast to [Delhi](https://www.britannica.com/place/Delhi). Those mountains are composed of ancient rocks and are divided into several parts, in one of which lies [Sambhar Salt Lake](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sambhar-Salt-Lake). Their highest [summit](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/summit) is Guru Peak (5,650 feet [1,722 meters]), on [Mount Abu](https://www.britannica.com/place/Abu). The Aravallis form a divide between the west-flowing streams, draining into the desert or the [Rann of Kachchh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rann-of-Kachchh) (Kutch), and the Chambal and its tributaries within the [Ganges River](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ganges-River) [catchment area](https://www.britannica.com/science/drainage-basin).

Between the Aravallis and the [Vindhya Range](https://www.britannica.com/place/Vindhya-Range) lies the fertile, basaltic [Malwa Plateau](https://www.britannica.com/place/Malwa-Plateau). The plateau gradually rises southward toward the hills of the Vindhya Range, which is actually a south-facing escarpment deeply eroded by short streams flowing into the valley of the [Narmada River](https://www.britannica.com/place/Narmada-River) below. The escarpment appears from the south as an imposing range of mountains. The Narmada valley forms the western and principal portion of the Narmada-Son trough, a continuous depression running southwest-northeast, mostly at the base of the Vindhya Range, for about 750 miles (1,200 km).

To the east of the peninsular foreland lies the mineral-rich [Chota Nagpur](https://www.britannica.com/place/Chota-Nagpur) plateau region (mostly within [Jharkhand](https://www.britannica.com/place/Jharkhand), northwestern [Odisha](https://www.britannica.com/place/Odisha) [Orissa], and [Chhattisgarh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Chhattisgarh) states). It is a region of numerous scarps separating areas of rolling terrain. To the southwest of the Chota Nagpur plateau is the [Chhattisgarh Plain](https://www.britannica.com/place/Chhattisgarh-Plain), centered in Chhattisgarh on the upper course of the [Mahanadi River](https://www.britannica.com/place/Mahanadi-River).

Most of the inland area south of the peninsular foreland and the Chota Nagpur plateau is characterized by rolling terrain and generally low relief, within which a number of hill ranges, some of them mesalike formations, run in various directions. Occupying much of the northwestern portion of the peninsula (most of [Maharashtra](https://www.britannica.com/place/Maharashtra) and some bordering areas of [Madhya Pradesh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Madhya-Pradesh), [Telangana](https://www.britannica.com/place/Telengana), and [Karnataka](https://www.britannica.com/place/Karnataka-state-India)) is the Deccan lava plateau. The mesa-like features are especially [characteristic](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/characteristic) of that large fertile area, which is cut across by the [Satpura](https://www.britannica.com/place/Satpura-Range), Ajanta, and [Balaghat](https://www.britannica.com/place/Balaghat-Range) ranges.

**Coastal areas**

Most of the coast of India flanks the Eastern and Western Ghats. In the northwest, however, much of coastal Gujarat lies to the northwest of the Western Ghats, extending around the [Gulf of Khambhat](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gulf-of-Khambhat) (Cambay) and into the salt marshes of the [Kathiawar](https://www.britannica.com/place/Kathiawar-Peninsula) and Kachchh (Kutch) peninsulas. Those tidal marshes include the Great [Rann of Kachchh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rann-of-Kachchh) along the border with [Pakistan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Pakistan) and the Little Rann of Kachchh between the two peninsulas. Because the level of the marshes rises markedly during the rainy season, the Kachchh Peninsula normally becomes an island for several months each year.

The area farther south, especially the stretch from [Daman](https://www.britannica.com/place/Daman) to [Goa](https://www.britannica.com/place/Goa) (known as the [Konkan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Konkan) coast), is indented with [rias](https://www.britannica.com/science/ria) (flooded valleys) extending inland into narrow riverine plains. Those plains are dominated by low-level lateritic plateaus and are marked by alternating headlands and bays, the latter often sheltering crescent-shaped beaches. From Goa south to [Cape Comorin](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cape-Comorin) (the southernmost tip of India) is the [Malabar](https://www.britannica.com/place/Malabar-Coast) coastal plain, which was formed by the [deposition](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/deposition) of sediment along the shoreline. The plain, varying between 15 and 60 miles (25 to 100 km) wide, is characterized by lagoons and brackish, navigable backwater channels.

The predominantly deltaic eastern coastal plain is an area of deep sedimentation. Over most of its length it is considerably wider than the plain on the western coast. The major [deltas](https://www.britannica.com/science/delta-river-system-component), from south to north, are of the Kaveri, the Krishna-Godavari, the Mahanadi, and the Ganges-Brahmaputra rivers. The last of those is some 190 miles (300 km) wide, but only about one-third of it lies within India. Traversed by innumerable distributaries, the [Ganges delta](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ganges-delta) is an ill-drained region, and the western part within Indian territory has become [moribund](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/moribund) because of shifts in the channels of the Ganges. Tidal incursions extend far inland, and any small temporary rise in sea level could submerge [Kolkata](https://www.britannica.com/place/Kolkata) (Calcutta), located about 95 miles (155 km) from the head of the Bay of Bengal. The eastern coastal plain includes several lagoons, the largest of which, [Pulicat](https://www.britannica.com/place/Pulicat-Lake) and [Chilka](https://www.britannica.com/place/Chilka-Lake) (Chilika) lakes, have resulted from sediment being deposited along the shoreline.

**Islands**

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/28/1628-050-50922A3F/Andaman-redwood-trees-Cinque-Islands-Rutland-Island.jpg)

[Andaman Islands](https://cdn.britannica.com/28/1628-050-50922A3F/Andaman-redwood-trees-Cinque-Islands-Rutland-Island.jpg)

Andaman redwood on the coast of Cinque Island, south of Rutland Island, Andaman Islands.(more)

Several archipelagoes in the [Indian Ocean](https://www.britannica.com/place/Indian-Ocean) are politically a part of India. The [union territory](https://www.britannica.com/topic/union-territory) of [Lakshadweep](https://www.britannica.com/place/Lakshadweep) is a group of small coral atolls in the Arabian Sea to the west of the Malabar Coast. Far off the eastern coast, separating the Bay of Bengal and the [Andaman Sea](https://www.britannica.com/place/Andaman-Sea), lie the considerably larger and hillier chains of the [Andaman and Nicobar Islands](https://www.britannica.com/place/Andaman-and-Nicobar-Islands), also a union territory; the Andamans are closer to [Myanmar](https://www.britannica.com/place/Myanmar) and the Nicobars closer to [Indonesia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Indonesia) than to the Indian mainland.

**Drainage**

More than 70 percent of India’s territory drains into the Bay of Bengal via the Ganges-Brahmaputra river system and a number of large and small peninsular rivers. Areas draining into the Arabian Sea, accounting for about 20 percent of the total, lie partially within the Indus drainage [basin](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/basin) (in northwestern India) and partially within a completely separate set of drainage basins well to the south (in Gujarat, western Madhya Pradesh, northern Maharashtra, and areas west of the Western Ghats). Most of the remaining area, less than 10 percent of the total, lies in regions of interior drainage, notably in the Great Indian Desert of [Rajasthan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rajasthan) state (another is in the [Aksai Chin](https://www.britannica.com/place/Aksai-Chin), a barren plateau in a portion of [Kashmir](https://www.britannica.com/place/Kashmir-region-Indian-subcontinent) administered by [China](https://www.britannica.com/place/China) but claimed by India). Finally, less than 1 percent of India’s area, along the border with Myanmar, drains into the Andaman Sea via tributaries of the [Irrawaddy River](https://www.britannica.com/place/Irrawaddy-River).

**Drainage into the**[**Bay of Bengal**](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bay-of-Bengal)

**The**[**Ganges-Brahmaputra**](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ganges-River)**river system**

The Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers, together with their tributaries, drain about one-third of India. The Ganges (Ganga), considered sacred by the [country’s](https://www.britannica.com/topic/nation-state) Hindu population, is 1,560 miles (2,510 km) long. Although its deltaic portion lies mostly in [Bangladesh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bangladesh), the course of the Ganges within India is longer than that of any of the country’s other rivers. It has numerous headstreams that are fed by [runoff](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/runoff) and meltwater from Himalayan glaciers and mountain peaks. The main headwater, the [Bhagirathi River](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bhagirathi-River), rises at an elevation of about 10,000 feet (3,000 meters) at the foot of the [Gangotri](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gangotri-India) Glacier, considered sacred by Hindus.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/13/189813-050-BF6163E7/Manikarnika-Ghat-cremation-site-Hindu-Ganges-River.jpg)

[Varanasi, India: Manikarnika Ghat](https://cdn.britannica.com/13/189813-050-BF6163E7/Manikarnika-Ghat-cremation-site-Hindu-Ganges-River.jpg)

Manikarnika Ghat, a Hindu cremation site along the Ganges River in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India.(more)

The Ganges enters the [Indo-Gangetic Plain](https://www.britannica.com/place/Indo-Gangetic-Plain) at the city of [Haridwar](https://www.britannica.com/place/Haridwar) (Hardwar). From Haridwar to [Kolkata](https://www.britannica.com/place/Kolkata) it is joined by numerous tributaries. Proceeding from west to east, the [Ghaghara](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ghaghara-River), [Gandak](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gandak-River), and [Kosi](https://www.britannica.com/place/Kosi-River) rivers, all of which emerge from the [Himalayas](https://www.britannica.com/place/Himalayas), join the Ganges from the north, while the [Yamuna](https://www.britannica.com/place/Yamuna-River) and [Son](https://www.britannica.com/place/Son-River)are the two most important tributaries from the south. The Yamuna, which also has a Himalayan source (the Yamunotri glacier) and flows roughly parallel to the Ganges throughout its length, receives the flow of several important rivers, including the [Chambal](https://www.britannica.com/place/Chambal-River), [Betwa](https://www.britannica.com/place/Betwa-River), and [Ken](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/Ken), which originate in India’s peninsular foreland. Of the northern tributaries of the Ganges, the [Kosi](https://www.britannica.com/place/Kosi-River), India’s most-destructive river (referred to as the “Sorrow of Bihar”), warrants special mention. Because of its large catchment in the Himalayas of [Nepal](https://www.britannica.com/place/Nepal) and its gentle gradient once it reaches the plain, the Kosi is unable to discharge the large volume of water it carries at its peak flows, and it frequently floods and changes its course.

The seasonal flows of the Ganges and other rivers fed by meltwaters from the Himalayas vary considerably less than those of the exclusively rain-fed peninsular rivers. That consistency of flow [enhances](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/enhances) their suitability for irrigation and—where the diversion of water for irrigation is not excessive—for navigation as well.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/33/197233-050-932B50CA/course-Brahmaputra-River-Himalayas-Tibet.jpg)

[Brahmaputra River](https://cdn.britannica.com/33/197233-050-932B50CA/course-Brahmaputra-River-Himalayas-Tibet.jpg)

The upper course of the Brahmaputra River flows through Tibet in the Himalayas.(more)

Although the total length of the [Brahmaputra](https://www.britannica.com/place/Brahmaputra-River) (about 1,800 miles [2,900 km]) exceeds that of the Ganges, only 450 miles (725 km) of its course lies within India. The Brahmaputra, like the Indus, has its source in a trans-Himalayan area about 60 miles (100 km) southeast of [Mapam Lake](https://www.britannica.com/place/Lake-Mapam) in the [Tibet Autonomous Region](https://www.britannica.com/place/Tibet) of [China](https://www.britannica.com/place/China). The river runs east across Tibet for more than half its total length before cutting into India at the northern border of [Arunachal Pradesh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Arunachal-Pradesh) state. It then flows south and west through the state of [Assam](https://www.britannica.com/place/Assam-Valley) and south into Bangladesh, where it empties into the vast [Ganges-Brahmaputra delta](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ganges-delta). The narrow Brahmaputra basin in Assam is prone to flooding because of its large catchment areas, parts of which experience exceedingly heavy precipitation.

**Peninsular rivers**

The peninsular drainage into the Bay of Bengal includes a number of major rivers, most notably the Mahanadi, Godavari, [Krishna](https://www.britannica.com/place/Krishna-district-India), and Kaveri. Except for the Mahanadi, the headwaters of those rivers are in the high-rainfall zones of the [Western Ghats](https://www.britannica.com/place/Western-Ghats), and they [traverse](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/traverse) the entire width of the plateau (generally from northwest to southeast) before reaching the Bay of Bengal. The Mahanadi has its source at the southern edge of the [Chhattisgarh Plain](https://www.britannica.com/place/Chhattisgarh-Plain).

India’s peninsular rivers have relatively steep gradients and thus rarely give rise to floods of the type that occur in the plains of northern India, despite considerable variations in flow from the dry to wet seasons. The lower courses of a number of those rivers are marked by rapids and gorges, usually as they cross the Eastern Ghats. Because of their steep gradients, rocky underlying terrain, and variable flow regimes, the peninsular rivers are not navigable.

**Drainage into the**[**Arabian Sea**](https://www.britannica.com/place/Arabian-Sea)

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/65/83465-050-0CF84222/Indus-River-Himalayas.jpg)

[Indus River](https://cdn.britannica.com/65/83465-050-0CF84222/Indus-River-Himalayas.jpg)

In the upper part of its course the Indus River flows in the Himalayas of northern India.(more)

A substantial part of northwestern India is included in the [Indus](https://www.britannica.com/place/Indus-River) [drainage basin](https://www.britannica.com/science/drainage-basin), which India shares with China, [Afghanistan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Afghanistan), and [Pakistan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Pakistan). The Indus and its longest tributary, the [Sutlej](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sutlej-River), both rise in the trans-Himalayan region of Tibet. The Indus initially flows to the northwest between towering mountain ranges and through [Jammu and Kashmir](https://www.britannica.com/place/Jammu-and-Kashmir) state before entering the Pakistani-administered portion of [Kashmir](https://www.britannica.com/place/Kashmir-region-Indian-subcontinent). It then travels generally to the southwest through Pakistan until it reaches the Arabian Sea. The Sutlej also flows northwest from its source but enters India farther south, at the border of [Himachal Pradesh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Himachal-Pradesh) state. From there it travels west into the Indian state of Punjab and eventually enters Pakistan, where it flows into the Indus.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/51/10651-004-5E03D7B8/Jhelum-River-Srinagar-Jammu-and-Kashmir-India.jpg)

[Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir, India: Jhelum River](https://cdn.britannica.com/51/10651-004-5E03D7B8/Jhelum-River-Srinagar-Jammu-and-Kashmir-India.jpg)

The Jhelum River at Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir, India.

Between the Indus and the Sutlej lie several other major Indus tributaries. The [Jhelum](https://www.britannica.com/place/Jhelum-River), the northernmost of those rivers, flows out of the [Pir Panjal Range](https://www.britannica.com/place/Pir-Panjal-Range) into the [Vale of Kashmir](https://www.britannica.com/place/Vale-of-Kashmir) and thence via [Baramula](https://www.britannica.com/place/Baramula) [Gorge](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/Gorge) into Pakistani-administered Kashmir. The three others—the [Chenab](https://www.britannica.com/place/Chenab-River), [Ravi](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ravi-River), and [Beas](https://www.britannica.com/place/Beas-River)—originate in the Himalayas within Himachal Pradesh. The Chenab travels across Jammu and Kashmir before flowing into Pakistan; the [Ravi](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ravi-River) forms a part of the southern boundary between Jammu and Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh states and thereafter a short stretch of the India-Pakistan border prior to entering Pakistan; and the [Beas](https://www.britannica.com/place/Beas-River) flows entirely within India, joining the Sutlej in the Indian state of [Punjab](https://www.britannica.com/place/Punjab-state-India). The area through which the five Indus tributaries flow has traditionally been called the Punjab (from Persian *panj*, “five,” and *āb*, “water”). That area currently falls in the Indian state of [Punjab](https://www.britannica.com/place/Punjab-province-Pakistan) (containing the Sutlej and the Beas) and the Pakistani province of Punjab. Despite low rainfall in the Punjab plains, the moderately high runoff from the Himalayas ensures a year-round flow in the Indus and its tributaries, which are extensively utilized for canal irrigation.

Farther to the south, another notable river flowing into the Arabian Sea is the [Luni](https://www.britannica.com/place/Luni-River) of southern [Rajasthan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rajasthan), which in most years has carried enough water to reach the Great [Rann of Kachchh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rann-of-Kachchh) in western [Gujarat](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gujarat). Also flowing through Gujarat is the [Mahi River](https://www.britannica.com/place/Mahi-River), as well as the two most important west-flowing rivers of peninsular India—the [Narmada](https://www.britannica.com/place/Narmada-River) (drainage basin 38,200 square miles [98,900 square km]) and [Tapi](https://www.britannica.com/place/Tapti-River) (Tapti; 25,000 square miles [65,000 square km]). The Narmada and its basin have undergone large-scale multipurpose development. Most of the other peninsular rivers draining into the Arabian Sea have short courses, and those that flow westward from headwaters in the Western Ghats have seasonally torrential flows.

**Lakes and inland drainage**

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/64/41264-004-8F69272C/Resort-house-Wular-Lake-state-Vale-of.jpg)

[Jammu and Kashmir, India: Wular Lake](https://cdn.britannica.com/64/41264-004-8F69272C/Resort-house-Wular-Lake-state-Vale-of.jpg)

Resort house on Wular Lake in the Vale of Kashmir, Jammu and Kashmir, India.(more)

For such a large country, India has few natural lakes. Most of the lakes in the Himalayas were formed when glaciers either dug out a basin or dammed an area with earth and rocks. [Wular Lake](https://www.britannica.com/place/Wular-Lake) in Jammu and Kashmir, by contrast, is the result of a tectonic depression. Although its area fluctuates, Wular Lake is the largest natural freshwater lake in India.

Inland drainage in India is mainly [ephemeral](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ephemeral) and almost entirely in the arid and semiarid part of northwestern India, particularly in the [Great Indian Desert](https://www.britannica.com/place/Thar-Desert) of Rajasthan, where there are several ephemeral [salt lakes](https://www.britannica.com/science/saline-lake)—most prominently [Sambhar Salt Lake](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sambhar-Salt-Lake), the largest lake in India. Those lakes are fed by short [intermittent](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intermittent) streams, which experience flash floods during occasional intense rains and become dry and lose their identity once the rains are over. The water in the lakes also evaporates and subsequently leaves a layer of white saline soils, from which a considerable amount of salt is commercially produced. Many of India’s largest lakes are reservoirs formed by damming rivers.

**Soils**

There is a wide range of [soil](https://www.britannica.com/science/soil) types in India. As products of natural environmental processes, they can be broadly divided into two groups: in situ soils and transported soils. The in situ soils get their distinguishing features from the parent rocks, which are sieved by flowing water, sliding glaciers, and drifting wind and are deposited on landforms such as river valleys and coastal plains. The process of sieving such soils has led to [deposition](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/deposition) of materials in layers without any marked pedologic horizons, though it has altered the original chemical [composition](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/composition) of the in situ soils.

Among the in situ soils are the red-to-yellow (including laterite) and black soils known locally as [*regur*](https://www.britannica.com/science/regur). After those the alluvial soil is the third most-common type. Also significant are the desert soils of Rajasthan, the saline soils in Gujarat, southern Rajasthan, and some coastal areas, and the mountain soils of the Himalayas. The type of soil is determined by numerous factors, including climate, relief, elevation, and drainage, as well as by the composition of the underlying rock material.

**In situ soils**

**Red-to-yellow soils**

Those soils are [encountered](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/encountered) over extensive nonalluvial tracts of peninsular India and are made up of such acidic rocks as granite, gneiss, and schist. They develop in areas in which rainfall leaches soluble minerals out of the ground and results in a loss of chemically basic constituents; a corresponding proportional increase in oxidized iron imparts a reddish hue to many such soils. Hence, they are commonly described as ferralitic soils. In extreme cases, the concentration of oxides of iron leads to formation of a hard crust, in which case they are described as [lateritic](https://www.britannica.com/science/laterite) (for *later*, the Latin term meaning “brick”) soils. The heavily leached red-to-yellow soils are concentrated in the high-rainfall areas of the Western Ghats, the western [Kathiawar Peninsula](https://www.britannica.com/place/Kathiawar-Peninsula), eastern Rajasthan, the Eastern Ghats, the [Chota Nagpur](https://www.britannica.com/place/Chota-Nagpur) plateau region, and other upland tracts of northeastern India. Less-leached red-to-yellow soils occur in areas of low rainfall immediately east of the Western Ghats in the dry interior of the [Deccan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Deccan). Red-to-yellow soils are usually infertile, but that problem is partly [ameliorated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ameliorated) in forested tracts, where humus concentration and the recycling of nutrients help restore fertility in the topsoil.

**Black soils**

Among the in situ soils of India, the black soils found in the lava-covered areas are the most [conspicuous](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conspicuous). Those soils are often referred to as [*regur*](https://www.britannica.com/science/regur) but are popularly known as “black cotton soils,” since cotton has been the most common traditional crop in areas where they are found. Black soils are derivatives of trap lava and are spread mostly across interior [Gujarat](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gujarat), [Maharashtra](https://www.britannica.com/place/Maharashtra), [Karnataka](https://www.britannica.com/place/Karnataka-linguistic-region-India), and [Madhya Pradesh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Madhya-Pradesh) on the [Deccan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Deccan) lava plateau and the [Malwa Plateau](https://www.britannica.com/place/Malwa-Plateau), where there is both moderate rainfall and underlying basaltic rock. Because of their high clay content, black soils develop wide cracks during the dry season, but their iron-rich granular structure makes them resistant to wind and water erosion. They are poor in humus yet highly moisture-retentive, thus responding well to irrigation. Those soils are also found on many [peripheral](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/peripheral) tracts where the underlying basalt has been shifted from its original location by fluvial processes. The sifting has only led to an increased concentration of clastic contents.

[**Alluvial**](https://www.britannica.com/science/alluvium)**soils**

Alluvial soils are widespread. They occur throughout the [Indo-Gangetic Plain](https://www.britannica.com/place/Indo-Gangetic-Plain) and along the lower courses of virtually all the [country’s](https://www.britannica.com/topic/nation-state) major rivers (especially the deltas along the east coast). The nondeltaic plains along India’s coasts are also marked by narrow ribbons of alluvium.

New alluvium found on much of the Indo-Gangetic floodplain is called [*khadar*](https://www.britannica.com/science/khadar) and is extremely fertile and uniform in texture; conversely, the old alluvium on the slightly elevated terraces, termed *[bhangar](https://www.britannica.com/science/bhangar)*, carries patches of [alkaline](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/alkaline) efflorescences, called *usar*, rendering some areas infertile. In the Ganges basin, sandy aquifers holding an enormous reserve of groundwater ensure irrigation and help make the plain the most agriculturally productive region of the country.

[**Climate**](https://www.britannica.com/science/tropical-monsoon-and-trade-wind-littoral-climate)

India provides the world’s most-pronounced example of a [monsoon climate](https://www.britannica.com/science/monsoon). The wet and dry seasons of the [Indian monsoon](https://www.britannica.com/science/Indian-monsoon) system, along with the annual temperature fluctuations, produce three general climatic periods over much of the country: (1) hot wet weather from about mid-June to the end of September, (2) cool dry weather from early October to February, and (3) hot dry weather (though normally with high atmospheric humidity) from about March to mid-June. The actual [duration](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/duration) of those periods may vary by several weeks, not only from one part of India to another but also from year to year. Regional differences, which are often considerable, result from a number of internal factors—including elevation, type of relief, and proximity to bodies of water.

**The**[**monsoons**](https://www.britannica.com/science/monsoon)

A [monsoon](https://www.britannica.com/science/monsoon) system is characterized by a seasonal reversal of prevailing wind directions and by alternating wet and dry seasons. In India the wet season, called the southwest monsoon, occurs from about mid-June to early October, when winds from the [Indian Ocean](https://www.britannica.com/place/Indian-Ocean) carry moisture-laden air across the subcontinent, causing heavy rainfall and often considerable flooding. Usually about three-fourths of the country’s total annual precipitation falls during those months. During the driest months (called the retreating monsoon), especially from November through February, that pattern is reversed, as dry air from the Asian interior moves across India toward the ocean. October and March through May, by contrast, are typically periods of [desultory](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/desultory) breezes with no strong prevailing patterns.

**The southwest monsoon**

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/72/123872-050-49243DF7/Monsoon-clouds-Lucknow-India.jpg)

[monsoon](https://cdn.britannica.com/72/123872-050-49243DF7/Monsoon-clouds-Lucknow-India.jpg)

Monsoon clouds over Lucknow, India.

Although the winds of the rainy season are called the southwest monsoon, they actually follow two generally distinct branches, one initially flowing eastward from the [Arabian Sea](https://www.britannica.com/place/Arabian-Sea) and the other northward from the [Bay of Bengal](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bay-of-Bengal). The former begins by lashing the west coast of peninsular India and rising over the [adjacent](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/adjacent) Western Ghats. When crossing those mountains, the air cools (thus losing its moisture-bearing capacity) and deposits rain copiously on the windward side of that highland barrier. Annual precipitation in parts of the region exceeds 100 inches (2,540 mm) and is as high as 245 inches (6,250 mm) at [Mahabaleshwar](https://www.britannica.com/place/Mahabaleshwar) on the crest of the [Western Ghats](https://www.britannica.com/place/Western-Ghats). Conversely, as the winds descend on the leeward side of the Western Ghats, the air’s moisture-bearing capacity increases and the resultant [rain shadow](https://www.britannica.com/science/rain-shadow) makes for a belt of semiarid terrain, much of it with less than 25 inches (635 mm) of precipitation per year.

The Bay of Bengal branch of the monsoon sweeps across eastern India and [Bangladesh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bangladesh) and, in several areas, gives rise to rainfall in much the same way as occurs along the Western Ghats. The effect is particularly pronounced in the [Shillong Plateau](https://www.britannica.com/place/Shillong-Plateau), where at [Cherrapunji](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cherrapunji) the average annual rainfall is 450 inches (11,430 mm), one of the heaviest in the world. The Brahmaputra valley to the north also experiences a rain-shadow effect; the problem is [mitigated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mitigated), however, by the adjacent [Himalayas](https://www.britannica.com/place/Himalayas), which cause the winds to rise again, thereby establishing a parallel belt of heavy precipitation. Blocked by the Himalayas, the Bay of Bengal branch of the monsoon is diverted westward up the Gangetic Plain, reaching Punjab only in the first week of July.

In the Gangetic Plain the two branches merge into one. By the time they reach the Punjab their moisture is largely spent. The gradual reduction in the amount of rainfall toward the west is evidenced by the decline from 64 inches (1,625 mm) at [Kolkata](https://www.britannica.com/place/Kolkata) to 26 inches (660 mm) at [Delhi](https://www.britannica.com/place/Delhi) and to desert conditions still farther west. Over the northeastern portion of peninsular India, the two branches also intermittently collide, creating weak weather fronts with [sufficient](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/sufficient) rainfall to produce patches of fairly high precipitation (more than 60 inches [1,520 mm]) in the [Chota Nagpur](https://www.britannica.com/place/Chota-Nagpur) plateau.

**Rainfall during the retreating monsoon**

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/51/12951-004-CCD368F8/oasis-Chengalpattu-Mamallapuram-plain-India-Tamil-Nadu.jpg)

[Mahabalipuram, Tamil Nadu, India: oasis](https://cdn.britannica.com/51/12951-004-CCD368F8/oasis-Chengalpattu-Mamallapuram-plain-India-Tamil-Nadu.jpg)

An oasis on the sandy plain near Mahabalipuram, southeast of Chingleput, Tamil Nadu, India.(more)

Much of India experiences infrequent and relatively feeble [precipitation](https://www.britannica.com/science/precipitation) during the retreating [monsoon](https://www.britannica.com/science/monsoon). An exception to that rule occurs along the southeastern coast of India and for some distance inland. When the retreating monsoon blows from the northeast across the [Bay of Bengal](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bay-of-Bengal), it picks up a significant amount of moisture, which is subsequently released after moving back onto the peninsula. Thus, from October to December the coast of [Tamil Nadu](https://www.britannica.com/place/Tamil-Nadu) state receives at least half of its roughly 40 inches (1,000 mm) of annual precipitation. That rainy extension of the generally dry retreating monsoon is called the northeast, or winter, monsoon.

Another type of winter precipitation occurs in northern India, which receives weak cyclonic storms originating in the Mediterranean basin. In the [Himalayas](https://www.britannica.com/place/Himalayas) those storms bring weeks of drizzling rain and cloudiness and are followed by waves of cold temperatures and snowfall. [Jammu and Kashmir](https://www.britannica.com/place/Jammu-and-Kashmir) in particular receives much of its precipitation from the storms.

[**Tropical cyclones**](https://www.britannica.com/science/tropical-cyclone)

Fierce [tropical cyclones](https://www.britannica.com/science/tropical-cyclone) occur in India during what may be called the premonsoon, early monsoon, or postmonsoon periods. Originating in both the Bay of Bengal and the [Arabian Sea](https://www.britannica.com/place/Arabian-Sea), tropical cyclones often attain velocities of more than 100 miles (160 km) per hour and are [notorious](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/notorious) for causing intense rain and storm tides (surges) as they cross the coast of India. The [Andhra Pradesh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Andhra-Pradesh), [Odisha](https://www.britannica.com/place/Odisha), and [West Bengal](https://www.britannica.com/place/West-Bengal) coasts are especially susceptible to such storms.

**Importance to agriculture**

Monsoons play a pivotal role in Indian agriculture, and the substantial year-to-year variability of rainfall, in both timing and quantity, introduces much uncertainty in the [country’s](https://www.britannica.com/topic/nation-state) crop yield. Good years bring bumper crops, but years of poor rain may result in total crop failure over large areas, especially where irrigation is lacking. Large-scale flooding can also cause damage to crops. As a general rule, the higher an area’s average annual precipitation, the more dependable its rainfall, but few areas of India have an average precipitation high enough to be free from the possibility of occasional [drought](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/drought) and consequent crop failure.

**Temperatures**

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/92/182892-050-32936BD1/rickshaw-drivers-fares-India-Kolkata-heat-wave-May-20-2015.jpg)

[Kolkata, India: rickshaw drivers](https://cdn.britannica.com/92/182892-050-32936BD1/rickshaw-drivers-fares-India-Kolkata-heat-wave-May-20-2015.jpg)

Rickshaw drivers in Kolkata, India, resting between fares during the intense heat wave in South Asia in 2015.(more)

Temperatures in India generally are the warmest in May or June, just prior to the cooling downpours of the southwest monsoon. A secondary maximum often occurs in September or October when precipitation wanes. The temperature range tends to be significantly less along the coastal plains than in interior locations. The range also tends to increase with latitude. Near India’s southern extremity the seasonal range is no more than a few degrees; for example, at [Thiruvananthapuram](https://www.britannica.com/place/Thiruvananthapuram) (Trivandrum), in [Kerala](https://www.britannica.com/place/Kerala), there is an average fluctuation of just 4.3 °F (2.4 °C) around an annual mean temperature of 81 °F (27 °C). In the northwest, however, the range is much greater, as, for example, at [Ambala](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ambala), in [Haryana](https://www.britannica.com/place/Haryana), where the temperature fluctuates from 30 °F (−1 °C) in January to 118 °F (48 °C) in June. Temperatures are also moderated wherever elevations are significant, and many Himalayan resort towns, called hill stations (a [legacy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/legacy) of British colonial rule), afford welcome relief from India’s sometimes oppressive heat. Occasionally, heat waves, such as the one that [spread over much of the subcontinent in mid-2015](https://www.britannica.com/event/India-Pakistan-heat-wave-of-2015), can be highly deadly.

**Plant and animal life**

**Vegetation**

The flora of India largely reflect the [country’s](https://www.britannica.com/topic/nation-state) distribution of rainfall. Tropical broad-leaved evergreen and mixed, partially evergreen forests grow in areas with high precipitation; in successively less rainy areas are found moist and dry deciduous forests, scrub jungle, grassland, and desert vegetation. Coniferous forests are confined to the [Himalayas](https://www.britannica.com/place/Himalayas). There are about 17,000 species of flowering plants in the country. The subcontinent’s physical isolation, caused by its relief and climatic barriers, has resulted in a considerable number of [endemic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/endemic) flora.

Roughly one-fourth of the country is forested. However, beginning in the late 20th century, forest depletion accelerated considerably to make room for more agriculture and urban-industrial development. That activity has taken its toll on many Indian plant species. About 20 species of higher-order plants are believed to have become extinct, and already some 1,300 species are considered to be endangered.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/31/1631-050-23506727/vegetation-waterways-state-Kerala-India.jpg)

[Kerala, India: tropical vegetation](https://cdn.britannica.com/31/1631-050-23506727/vegetation-waterways-state-Kerala-India.jpg)

Tropical vegetation lining coastal waterways, Kerala state, southwestern India.(more)

Tropical evergreen and mixed evergreen-deciduous forests generally occupy areas with more than 80 inches (2,000 mm) of rainfall per year, mainly in upper [Assam](https://www.britannica.com/place/Assam), the [Western Ghats](https://www.britannica.com/place/Western-Ghats) (especially in Kerala), parts of [Odisha](https://www.britannica.com/place/Odisha), and the [Andaman and Nicobar Islands](https://www.britannica.com/place/Andaman-and-Nicobar-Islands). Common trees in those tall multistoried forests include species of *Mesua*, *Toona ciliata*, *Hopea*, and *Eugenia*, as well as *gurjun* (*Dipterocarpus turbinatus*), which grows to heights [exceeding](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/exceeding) 165 feet (50 metres) on the [Andaman Islands](https://www.britannica.com/place/Andaman-Islands) and in Assam. The mixed evergreen-deciduous forests of [Kerala](https://www.britannica.com/place/Kerala) and the [Bengal](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bengal-region-Asia) Himalayas have a large variety of commercially valuable hardwood trees, of which *Lagerstroemia lanceolata*, East Indian, or Malabar, *kino* (*Pterocarpus marsupium*), and rosewood (*Dalbergia latifolia*) are well known.

Tropical moist deciduous forests generally occur in areas with 60 to 80 inches (1,500 to 2,000 mm) of rainfall, such as the northern part of the Eastern Ghats, east-central India, and western [Karnataka](https://www.britannica.com/place/Karnataka-state-India). Dry deciduous forests, which grow in places receiving less than 60 inches (1,500 mm) of precipitation, characterize the subhumid and semiarid regions of [Gujarat](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gujarat), [Madhya Pradesh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Madhya-Pradesh), eastern [Rajasthan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rajasthan), central [Andhra Pradesh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Andhra-Pradesh), and western [Tamil Nadu](https://www.britannica.com/place/Tamil-Nadu). Teak, *sal* (*Shorea robusta*), axle-wood (*Anogeissus latifolia*), *tendu*, *ain*, and *Adina cardifolia* are some of the major deciduous species.

Tropical thorn forests occupy areas in various parts of the country, though mainly in the northern [Gangetic Plain](https://www.britannica.com/place/Indo-Gangetic-Plain) and southern peninsular India. Those forests generally grow in areas with less than 24 inches (600 mm) of rain but are also found in more humid areas, where deciduous forests have been degraded because of unregulated grazing, felling, and [shifting agriculture](https://www.britannica.com/topic/shifting-agriculture). In those areas, such xerophytic (drought-tolerant) trees as species of acacia (babul and catechu) and *Butea monosperma* predominate.

The important commercial species include [teak](https://www.britannica.com/plant/teak) and *sal*. Teak, the foremost timber species, is largely confined to the peninsula. During the period of British rule, it was used extensively in shipbuilding, and certain forests were therefore reserved as teak plantations. [*Sal*](https://www.britannica.com/plant/sal) is confined to the lower Himalayas, [Uttar Pradesh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Uttar-Pradesh), [Bihar](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bihar), [Jharkhand](https://www.britannica.com/place/Jharkhand), [Chhattisgarh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Chhattisgarh), Assam, and Madhya Pradesh. Other species with commercial uses are [sandalwood](https://www.britannica.com/plant/sandalwood) (*Santalum album*), the fragrant wood that is perhaps the most [precious](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/precious) in the world, and [rosewood](https://www.britannica.com/plant/rosewood-tree-and-timber), an evergreen used for carving and furniture.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/64/6464-004-19F6AF56/Cluster-seeds-betel-nuts-palm.jpg)

[Betel palm nuts](https://cdn.britannica.com/64/6464-004-19F6AF56/Cluster-seeds-betel-nuts-palm.jpg)

Cluster of betel nuts, seeds of the betel palm (*Areca catechu*).

Many other species are noteworthy, some because of special ecological [niches](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/niches) they occupy. Deltaic areas, for example, are fringed with [mangrove](https://www.britannica.com/plant/mangrove) forests, in which the dominant species—called *sundri* or *sundari* (*Heritiera fomes*), which is not, properly speaking, a mangrove—is characterized by respiratory roots that emerge from the tidal water. [Conspicuous](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Conspicuous) features of the tropical landscape are the [palms](https://www.britannica.com/plant/palm-tree), which are represented in India by some 100 species. Coconut and betel nut (the fruit of which is chewed) are [cultivated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cultivated) mainly in coastal [Karnataka](https://www.britannica.com/place/Karnataka-linguistic-region-India) and Kerala. Among the common, majestic-looking trees found throughout much of India are the mango—a major source of fruit—and two revered *Ficus* species, the pipal (famous as the [Bo tree](https://www.britannica.com/plant/Bo-tree) of the [Buddha](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Buddha-founder-of-Buddhism)) and the [banyan](https://www.britannica.com/plant/banyan). Many types of bamboo (members of the grass family) grow over much of the country, with a concentration in the rainy areas.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/82/102682-050-9177C49B/Streams-settlements-mountains-Jammu-and-Kashmir-India.jpg)

[Jammu and Kashmir: montane vegetation](https://cdn.britannica.com/82/102682-050-9177C49B/Streams-settlements-mountains-Jammu-and-Kashmir-India.jpg)

Montane vegetation in Jammu and Kashmir, northwestern India.

Vegetation in the Himalayas can be generally divided into a number of elevation zones. Mixed evergreen-deciduous forests dominate the foothill areas up to a height of 5,000 feet (1,500 meters). Above that level subtropical pine forests make their appearance, followed by the Himalayan moist-temperate forests of oak, fir, deodar (*Cedrus deodara*), and spruce. The highest tree zone, consisting of alpine shrubs, is found up to an elevation of about 15,000 feet (4,500 meters). Rhododendrons are common at 12,000 feet (3,700 meters), above which occasional junipers and alpine meadows are encountered. Zones overlap considerably, and there are wide transitional bands.

**Animal life**

India forms an important segment of what is known as the [Oriental](https://www.britannica.com/science/Oriental-region-faunal-region), or Sino-Indian, [biogeographic region](https://www.britannica.com/science/biogeographic-region), which extends eastward from India to include mainland and much of [insular Southeast Asia](https://www.britannica.com/place/East-Indies). Its fauna are numerous and highly [diverse](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/diverse).

**Mammals**

Mammals of the submontane region include [Indian elephants](https://www.britannica.com/animal/Asian-elephant) (*Elephas maximus*)—associated from time immemorial with mythology and the splendor of regal pageantry—the great one-horned Indian rhinoceroses, a wide variety of ruminants, and various primates. There are also numerous predators represented by various genera.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/30/1630-050-96AEFF77/elephant-bathing-Kabani-River-Mysuru-India-Karnataka.jpg)

[Mysore, Karnataka, India: elephant in Kabani River](https://cdn.britannica.com/30/1630-050-96AEFF77/elephant-bathing-Kabani-River-Mysuru-India-Karnataka.jpg)

Elephant and rider in the Kabani River near Mysore, Karnataka, India.

Wild herds of elephants can be observed in several areas, particularly in such renowned national parks as [Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary](https://www.britannica.com/place/Periyar-Wildlife-Sanctuary), in Kerala, and Bandipur, in Karnataka. The [Indian rhinoceros](https://www.britannica.com/animal/Indian-rhinoceros) is protected at [Kaziranga National Park](https://www.britannica.com/place/Kaziranga-National-Park) and [Manas Wildlife Sanctuary](https://www.britannica.com/place/Manas-Wildlife-Sanctuary) in Assam.

Examples of ruminants include the wild Indian bison, or [gaur](https://www.britannica.com/animal/gaur) (*Bos gaurus*), which [inhabits](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/inhabits) peninsular forests; Indian buffalo; four-horned antelope (*Tetracerus quadricornis*), known locally as *chousingha*; blackbuck (*Antilope cervicapra*), or Indian antelope; antelope known as the *nilgai* (*Boselaphus tragocamelus*), or bluebuck; and Indian [wild ass](https://www.britannica.com/animal/ass) (*Equus hemionus khur*), or *ghorkhar*. There are also several species of deer, such as the rare [Kashmir](https://www.britannica.com/place/Kashmir-region-Indian-subcontinent) stag (*hangul*), swamp deer (*[barasingha](https://www.britannica.com/animal/barasingha)*), [spotted deer](https://www.britannica.com/animal/chital), [musk deer](https://www.britannica.com/animal/musk-deer), brow-antlered deer (*Cervus eldi eldi*; an endangered species known locally as the *sangai* or *thamin*), and [mouse deer](https://www.britannica.com/animal/chevrotain).

Among the primates are various [monkeys](https://www.britannica.com/animal/monkey), including rhesus monkeys and gray, or [Hanuman](https://www.britannica.com/animal/Hanuman-langur), langurs (*Presbytis entellus*), both of which are found in forested areas and near human settlements. The only ape found in India, the hoolock gibbon, is confined to the rainforests of the eastern region. Lion-tailed macaques of the Western Ghats, with halos of hair around their faces, are becoming rare because of poaching.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/96/170796-050-07DF2FD9/Bengal-tiger-Bandhavgarh-National-Park-India-Madhya.jpg)

[tiger](https://cdn.britannica.com/96/170796-050-07DF2FD9/Bengal-tiger-Bandhavgarh-National-Park-India-Madhya.jpg)

Bengal tiger in Bandhavgarh National Park, Madhya Pradesh, India.

The country’s [carnivores](https://www.britannica.com/science/carnivore-consumer) include cats, dogs, foxes, jackals, and mongooses. Among the animals of prey, the Asiatic lion—now confined to [Gir National Park](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gir-National-Park), in the [Kathiawar Peninsula](https://www.britannica.com/place/Kathiawar-Peninsula) of Gujarat—is the only [extant](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/extant) subspecies of lion found outside of Africa. The majestic but [endangered](https://www.britannica.com/science/endangered-species) [Bengal tiger](https://www.britannica.com/animal/Bengal-tiger), the national animal of India, is known for its rich colour, illusive design, and [formidable](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/formidable) power. Of the five extant [tiger](https://www.britannica.com/animal/tiger) subspecies worldwide, the Bengal tiger is the most numerous. [Tigers](https://www.britannica.com/animal/tiger) are found in the forests of the [Tarai](https://www.britannica.com/place/Tarai) region of northern India, Bihar, and Assam; the [Ganges delta](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ganges-delta) in West Bengal; the Eastern Ghats; Madhya Pradesh; and eastern Rajasthan. Once on the verge of extinction, Indian tigers have increased to several thousand, thanks largely to Project Tiger, which has established reserves in various parts of the country. Among other cats are leopards, clouded leopards, and various smaller species.

The [Great Himalayas](https://www.britannica.com/place/Great-Himalayas) have notable fauna that includes wild sheep and goats, *markhor* (*Capra falconeri*), and ibex. Lesser pandas and snow leopards are also found in the upper reaches of the mountains.

Oxen, buffalo, horses, dromedary camels, sheep, goats, and pigs are common domesticated animals. The cattle breed Brahman, or zebu (*Bos indicus*), a species of ox, is an important [draft animal](https://www.britannica.com/animal/draft-animal).

[**Birds**](https://www.britannica.com/animal/bird-animal)

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/30/73330-050-BB3037E5/Bird-sanctuary-Keoladeo-Ghana-National-Park-Bharatpur.jpg)

[Keoladeo Ghana National Park](https://cdn.britannica.com/30/73330-050-BB3037E5/Bird-sanctuary-Keoladeo-Ghana-National-Park-Bharatpur.jpg)

Bird sanctuary at Keoladeo Ghana National Park, near Bharatpur, Rajasthan, India.(more)

India has more than 1,200 species of [birds](https://www.britannica.com/animal/bird-animal) and perhaps 2,000 subspecies, although some migratory species are found in the country only during the winter. The amount of avian life in the country represents roughly one-eighth of the world’s species. The major reason for such a high level of [diversity](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/diversity) is the presence of a wide variety of habitats, from the cold and dry alpine tundra of [Ladakh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ladakh) and [Sikkim](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sikkim) to the steamy, tangled jungles of the [Sundarbans](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sundarbans) and wet, moist forests of the Western Ghats and the northeast. The country’s many larger rivers provide deltas and backwaters for aquatic animal life, and many smaller rivers drain internally and end in vast saline lakes that are important breeding grounds for such birds as black-necked cranes (*Grus nigricollis*), barheaded geese (*Anser indicus*), and great crested grebes, as well as various kinds of terns, gulls, plovers, and sandpipers. Herons, storks, ibises, and flamingos are well represented, and many of those birds frequent [Keoladeo Ghana National Park](https://www.britannica.com/place/Keoladeo-Ghana-National-Park), near [Bharatpur](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bharatpur-India), Rajasthan (designated a [UNESCO](https://www.britannica.com/topic/UNESCO) [World Heritage site](https://www.britannica.com/topic/World-Heritage-site) in 1985). The [Rann of Kachchh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rann-of-Kachchh) forms the nesting ground for one of the world’s largest breeding colonies of [flamingos](https://www.britannica.com/animal/flamingo-bird).

Birds of prey include hawks, vultures, and eagles. Vultures are [ubiquitous](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ubiquitous) consumers of carrion. Game birds are represented by pheasants, [jungle fowl](https://www.britannica.com/animal/jungle-fowl), partridges, and quails. [Peacocks](https://www.britannica.com/animal/peacock) (peafowl) are also common, especially in Gujarat and Rajasthan, where they are kept as pets. Resplendently feathered, the peacock has been adopted as India’s national bird.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/09/157809-050-073D23F3/Indian-bustard-bird-species.jpg)

[great Indian bustard](https://cdn.britannica.com/09/157809-050-073D23F3/Indian-bustard-bird-species.jpg)

Great Indian bustard (*Ardeotis nigriceps*), a critically endangered bird species of India.(more)

Other notable birds in India include the Indian crane, commonly known as the *sarus* (*Grus antigone*); a large gray bird with crimson legs, the *sarus* stands as tall as a human. Bustards inhabit India’s grasslands. The [great Indian bustard](https://www.britannica.com/animal/great-Indian-bustard) (*Ardeotis nigriceps*), now confined to central and western India, is an endangered species protected by legislation. Sand [grouse](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/grouse), pigeons, doves, parakeets, and cuckoos are found throughout the country. The mainly nonmigratory kingfisher, living close to water bodies, is considered sacred in many areas. Hornbills, barbets, and woodpeckers also are common, as are larks, crows, babblers, and thrushes.

**Reptiles, fish, and insects**

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/67/11567-050-2265BD02/Gavial-India.jpg)

[Gavial](https://cdn.britannica.com/67/11567-050-2265BD02/Gavial-India.jpg)

Gavial (*Gavialis gangeticus*) of northern India.

Reptiles are well represented in India. [Crocodiles](https://www.britannica.com/animal/crocodile-order) inhabit the country’s rivers, swamps, and lakes. The [estuarine crocodile](https://www.britannica.com/animal/estuarine-crocodile) (*Crocodilus porosus*)—once attaining a maximum length of 30 feet (9 meters), though specimens exceeding 20 feet (6 meters) are now rare—usually lives on the fish, birds, and crabs of muddy deltaic regions. The long-snouted gavial, or gharial (*Gavialis gangeticus*), a species similar to the crocodile, is [endemic](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/endemic) to northern India; it is found in a number of large rivers, including the Ganges and Brahmaputra and their tributaries. Of the nearly 400 species of snakes, one-fifth are venomous. Kraits and [cobras](https://www.britannica.com/animal/cobra-snake) are particularly widespread venomous species. King cobras often grow to at least 12 feet (3.6 meters) long. The Indian python frequents marshy areas and grasslands. Lizards also are widespread, and turtles are found throughout India, especially along the eastern coast.

Of some 2,000 species of fish in India, about one-fifth live in fresh water. Common edible freshwater fish include catfish and several members of the carp family, notably the mahseer, which grows up to 6.5 feet (2 meters) and 200 pounds (90 kg). Sharks are found in India’s coastal waters and sometimes travel inland through major estuaries. Commercially valuable marine shellfish species include shrimps, prawns, crabs, lobsters, pearl oysters, and conchs.

Among the commercially valuable insects are silkworms, bees, and the [lac insect](https://www.britannica.com/animal/Indian-lac-insect) (*Laccifer lacca*). The latter secretes a sticky, resinous material called lac, from which shellac and a red dye are produced. Many other insects, such as various species of mosquitoes, are vectors for disease (e.g., malaria and yellow fever) or for human parasites (e.g., certain flatworms and nematodes).

[**Conservation**](https://www.britannica.com/science/conservation-ecology)

The movement for the protection of forests and wildlife is strong in India. A number of species, including the elephant, rhinoceros, and tiger, have been declared endangered, and numerous others—both large and small—are considered [vulnerable](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vulnerable) or at risk. Legislative measures have declared certain animals protected species, and areas with particularly rich floral diversity have been adopted as biosphere reserves. Virtually no forests are left in private hands. Projects likely to cause ecological damage must be cleared by the national government’s Ministry of [Environment](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Environment), Forest, and Climate Change. Despite such measures, the reduced areas of forests, savannas, and grasslands provide little hope that India’s population of animals can be restored to what it was at the end of the 19th century.

**People of India**

[**Ethnic groups**](https://www.britannica.com/topic/ethnic-group)

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/21/1621-050-FFCB3339/pilgrims-ghat-Phalgu-River-Bihar-India-Gaya.jpg)

[Gaya, Bihar, India: Phalgu River](https://cdn.britannica.com/21/1621-050-FFCB3339/pilgrims-ghat-Phalgu-River-Bihar-India-Gaya.jpg)

Hindu pilgrims bathing and washing at a ghat (stairway) on the Phalgu River in Gaya, Bihar, India.(more)

India is a [diverse](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/diverse) multiethnic [country](https://www.britannica.com/topic/nation-state) that is home to thousands of small ethnic and tribal groups. That complexity developed from a lengthy and involved process of [migration](https://www.britannica.com/science/migration-animal) and intermarriage. The great [urban culture](https://www.britannica.com/topic/urban-culture) of the [Indus civilization](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Indus-civilization), a society of the [Indus River](https://www.britannica.com/place/Indus-River) valley that is thought to have been Dravidian-speaking, thrived from roughly 2500 to 1700 bce. An early [Aryan](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Aryan) civilization—dominated by peoples with [linguistic](https://www.britannica.com/science/linguistics) [affinities](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/affinities) to peoples in [Iran](https://www.britannica.com/place/Iran) and [Europe](https://www.britannica.com/place/Europe)—came to occupy northwestern and then north-central India over the period from roughly 2000 to 1500 bce and subsequently spread southwestward and eastward at the expense of other [indigenous](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/indigenous) groups. Despite the emergence of caste restrictions, that process was attended by intermarriage between groups that probably has continued to the present day, despite considerable opposition from peoples whose own distinctive civilizations had also evolved in early historical times. Among the documented invasions that added significantly to the Indian ethnic mix are those of Persians, Scythians, Arabs, Mongols, Turks, and Afghans. The last and politically most successful of the great invasions—namely, that from Europe—vastly altered Indian [culture](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture) but had relatively little impact on India’s ethnic [composition](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/composition).

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/28/156628-050-8BFE381B/girl-Naga-Arunachal-Pradesh-India.jpg)

[India: Naga](https://cdn.britannica.com/28/156628-050-8BFE381B/girl-Naga-Arunachal-Pradesh-India.jpg)

Naga girl, Arunachal Pradesh, India.

Broadly speaking, the peoples of north-central and northwestern India tend to have ethnic affinities with European and Indo-European peoples from southern Europe, the Caucasus region, and Southwest and [Central Asia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Central-Asia). In northeastern India, [West Bengal](https://www.britannica.com/place/West-Bengal) (to a lesser degree), the higher reaches of the western [Himalayan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Himalayas) region, and [Ladakh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ladakh), much of the population more closely resembles peoples to the north and east—notably Tibetans and Burmans. Many aboriginal (“tribal”) peoples in the [Chota Nagpur](https://www.britannica.com/place/Chota-Nagpur) Plateau (northeastern peninsular India) have affinities to such groups as the [Mon](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mon-people), who have long been established in mainland [Southeast Asia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Southeast-Asia). Much less numerous are southern groups who appear to be descended, at least in part, either from peoples of East African origin (some of whom settled in historical times on India’s western coast) or from a population commonly designated as Negrito, now represented by numerous small and widely dispersed peoples from the [Andaman Islands](https://www.britannica.com/place/Andaman-Islands), the [Philippines](https://www.britannica.com/place/Philippines), [New Guinea](https://www.britannica.com/place/New-Guinea), and other areas.

**Languages**

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/46/104846-050-A2AEC5DF/Devanagari-script-section-Bhagavata-purana-Sanskrit-British-Library-1900.jpg)

[Devanagari script](https://cdn.britannica.com/46/104846-050-A2AEC5DF/Devanagari-script-section-Bhagavata-purana-Sanskrit-British-Library-1900.jpg)

Devanagari script from a section of the Sanskrit Bhagavata Purana, c. 1880–c. 1900; in the British Library.(more)

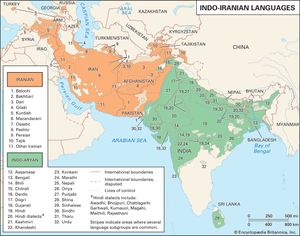
There are probably hundreds of major and minor languages and many hundreds of recognized [dialects](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dialects) in India, whose languages belong to four different language families: [Indo-Iranian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Indo-Iranian-languages)(a subfamily of the Indo-European language family), [Dravidian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Dravidian-languages), [Austroasiatic](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Austroasiatic-languages), and [Tibeto-Burman](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Tibeto-Burman-languages) (a subfamily of [Sino-Tibetan](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sino-Tibetan-languages)). There are also several isolate languages, such as Nahali, which is spoken in a small area of [Madhya Pradesh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Madhya-Pradesh) state. The overwhelming majority of Indians speak Indo-Iranian or Dravidian languages.

The difference between language and [dialect](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dialect) in India is often arbitrary, however, and official [designations](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/designations) vary notably from one census to another. That is complicated by the fact that, owing to their long-standing contact with one another, India’s languages have come to converge and to form an amalgamated linguistic area—a *sprachbund*—comparable, for example, to that found in the [Balkans](https://www.britannica.com/place/Balkans). Languages within India have adopted words and grammatical forms from one another, and [vernacular](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vernacular) dialects within languages often diverge widely. Over much of India, and especially the [Indo-Gangetic Plain](https://www.britannica.com/place/Indo-Gangetic-Plain), there are no clear boundaries between one vernacular and another (although ordinary villagers are sensitive to [nuances](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nuances) of dialect that [differentiate](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/differentiate) nearby localities). In the mountain fringes of the country, especially in the northeast, spoken dialects are often sufficiently different from one valley to the next to merit classifying each as a truly distinct language. There were at one time, for example, no fewer than 25 languages classified within the [Naga group](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Naga-people), not one of which was spoken by more than 60,000 people.

Lending order to the linguistic mix are a number of written, or literary, languages used on the subcontinent, each of which often differs markedly from the vernacular with which it is associated. Many people are [bilingual](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/bilingual) or multilingual, knowing their local vernacular dialect (“mother tongue”), its associated written variant, and, perhaps, one or more other languages. The constitutionally designated official language of the Indian central government is [Hindi](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hindi-language), and [English](https://www.britannica.com/topic/English-language) is also officially designated for government use. However, there are also 22 (originally 14) so-called “scheduled languages” recognized in the Indian constitution that may be used by states in official correspondence. Of those, 15 are Indo-European ([Assamese](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Assamese-language), [Bengali](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Bengali-language), [Dogri](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Dogri-language), [Gujarati](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Gujarati-language), Hindi, [Kashmiri](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Kashmiri-language), [Konkani](https://www.britannica.com/place/Konkan), Maithili, [Marathi](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Marathi-language), [Nepali](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Nepali-language), [Oriya](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Odia-language), [Punjabi](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Punjabi-language), [Sanskrit](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sanskrit-language), [Sindhi](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sindhi-language), and [Urdu](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Urdu-language)), 4 are Dravidian ([Kannada](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Kannada-language), [Malayalam](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Malayalam-language), [Tamil](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Tamil-language), and [Telugu](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Telugu-language)), 2 are Sino-Tibetan (Bodo and [Manipuri](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Manipuri-language)), and 1 is [Austroasiatic](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Austroasiatic-languages) (Santhali). Those languages have become increasingly standardized since independence because of improved education and the influence of [mass media](https://www.britannica.com/topic/mass-media). English is an “associate” official language and is widely spoken.

Most Indian languages (including the official script for Hindi) are written by using some variety of [Devanagari](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Devanagari) script, but other scripts are used. Sindhi, for instance, is written in a Persianized form of Arabic script, but it also is sometimes written in the Devanagari or [Gurmukhi](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Gurmukhi-alphabet) scripts.

[**Indo-European languages**](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Indo-European-languages)

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/19/49419-050-C4BDDD30/Distribution-Indo-Iranian-languages.jpg)

[Indo-Iranian languages](https://cdn.britannica.com/19/49419-050-C4BDDD30/Distribution-Indo-Iranian-languages.jpg)

Distribution of Indo-Iranian languages.

The Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European family is the largest language group in the subcontinent, with nearly three-fourths of the population speaking a language of that family as a mother tongue. It can be further split into three subfamilies: [Indo-Aryan](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Indo-Aryan-languages), [Dardic](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Dardic-languages), and [Iranian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Iranian-languages). The numerous languages of the family all [derive](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/derive) from [Sanskrit](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sanskrit-language), the language of the ancient Aryans. Sanskrit, the classic language of India, underwent a process of systematization and grammatical refinement at an early date, rendering it unique among Indo-Aryan languages in its degree of linguistic cultivation. Subsequently, the [Prakrit](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Prakrit-languages) languages developed from local [vernaculars](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vernaculars) but later were refined into literary tongues. The modern Indian languages were derived from the [Prakrit languages](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Prakrit-languages).

By far the most widely spoken Indo-Iranian language is [Hindi](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hindi-language), which is used in one form or another by some two-thirds of the population. Hindi has a large number of [dialects](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dialects), generally divided into Eastern and Western Hindi, some of which are mutually unintelligible. Apart from its nationally preeminent position, Hindi has been adopted as the official language by each of a large [contiguous](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/contiguous) bloc of northern states—[Bihar](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bihar), [Chhattisgarh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Chhattisgarh), [Haryana](https://www.britannica.com/place/Haryana), [Himachal Pradesh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Himachal-Pradesh), [Jharkhand](https://www.britannica.com/place/Jharkhand), [Madhya Pradesh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Madhya-Pradesh), [Rajasthan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rajasthan), [Uttarakhand](https://www.britannica.com/place/Uttarakhand), and [Uttar Pradesh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Uttar-Pradesh)—as well as by the national capital territory of [Delhi](https://www.britannica.com/place/Delhi).

Other Indo-European languages with official status in individual states are Assamese, in [Assam](https://www.britannica.com/place/Assam); Bengali, in [West Bengal](https://www.britannica.com/place/West-Bengal) and [Tripura](https://www.britannica.com/place/Tripura-state-India); Gujarati, in [Gujarat](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gujarat); Kashmiri, in [Jammu](https://www.britannica.com/place/Jammu) and Kashmir; Konkani, in [Goa](https://www.britannica.com/place/Goa); Marathi, in [Maharashtra](https://www.britannica.com/place/Maharashtra); Nepali, in portions of northern West Bengal; Oriya, in [Odisha](https://www.britannica.com/place/Odisha); and Punjabi, in [Punjab](https://www.britannica.com/place/Punjab-state-India). [Urdu](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Urdu-language), the official language of [Pakistan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Pakistan), is also the language of most Muslims of northern and peninsular India as far south as [Chennai](https://www.britannica.com/place/Chennai) (Madras). [Sindhi](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sindhi-language) is spoken mainly by inhabitants of the [Kachchh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rann-of-Kachchh) district of Gujarat, which borders the Pakistani province of [Sindh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sindh-province-Pakistan), as well as in other areas by immigrants (and their descendants) who fled Sindh after the 1947 [partition](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/partition) of the subcontinent.

**Dravidian and other languages**

[Dravidian languages](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Dravidian-languages) are spoken by about one-fourth of all Indians, overwhelmingly in southern India. Dravidian speakers among tribal peoples (e.g., [Gonds](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Gond)) in central India, in eastern Bihar, and in the Brahui-speaking region of the distant Pakistani province of [Balochistan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Balochistan) suggest a much wider distribution in ancient times. The four constitutionally recognized Dravidian languages also enjoy official state status: Kannada, in [Karnataka](https://www.britannica.com/place/Karnataka-state-India); Malayalam, in [Kerala](https://www.britannica.com/place/Kerala); Tamil (the oldest of the main Dravidian tongues), in [Tamil Nadu](https://www.britannica.com/place/Tamil-Nadu); and Telugu, in [Telangana](https://www.britannica.com/place/Telengana) and [Andhra Pradesh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Andhra-Pradesh). Manipuri and other [Sino-Tibetan](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sino-Tibetan-languages) languages are spoken by small numbers of people in northeastern India.

[**Lingua francas**](https://www.britannica.com/topic/lingua-franca)

The two major lingua francas in India are [Hindustani](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hindustani-language) and English. Hindustani is based on an early [dialect](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dialect) of Hindi, known by linguists as [Khari Boli](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Khari-Boli), which originated in Delhi and an [adjacent](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/adjacent) region within the [Ganges-Yamuna Doab](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ganges-Yamuna-Doab) (interfluve). During the [Mughal](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mughal-dynasty) period (early 16th to mid-18th century), when political power became centered on Delhi, Khari Boli absorbed numerous Persian words and came to be used as a lingua franca throughout the empire, especially by merchants who needed a common commercial language. Hindustani was promoted by the British during the colonial period.

In the 19th century two literary languages arose from that [colloquial](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/colloquial) tongue: among Hindus, the modern form of Hindi, which derives its vocabulary and script (Devanagari) mainly from [Sanskrit](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sanskrit-language); and among Muslims, Urdu, which, though grammatically identical with Hindi, draws much of its vocabulary from Persian and Arabic and is written in the Perso-Arabic script. Despite the rift, Hindi and Urdu remain mutually intelligible, while their Hindustani progenitor still serves as a lingua franca in many parts of the subcontinent, particularly in the north.

[English](https://www.britannica.com/topic/English-language), a remnant of British colonial rule, is the most widely used lingua franca. The great size of India’s population makes it one of the largest English-speaking [communities](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/communities) in the world, although English is claimed as the mother tongue by only a small number of Indians and is spoken fluently by less than 5 percent of the population. English serves as the language linking the central government with the states, especially with those in which Hindi is not widely understood. English is also the principal language of commerce and the language of instruction in almost all of the [country’s](https://www.britannica.com/topic/nation-state) prestigious universities and private schools. The English-language press remains highly influential; scholarly publication is predominantly in English (almost exclusively so in science); and many Indians are devotees of literature in English (much of it written by Indians), as well as of English-language film, radio, television, [popular music](https://www.britannica.com/art/popular-music), and theatre.

**Minor languages and dialects**

Although many [tribal communities](https://www.britannica.com/topic/tribe-anthropology) are gradually abandoning their tribal languages, scores of such languages survive. Few, however, are still spoken by more than a million persons, with the exception of Bhili (Indo-European) and Santhali (of the [Munda](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Munda-languages) branch of the [Austroasiatic](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Austroasiatic-languages) family), which are both estimated as having more than five million speakers. Others include [Gondi](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Gondi-language) (Dravidian), [Kurukh](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Kurukh-language), or [Oraon](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Oraon) (Dravidian), Ho (Munda), Manipuri ([Sino-Tibetan](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sino-Tibetan-languages)), and Mundari (Munda). Generally, tribal languages lack a written tradition, though many are now written in the Roman script or, less often, in scripts adapted from those of neighbouring nontribal regions.

**Religions**

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/62/5962-050-B59EFEE8/cremation-ashes-ship-city-Hindus-Ganges-River.jpg)

[Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India: cremation ashes on ship](https://cdn.britannica.com/62/5962-050-B59EFEE8/cremation-ashes-ship-city-Hindus-Ganges-River.jpg)

Ship laden with cremation ashes to be deposited in the Ganges River, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India.(more)

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/38/58638-050-AC19D0CB/monk-Tibetan-Buddhist-Ladakh-Lamayuru-Monastery-India.jpg)

[Ladakh, India: Lamayuru Monastery](https://cdn.britannica.com/38/58638-050-AC19D0CB/monk-Tibetan-Buddhist-Ladakh-Lamayuru-Monastery-India.jpg)

Tibetan Buddhist monk at the Lamayuru Monastery, Ladakh, India.(more)

Because religion forms a crucial aspect of identity for most Indians, much of India’s history can be understood through the interplay among its [diverse](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/diverse) religious groups. One of the many religions born in India is [Hinduism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hinduism), a collection of diverse [doctrines](https://www.britannica.com/topic/doctrine), sects, and ways of life followed by the great majority of the population. For an in-depth discussion of the major [indigenous](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/indigenous) religions of India, *see* the articles [Hinduism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hinduism), [Jainism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Jainism), [Buddhism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Buddhism), and [Sikhism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sikhism). Philosophical ideas associated with those religions are treated in [Indian philosophy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Indian-philosophy). For further discussion of other major religions, *see* [Islam](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islam) and [Christianity](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Christianity).

In 1947, with the partition of the subcontinent and loss of Pakistan’s largely [Muslim](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islamic-world) population, India became even more predominantly Hindu. The [concomitant](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/concomitant) emigration of perhaps 10 million Muslims to Pakistan and the immigration of nearly as many Hindus and Sikhs from Pakistan further emphasized that change. Hindus now make up nearly four-fifths of India’s population. Muslims, however, are still the largest single minority faith (about one-seventh of the total population), with large concentrations in many areas of the country, including Jammu and Kashmir, western Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, [Kerala](https://www.britannica.com/place/Kerala), and many cities. India’s Muslim population is greater than that found in any country of the [Middle East](https://www.britannica.com/place/Middle-East) and is only exceeded by that of [Indonesia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Indonesia) and, slightly, by that of Pakistan or [Bangladesh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bangladesh).

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/09/189809-050-FAC505B0/Jama-Masjid-Delhi.jpg)

[Delhi: Jama Masjid](https://cdn.britannica.com/09/189809-050-FAC505B0/Jama-Masjid-Delhi.jpg)

Jama Masjid of Delhi.

Other important religious minorities in India include Christians, most heavily concentrated in the northeast, [Mumbai](https://www.britannica.com/place/Mumbai) (Bombay), and the far south; Sikhs, mostly in Punjab and some [adjacent](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/adjacent) areas; Buddhists, especially in [Ladakh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ladakh), Maharashtra, [Sikkim](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sikkim), and [Arunachal Pradesh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Arunachal-Pradesh); and Jains, most prominent in Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Rajasthan. Those practicing the [Bahāʾī faith](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Bahai-Faith), formerly too few to be treated by the census, have dramatically increased in number as a result of active proselytization. [Zoroastrians](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Zoroastrianism) (the [Parsis](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Parsi)), largely concentrated in [Mumbai](https://www.britannica.com/place/Mumbai) and in coastal Gujarat, wield influence out of all proportion to their small numbers because of their prominence during the colonial period. Several tiny but sociologically interesting communities of [Jews](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Judaism) are located along the western coast. India’s tribal peoples live mostly in the northeast; they practice various forms of [animism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/animism), which is perhaps the country’s oldest religious tradition.

Hindus are in the majority in every Indian state except Punjab (roughly three-fifths Sikh); [Meghalaya](https://www.britannica.com/place/Meghalaya), [Mizoram](https://www.britannica.com/place/Mizoram), and [Nagaland](https://www.britannica.com/place/Nagaland) (mainly Christian); and Arunachal Pradesh (predominantly animist). Hindus also form the majority in every [union territory](https://www.britannica.com/topic/union-territory) except [Lakshadweep](https://www.britannica.com/place/Lakshadweep) (more than nine-tenths Muslim) and [Jammu and Kashmir](https://www.britannica.com/place/Jammu-and-Kashmir) (more than two-thirds Muslim). Almost everywhere, however, significant local minorities are present. Only in the states of Odisha and Himachal Pradesh do Hindus [constitute](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/constitute) virtually the entire population.

Reliable statistics on the sectarian affiliations among India’s leading faiths are not available. Within Hinduism, such affiliations tend to be rather loose, nonexclusive, and [nebulous](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nebulous). [Vaishnavas](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Vaishnavism), who worship in temples dedicated to the god [Vishnu](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Vishnu) or one of his avatars (e.g., [Rama](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Rama-Hindu-deity) and [Krishna](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Krishna-Hindu-deity)) or who follow one of the many associated cults, tend to be more concentrated in northern and central India, while [Shaivas](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shaivism), or devotees of [Shiva](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shiva), are concentrated in Tamil Nadu, [Karnataka](https://www.britannica.com/place/Karnataka-linguistic-region-India), western Maharashtra, and much of the Himalayan region. Cults associated with [Shaktism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shaktism), the worship of various forms of [Shakti](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shaktism) (the [mother goddess](https://www.britannica.com/topic/mother-goddess), consort of Shiva), are particularly widespread in West Bengal (along with Vaishnavism), Assam, and the highland areas of Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh. Hinduism also [encompasses](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/encompasses) scores of smaller sects advocating religious revival and reform, promoting the uplift of disadvantaged groups, or focusing on the teachings of [charismatic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/charismatic) religious leaders. Some of the latter have attracted an international following.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/77/22877-050-9EFB35D4/Charminar-city-Hyderabad-India-Telangana.jpg)

[Hyderabad, India: Charminar](https://cdn.britannica.com/77/22877-050-9EFB35D4/Charminar-city-Hyderabad-India-Telangana.jpg)

The Charminar in the old city of Hyderabad, Telangana, India.

In [Islam](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islamic-world), [Sunni](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sunni) Muslims are the majority sect almost everywhere. There are, however, influential [Shiʿi](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shii) minorities in Gujarat, especially among such Muslim trading communities as the [Khojas](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Khoja) and [Bohras](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Bohras), and in large cities, such as [Lucknow](https://www.britannica.com/place/Lucknow) and [Hyderabad](https://www.britannica.com/place/Hyderabad-India), that, before the partition, were former capitals of Muslim states in which much of the gentry was of Persian origin.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/84/74484-050-36EF44C0/Roman-Catholic-Basilica-of-Bom-Jesus-India.jpg)

[Goa, India: Roman Catholic Basilica of Bom Jesus](https://cdn.britannica.com/84/74484-050-36EF44C0/Roman-Catholic-Basilica-of-Bom-Jesus-India.jpg)

The Roman Catholic Basilica of Bom Jesus, 16th century, Goa, India.

[Roman Catholics](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Roman-Catholicism) form the largest single [Christian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Christianity) group, especially on the western coast and in southern India. The many divisions among [Protestants](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Protestantism) have been substantially reduced since independence as a result of mergers creating the [Church of North India](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Church-of-North-India) and the [Church of South India](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Church-of-South-India). Many small fundamentalist sects, however, have maintained their independence. [Converts](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/Converts) to Christianity, especially since the mid-19th century, have come largely from the lower castes and tribal groups.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/41/58641-050-6B238BA8/Prayer-flags-Bodh-Gaya-pilgrim-bodhi-tree.jpg)

[Bodh Gaya, Bihar, India: Bodhi Tree](https://cdn.britannica.com/41/58641-050-6B238BA8/Prayer-flags-Bodh-Gaya-pilgrim-bodhi-tree.jpg)

Prayer flags mark the place where the Buddha achieved Enlightenment in Bodh Gaya, Bihar, India.(more)

Buddhists living near the Chinese ([Tibetan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Tibet)) border generally follow [Tibetan Buddhism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Tibetan-Buddhism), sometimes designated as [Vajrayana](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Vajrayana) (Sanskrit: “Vehicle of the Thunderbolt”), while those living near the border with [Myanmar](https://www.britannica.com/place/Myanmar) (Burma) adhere to the [Theravada](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Theravada) (Pali: “Way of the Elders”). Neo-Buddhists in Maharashtra do not have a clear sectarian affiliation.

[**Caste**](https://www.britannica.com/topic/caste-social-differentiation)**of India**

In [South Asia](https://www.britannica.com/place/South-Asia) the [caste](https://www.britannica.com/topic/caste-social-differentiation) system has been a dominating aspect of social organization for thousands of years. A caste, generally designated by the term *[jati](https://www.britannica.com/topic/jati-Hindu-caste-system)* (“birth”), refers to a strictly regulated social [community](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/community) into which one is born. Some *jati*s have occupational names, but the connection between caste and occupational specialization is limited. In general, a person is expected to [marry](https://www.britannica.com/topic/miscegenation) someone within the same *jati*, follow a particular set of rules for proper behaviour (in such matters as kinship, occupation, and diet), and interact with other *jati*s according to the group’s position in the social [hierarchy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hierarchy). Based on names alone, it is possible to identify more than 2,000 *jati*s. However, it is common for there to be several distinct groups bearing the same name that are not part of the same marriage network or local caste system.

In India virtually all nontribal Hindus and many adherents of other faiths (even Muslims, for whom caste is theoretically anathema) recognize their membership in one of those hereditary social [communities](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/communities). Among Hindus, *jati*s are usually assigned to one of four large caste clusters, called [*varna*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/varna-Hinduism)s, each of which has a traditional social function: [Brahmans](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Brahman-social-class) (priests), at the top of the social hierarchy, and, in descending [prestige](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prestige), [Kshatriyas](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Kshatriya) (warriors), [Vaishyas](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Vaishya) (originally peasants but later merchants), and [Shudras](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shudra) (artisans and labourers). The particular *varna* in which a *jati* is ranked depends in part on its relative level of “impurity,” determined by the group’s traditional contact with any of a number of “pollutants,” including blood, menstrual flow, saliva, dung, leather, dirt, and hair. Intercaste restrictions were established to prevent the relative purity of a particular *jati* from being corrupted by the pollution of a lower caste.

A fifth group, the Panchamas (from Sanskrit *panch*, “five”), theoretically were [excluded](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/excluded) from the system because their occupations and ways of life typically brought them in contact with such impurities. They were formerly called the [untouchables](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Dalit) (because their touch, believed by the upper castes to transmit pollution, was avoided), but the nationalist leader [Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mahatma-Gandhi) referred to them as Harijan (“Children of God”), a name that for a time gained popular usage. More recently, members of that class have adopted the term Dalit (“Oppressed”) to describe themselves. Officially, such groups are referred to as [Scheduled Castes](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Dalit). Those in Scheduled Castes, collectively accounting for roughly one-sixth of India’s total population, are generally landless and perform most of the agricultural labour, as well as a number of ritually polluting caste occupations (e.g., leatherwork, among the[Chamar](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Chamar)s, the largest Scheduled Caste).

India’s many tribal peoples—officially [designated](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/designated) as [Scheduled Tribes](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Scheduled-Tribe)—have also been given status similar to that of the Scheduled Castes. Tribal peoples are concentrated mainly in the northeast (notably [Meghalaya](https://www.britannica.com/place/Meghalaya), [Mizoram](https://www.britannica.com/place/Mizoram), and Nagaland) and, to a lesser extent, in the northeast-central (Chhattisgarh, [Jharkhand](https://www.britannica.com/place/Jharkhand), and Odisha) regions of the [country](https://www.britannica.com/topic/nation-state), as well as in the [Lakshadweep](https://www.britannica.com/place/Lakshadweep) and [Dadra and Nagar Haveli](https://www.britannica.com/place/Dadra-and-Nagar-Haveli) union territories.

While inherently nonegalitarian, *jati*s provide Indians with social support and, at least in theory, a sense of having a secure and well-defined social and economic role. In most parts of India, there is one or perhaps there are several dominant castes that own the majority of land, are politically most powerful, and set a cultural tone for a particular region. A dominant *jati* typically forms anywhere from one-eighth to one-third of the total rural population but may in some areas account for a clear majority (e.g., Sikh Jats in central Punjab, [Maratha](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Maratha)s in parts of [Maharashtra](https://www.britannica.com/place/Maharashtra), or Rajputs in northwestern Uttar Pradesh). The second most numerous *jati* is usually from one of the Scheduled Castes. Depending on its size, a village typically will have between 5 and 25 *jati*s, each of which might be represented by anywhere from 1 to more than 100 households.

Although it is not as visible as it is among Hindus, caste is found among Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Jains, and Jews. In the 1990s the Dalit movement began adopting a more aggressive approach to ending caste [discrimination](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/discrimination), and many converted to other religions, especially [Buddhism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Buddhism), as a means of rejecting the social [premises](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/premises) of Hindu society. At the same time, the officially designated “Other Backward Classes” (other social and tribal groups traditionally excluded) also began to claim their rights under the constitution. There has been some relaxation of caste distinction among young urban dwellers and those living abroad, but caste identity has remained strong—especially since groups such as the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes have a guaranteed percentage of representation in national and state legislatures.

**Settlement patterns**

**Population density**

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/16/10916-004-5AE0F679/Hoshiarpur-Punjab-India.jpg)

[Hoshiarpur, Punjab, India: communal well](https://cdn.britannica.com/16/10916-004-5AE0F679/Hoshiarpur-Punjab-India.jpg)

Communal well, Hoshiarpur, Punjab, India.

Only a tiny fraction of India’s surface area is uninhabited. More than half of it is [cultivated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cultivated), with little left fallow in any given year. Most of the area classified as forest—roughly one-fifth of the total—is used for grazing, for gathering firewood and other forest products, for commercial forestry, and, in tribal areas, for [shifting cultivation](https://www.britannica.com/topic/slash-and-burn-agriculture) (often in defiance of the law) and hunting. The areas too dry for growing crops without irrigation are largely used for grazing. The higher elevations of the [Himalayas](https://www.britannica.com/place/Himalayas) are the only places with substantial continuous areas not in use by humans. Although India’s population is predominantly rural, the country has three of the largest urban areas in the world—[Mumbai](https://www.britannica.com/place/Mumbai), [Kolkata](https://www.britannica.com/place/Kolkata) (Calcutta), and [Delhi](https://www.britannica.com/place/Delhi)—and those and other large Indian cities have some of the world’s highest population densities.

Most Indians reside in the areas of continuous cultivation, including the towns and cities they [encompass](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/encompass). Within such areas, differences in population density are largely a function of water availability (whether directly from rainfall or from irrigation) and soil fertility. Areas receiving more than 60 inches (1,500 mm) of annual precipitation are generally capable of, for example, growing two crops per year, even without irrigation, and thus can support a high population density. More than three-fifths of the total population lives either on the fertile alluvial soils of the [Indo-Gangetic Plain](https://www.britannica.com/place/Indo-Gangetic-Plain) and the deltaic regions of the eastern coast or on the mixed alluvial and marine soils along India’s western coast. Within those agriculturally productive areas—for example, parts of the eastern Gangetic Plain and of the state of Kerala—densities exceed 2,000 persons per square mile (800 persons per square km).

**Rural settlement**

Much of India’s rural population lives in nucleated [villages](https://www.britannica.com/topic/village), which most commonly have a settlement form described as a shapeless agglomerate. Such settlements, though unplanned, are divided by caste into distinct wards and grow outward from a recognizable core area. The dominant and higher castes tend to live in the core area, while the lower artisan and service castes, as well as Muslim groups, generally occupy more [peripheral](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/peripheral) localities. When the centrally located castes increase in population, they either subdivide their existing, often initially large, residential [compounds](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/compounds), add second and even third stories on their existing houses (a common expedient in Punjab), leapfrog over lower-caste wards to a new area on the village [periphery](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/periphery), or, in rare cases where land is available, found a completely new village.

Within the shapeless agglomerated villages, streets are typically narrow, twisting, and unpaved, often ending in culs-de-sac. There are usually a few open spaces where people gather: [adjacent](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/adjacent) to a temple or mosque, at the main village well, in areas where grain is threshed or where grain and oilseeds are milled, and in front of the homes of the leading families of the village. In such spaces, depending on the size of the village, might be found the [*panchayat*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/panchayat) (village council) hall, a few shops, a tea stall, a public radio hooked up to a loudspeaker, a small post office, or perhaps a *dharmshala* (a free guest house for travelers). The village school is usually on the edge of the village in order to provide pupils with adequate playing space. Another common feature along the margin of a village is a [grove](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/grove) of [mango](https://www.britannica.com/plant/mango-plant-and-fruit) or other trees, which provides shade for people and animals and often contains a large well.

There are many regional variants from the simple agglomerated-villages pattern. Hamlets, each containing only one or a few castes, commonly surround villages in the eastern Gangetic Plain; Scheduled Castes and herding castes are likely to occupy such hamlets. In southern India, especially [Tamil Nadu](https://www.britannica.com/place/Tamil-Nadu), and in [Gujarat](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gujarat), villages have a more planned layout, with streets running north-south and east-west in straight lines. In many tribal areas (or areas that were tribal until relatively recently) the typical village consists of rows of houses along a single street or perhaps two or three parallel streets. In areas of rugged terrain, where relatively level spaces for building are limited, settlements often conform in shape to ridge lines, and few grow to be larger than hamlets. Finally, in particularly aquatic [environments](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/environments), such as the Gangetic delta region and the tidal backwater region of [Kerala](https://www.britannica.com/place/Kerala), agglomerations of even hamlet size are rare; most rural families instead live singly or in clusters of only a few households on their individual plots of owned or rented land.

Most village houses are small, simple one-story mud (*kacha*) structures, housing both people and livestock in one or just a few rooms. Roofs typically are flat and made of mud in dry regions, but in areas with considerable precipitation they generally are sloped for drainage and made of rice straw, other thatching material, or clay tiles. The wetter the region, the greater the pitch of the roof. In some wet regions, especially in tribal areas, bamboo walls are more common than those of mud, and houses often stand on piles above ground level. The houses usually are windowless and contain a minimum of furniture, a storage space for food, water, and [implements](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/implements), a few shelves and pegs for other possessions, a [niche](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/niche) in the wall to serve as the household altar, and often a few decorations, such as pictures of gods or film heroes, family photographs, a calendar, or perhaps some memento of a pilgrimage. In one corner of the house or in an exterior court is the earthen hearth on which all meals are cooked. Electricity, running water, and toilet facilities generally are absent. Relatively secluded spots on the edge of the village serve the latter need.

Almost everywhere in India, the dwellings of the more [affluent](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/affluent) households are larger and usually built of more durable (*pakka*) materials, such as brick or stone. Their roofs are also of sturdier construction, sometimes of corrugated iron, and often rest on sturdy timbers or even steel I beams. Windows, usually barred for security, are common. The number of rooms, the furnishings, and the interior and exterior decor, especially the entrance gate, generally reflect the wealth of the family. There is typically an interior [compound](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/compound) where much of the harvest will be stored. Within the compound there may be a private well or even a hand pump, an area for bathing, and a walled latrine enclosure, which is periodically cleaned by the village sweeper. Animal stalls, granaries, and farm equipment are in spaces distinct from those occupied by people.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/29/1629-050-D9F21E2F/women-dress-Hyderabad-India-Telangana.jpg)

[Hyderabad, India: Labhani women](https://cdn.britannica.com/29/1629-050-D9F21E2F/women-dress-Hyderabad-India-Telangana.jpg)

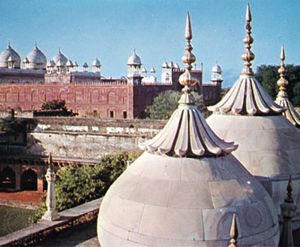
Banjari (Labhani) women in festive dress, near Hyderabad, Telangana, India.(more)

[Nomadic groups](https://www.britannica.com/topic/nomadism) may be found in most parts of India. Some are small bands of wandering entertainers, ironworkers, and animal traders who may congregate in communities called *tanda*s. A group variously known as the Banjari or Vanjari (also called [Labhani](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Labhani)), originally from [Rajasthan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rajasthan) and related to the [Roma](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Rom) (Gypsies) of Europe, roams over large areas of central India and the [Deccan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Deccan), largely as agricultural labourers and construction workers. Many tribal peoples practice similar occupations seasonally. Shepherds, largely of the Gujar [caste](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/caste), practice transhumance in the [western Himalayas](https://www.britannica.com/place/western-Himalayas). In the semiarid and arid regions where agriculture is either impossible or precarious, herders of cattle, sheep, goats, and camels live in a symbiotic relationship with local or nearby cultivators.

**Urban settlement**

Although less than one-third of India’s people live in towns and cities, more than 6,100 places are classified as urban. In general, the proportion is higher in the agriculturally prosperous regions of the northwest, west, and south than in the northeastern rice-growing parts of the country, where the population capacity is limited by generally meagre crop surpluses.

In India large cities long have been growing at faster rates than small cities and towns. The major metropolitan agglomerations have the fastest rates of all, even where, as in Kolkata, there is a high degree of congestion within the central city. Major contributors to urban growth are the burgeoning of the [bureaucracy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bureaucracy), the increasing commercialization of the agricultural economy, and the spread of factory industry and services.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/11/13611-004-9A245FE1/fort-Pearl-Mosque-Agra-India-Uttar-Pradesh.jpg)

[Agra Fort: Pearl Mosque (Moti Masjid)](https://cdn.britannica.com/11/13611-004-9A245FE1/fort-Pearl-Mosque-Agra-India-Uttar-Pradesh.jpg)

The Pearl Mosque (Moti Masjid) and the fort at Agra, Uttar Pradesh, India.

In many cities dating from the precolonial period, such as Delhi and [Agra](https://www.britannica.com/place/Agra), the urban core is an exceedingly congested area within an old city wall, portions of which may still stand. In those “old cities,” residential segregation by religion and caste and the layout of streets and open places are, except for scale, not greatly dissimilar from what was described above for shapeless agglomerated villages. In contrast to many Western cities, [affluent](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/affluent) families commonly occupy houses in the heart of the most congested urban wards. Specialized bazaar streets selling sweets, grain, cloth, metalware, jewelry, books and stationery, and other commodities are characteristic of the old city. In such streets it is common for a single building to be at once a workshop, a retail outlet for what the workshop produces, and the residence for the artisan’s family and employees.

Moderately old, highly congested urban cores also characterize many cities that grew up in the wake of British occupation. Of those, [Kolkata](https://www.britannica.com/place/Kolkata), Mumbai, and [Chennai](https://www.britannica.com/place/Chennai) are the most notable examples. In such cases, however, there are usually a few broad major thoroughfares, some degree of regularity to the street pattern, space reserved for parks, and a central business district, including old government offices, high-rise commercial office buildings, banks, elite shopping establishments, restaurants, hotels, museums, a few churches, and other reminders of the former colonial presence.

Associated with a great many cities are special sections created originally for the needs of the British: largely residential areas known as civil lines, where the families of resident European administrators occupied spacious [bungalows](https://www.britannica.com/technology/bungalow), with adjoining outbuildings for their servants, nearby shopping facilities, and a [gymkhana](https://www.britannica.com/sports/gymkhana) (a [combined](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/combined) sports and social club); cantonments, where military personnel of all ranks were quartered, together with adjacent parade grounds, polo fields, and firing ranges; and industrial zones, including not only the modern mills but also the adjacent “factory lines,” reminiscent of 19th-century company housing in [Britain](https://www.britannica.com/place/United-Kingdom) but even more squalid.

In the postindependence period, with the acceleration of urban growth and the consequent need for [urban planning](https://www.britannica.com/topic/urban-planning), new forms arose. The millions of refugees from [Pakistan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Pakistan), for example, led to the establishment of many “model” (i.e., planned) towns on the edges of the existing cities. The subsequent steady influx of job seekers, together with the natural growth of the already settled population, gave rise to many planned residential areas, typically called “colonies,” usually consisting of four- or five-story apartment blocks, a small shopping center, schools, and playgrounds and other recreational spaces. In general, [commuting](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/commuting) from colonies to jobs in the inner city is by either bus or bicycle.

For poorer immigrants, residence in those urban colonies was not an option. Some could afford to move into slum flats, often sharing space with earlier immigrants from their native villages. Others, however, had no recourse but to find shelter in *[basti](https://www.britannica.com/topic/basti-type-of-shantytown)*s ([shantytowns](https://www.britannica.com/topic/shantytown)), clusters of anywhere from a few to many hundreds of makeshift dwellings, which are commonly found along the edges of railroad yards and parks, outside the walls of factories, along the banks of rivers, and wherever else the urban authorities might tolerate their presence. Finally, there are the street dwellers, mainly single men in search of temporary employment, who lack even the meagre shelter that the *basti*s afford.

A special type of urban place to which British rule gave rise were the hill stations, such as [Shimla](https://www.britannica.com/place/Shimla) (Simla) and [Darjiling](https://www.britannica.com/place/Darjeeling-India) (Darjeeling). Those were erected at elevations high enough to provide cool retreats for the dependents of Europeans stationed in India and, in the summer months, to serve as seasonal capitals of the central or [provincial](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/provincial) governments. Hotels, guest houses, boarding schools, clubs, and other recreational facilities characterize those settlements. Since independence, affluent Indians have come to depend on the hill stations no less than did the British.

**Demographic trends**

India’s population is young. Its birth and death rates are both near the global average. More than half the population is under age 30 and less than one-fourth is age 45 or older. [Life expectancy](https://www.britannica.com/science/life-expectancy) is about 68 for men and 70 for women.

A population explosion in India commenced following the great [influenza epidemic of 1918–19](https://www.britannica.com/event/influenza-pandemic-of-1918-1919). In [subsequent](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/subsequent) decades there was a steadily accelerating rate of growth up to the census of 1961, after which the rate leveled off (though it remained high). The total population in 1921 within the present borders of India (i.e., excluding what is now Pakistan and Bangladesh) was 251 million, and in 1947, at the time of independence, it was about 340 million. India’s population doubled between 1947 and the 1981 census, and by the 2001 census it had surpassed one billion. The increase between 1991 and 2001 alone—more than 182 million—was greater than the total present-day population of all but the world’s most-populous countries, and that value was matched by the increase between 2001 and 2011. Although there has been a considerable drop in the [birth rate](https://www.britannica.com/science/birth-rate), a much more rapid decline in the [death rate](https://www.britannica.com/science/mortality-demography) has accounted for the rise in the [country’s](https://www.britannica.com/topic/nation-state) rate of [population growth](https://www.britannica.com/science/population-growth). Moreover, the increasing proportion of females attaining and living through their childbearing years continues to [inhibit](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/inhibit) a marked reduction in the birth rate. According to population estimates by the [United Nations](https://www.britannica.com/topic/United-Nations), India surpassed [China](https://www.britannica.com/place/China) in 2023 to become the most populous country in the world.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/03/156603-050-008DD92B/Crowd-pilgrims-India.jpg)

[India: crowd](https://cdn.britannica.com/03/156603-050-008DD92B/Crowd-pilgrims-India.jpg)

Crowd of pilgrims in India.

The effect of [emigration from or immigration to](https://www.britannica.com/topic/human-migration) India on the overall growth of population has been negligible throughout modern history. Within India, however, migration from relatively impoverished regions to areas, especially cities, offering some promise of economic betterment has been largely responsible for the differential growth rates from one state or region to another. In general, the larger a city, the greater its proportion of migrants to the total population and the more [cosmopolitan](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cosmopolitan) its population mix. In [Mumbai](https://www.britannica.com/place/Mumbai), for example, more than half of the population speaks languages other than Marathi, the principal language of the state of [Maharashtra](https://www.britannica.com/place/Maharashtra). The rates of migration to Indian cities severely tax their capacity to cope with the newcomers’ needs for housing, safe drinking water, and sanitary facilities, not to mention amenities. The result is that many migrants live in conditions of appalling squalor in *[basti](https://www.britannica.com/topic/basti-type-of-shantytown)*s or, even worse, with no permanent shelter at all.

[Refugees](https://www.britannica.com/topic/refugee) [constitute](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/constitute) another class of migrants. Some date from the 1947 [partition of India](https://www.britannica.com/event/Partition-of-India) and many others, especially in [Assam](https://www.britannica.com/place/Assam) and [West Bengal](https://www.britannica.com/place/West-Bengal), from the violent separation in 1971 of [Bangladesh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bangladesh) from [Pakistan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Pakistan). Still others are internal refugees from the communal violence and other forms of ethnic strife that periodically beset many parts of India.

**Economy**

India has one of the largest, most highly diversified economies in the world, but, because of its enormous population, it is—in terms of income and [gross national product](https://www.britannica.com/money/gross-national-product) (GNP) per capita—one of the poorest countries on Earth. Since independence, India has promoted a mixed [economic system](https://www.britannica.com/money/economic-system) in which the government, constitutionally defined as “socialist,” plays a major role as central planner, regulator, investor, manager, and producer. Starting in 1951, the government based its [economic planning](https://www.britannica.com/money/economic-planning) on a series of five-year plans influenced by the Soviet model. Initially, the attempt was to boost the domestic savings rate, which more than doubled in the half century following the First Five-Year Plan (1951–55). With the Second Five-Year Plan (1956–61), the focus began to shift to import-substituting industrialization, with an [emphasis](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/emphasis) on capital goods. A broad and diversified industrial base developed. However, with the collapse of the Soviet system in the early 1990s, India adopted a series of free-market reforms that fueled the growth of its middle class, and its highly educated and well-trained workforce made India one of the global centers of the high-technology boom that began in the late 20th century and produced significant annual growth rates. The agricultural sector remains the country’s main employer (about half of the workforce), though, with about one-fifth of the [gross domestic product](https://www.britannica.com/money/gross-domestic-product) (GDP), it is no longer the largest contributor to GDP. Manufacturing remains another solid component of GDP. However, the major growth has been in trade, finance, and other services, which, collectively, are by far the largest component of GDP.

Many of the government’s decisions are highly political, especially its attempts to invest equitably among the various states of the union. Despite the government’s [pervasive](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pervasive) economic role, large corporate undertakings dominate many spheres of modern economic activity, while tens of millions of generally small agricultural holdings and petty commercial, service, and craft enterprises account for the great bulk of employment. The range of technology runs the gamut from the most traditional to the most sophisticated.

There are few things that India cannot produce, though much of what it does manufacture would not be economically competitive without the protection offered by tariffs on imported goods, which have remained high despite liberalization. In absolute terms and in relation to GDP, [foreign trade](https://www.britannica.com/money/international-trade) traditionally has been low. Despite continued government regulation (which has remained strong in many sectors), trade expanded greatly beginning in the 1990s.

Probably no more than one-fifth of India’s [vast](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/vast) [labour force](https://www.britannica.com/money/labor-in-economics) is employed in the so-called “organized” sector of the economy (e.g., mining, plantation agriculture, factory industry, utilities, and modern transportation, commercial, and service enterprises), but that small fraction generates a disproportionate share of GDP, supports most of the middle- and upper-class population, and generates most of the [economic growth](https://www.britannica.com/money/economic-growth). It is the organized sector to which most government regulatory activity applies and in which [trade unions](https://www.britannica.com/money/organized-labor), chambers of commerce, professional associations, and other institutions of modern capitalist economies play a significant role. Apart from rank-and-file labourers, the organized sector engages most of India’s professionals and virtually all of its vast pool of scientists and technicians.

**Agriculture, forestry, and fishing**

[**Agriculture**](https://www.britannica.com/topic/agriculture)

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/35/1635-050-CC641D0E/sugarcane-village-Saharanpur-Uttar-Pradesh.jpg)

[Saharanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India: sugarcane milling](https://cdn.britannica.com/35/1635-050-CC641D0E/sugarcane-village-Saharanpur-Uttar-Pradesh.jpg)

Milling sugarcane in a small village near Saharanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India.(more)

Roughly half of all Indians still derive their livelihood directly from agriculture. That proportion only relatively recently has been declining from levels that were fairly consistent throughout the 20th century. The area [cultivated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cultivated), however, has risen steadily and has come to [encompass](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/encompass) considerably more than half of the [country’s](https://www.britannica.com/topic/nation-state) total area, a proportion matched by few other countries in the world. In the more fertile regions, such as the Indo-Gangetic Plain or the deltas of the eastern coast, the proportion of cultivated to total land often exceeds nine-tenths.

Water availability varies greatly with climate. In all but a small part of the country, the supply of water for agriculture is highly seasonal and depends on the often fickle southwest [monsoon](https://www.britannica.com/science/monsoon). As a result, farmers are able to raise only one crop per year in areas that lack [irrigation](https://www.britannica.com/technology/irrigation), and the risk of crop failure is fairly high in many locales. The prospects and actual development of irrigation also vary greatly from one part of the country to another. They are particularly favorable on the Indo-Gangetic Plain, in part because of the relatively even flow of the rivers issuing from the [Himalayas](https://www.britannica.com/place/Himalayas) and in part because of the [vast](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/vast) reserves of groundwater in the thousands of feet of alluvial deposits underlying the region. In peninsular India, however, surface-water availability relies on the region’s highly seasonal rainfall regime, and, in many areas, hard rock formations make it difficult to sink wells and severely curtail access to the groundwater that is present.

For such a predominantly agricultural country as India, resources of cultivable soil and water are of crucial importance. Although India does possess extensive areas of fertile alluvial soils, especially on the [Indo-Gangetic Plain](https://www.britannica.com/place/Indo-Gangetic-Plain), and other substantial areas of relatively productive soils, such as the black (*regur*) soils of the [Deccan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Deccan) lava plateau, the red-to-yellow lateritic soils that predominate over most of the remainder of the country are low in fertility. Overall, the per capita availability of cultivable area is low, and less than half of the cultivable land is of high quality. Moreover, many areas have lost much of their fertility because of erosion, alkalinization (caused by excessive irrigation without proper drainage), the subsurface formation of impenetrable hardpans, and protracted cultivation without restoring depleted plant nutrients.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/02/1602-050-B7DE5D24/Farmers-field-Mysuru-India-Karnataka.jpg)

[Karnataka, India: farmers](https://cdn.britannica.com/02/1602-050-B7DE5D24/Farmers-field-Mysuru-India-Karnataka.jpg)

Farmers plowing a field near Mysuru (Mysore), southern Karnataka, India.

Although the average farm size is only about 5 acres (2 hectares) and is declining, that figure masks the markedly skewed distribution of landholdings. More than half of all farms are less than 3 acres (1.2 hectares) in size, while much of the remainder is controlled by a small number of relatively [affluent](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/affluent) peasants and landlords. Most cultivators own farms that provide little more than a bare subsistence for their families; given fluctuations in the agricultural market and the fickle nature of the annual monsoon, the farm failure rate often has been quite high, particularly among smallholders. Further, nearly one-third of all agricultural households own no land at all and, along with many submarginal landowners, must work for the larger landholders or must supplement their earnings from some subsidiary occupation, often the one traditionally associated with their caste.

Agricultural technology has undergone rapid change in India. Government-sponsored large-scale irrigation canal projects, begun by the British in the mid-19th century, were greatly extended after independence. [Emphasis](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/Emphasis) then shifted toward deep wells (called tube wells in India), often privately owned, from which water was raised either by electric or diesel pumps; however, in many places these wells have depleted local groundwater reserves, and efforts have been directed at replenishing aquifers and utilizing rainwater. Tank irrigation, a method by which water is drawn from small reservoirs created along the courses of minor streams, is important in several parts of India, especially the southeast.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/10/1610-050-C80C9901/Farmers-fields-Yamunanagar-India-Haryana.jpg)

[Yamunanagar, Haryana, India: farming](https://cdn.britannica.com/10/1610-050-C80C9901/Farmers-fields-Yamunanagar-India-Haryana.jpg)

Farmers returning from their fields near Yamunanagar, Haryana, India.

The demand for chemical fertilizers also has been steadily increasing, although since the late 1960s the introduction of new, high-yielding hybrid varieties of seeds (HYVs), mainly for [wheat](https://www.britannica.com/plant/wheat) and secondarily for [rice](https://www.britannica.com/plant/rice), has brought about the most dramatic increases in production, especially in Punjab (where their adoption is virtually universal), [Haryana](https://www.britannica.com/place/Haryana), western [Uttar Pradesh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Uttar-Pradesh), and [Gujarat](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gujarat). So great has been the success of the so-called [Green Revolution](https://www.britannica.com/event/green-revolution) that India was able to build up [buffer](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/buffer) stocks of [grain](https://www.britannica.com/topic/cereal) sufficient for the country to weather several years of disastrously bad monsoons with virtually no imports or starvation and even to become, in some years, a modest net food exporter. During the same period, the production of coarse grains and pulses, which were less in demand than rice and wheat, either did not increase significantly or decreased. Hence, the total per capita grain production has been notably less than that suggested by many protagonists of the Green Revolution, and the threat of major food scarcity has not been eliminated.