

Chapter 2: Indian History and Religion

Introduction

India is blessed with an epic historical background that cannot be compressed into this single chapter. There are many volumes written on the different historical eras of India and the country has assimilated many cultures and religions into what has become twenty-first century India.

I want to introduce you to the major historical themes and events that have taken place in India. It will be enough information to help understand references to leaders such as Gandhi or Nehru without satiating your appetite for knowledge through the endless listing of dates and events. Although I have introduced some early history, this is best left to the dedicated history student. The events of the twentieth-century alone are enough for any visitor to digest.

When I asked the historian Lawrence James about the events that are essential knowledge for any manager planning a visit to India, he responded by noting: "Emotive subjects are the Mutiny, the Amritsar shootings and the management of partition. They are subjects that interest Indians, but they should always be allowed to raise them. As with so much else concerning history, topics will emerge naturally in conversation. If they do it is better to analyse rather than seek blame."¹

Lawrence James is focusing particularly on visiting British managers, who need to exercise caution when discussing the effect of the British Empire on India. He said: "I think most Indians see the Raj, for all its flaws, as beneficial; it has provided a foundation and shaped habits of mind, particularly among the educated. Furthermore, in sixty years passions have cooled and a greater subjectivity has appeared."

Devesh Nayel, of Indian BPO firm Progeon, warned me that to attempt the summary of Indian history in a single chapter is a trap. A trap because the topic is too vast – India is unique and incomparable - and it is unavoidable that key events will be missed. Most Indians adore the heritage of their country and will enjoy the opportunity to enlighten you about events that are not documented here. Go ahead and ask.

The Nature of Indian Religions

India is the birthplace of several religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. It has also been able to accommodate and absorb the influence of numerous outsiders into a welcoming religious melting pot. Asutosh Varshney, author of *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*, comments: "India has also regularly received, accommodated, and absorbed 'outsiders'—Parsis, Jews, and 'Syrian' Christians (followers of St. Thomas, arriving as early as the 2nd century, Christianity thus reaching India before it reached Europe). In the process, amalgamated or pluralist forms of culture have emerged, based on a lot of cultural give-and-take between the various communities."²

The 1991 national census of India³ reveals the following national breakdown of religion across the entire nation:

1. Hindu	82%
2. Muslim	12.12%
3. Christian	2.34%
4. Sikh	1.94%
5. Buddhist	0.76%
6. Jain	0.40%
7. Other	0.39%
8. Not Stated	0.05%

Hinduism is the undisputed religion that is central to the lives of most Indians; however the percentage breakdown can be misleading. Because of the immense size of the Indian population, the number of people practicing other religions can be significant. This table lists the numbers of people practicing the top three religions in India, based on the same census data:

Hindus	687,646,721
Muslims	101,596,057
Christians	19,640,284

Islam may be practiced by just 12% of Indians, but due to the immense population size, this equates to over one hundred million people. It is interesting to compare this to the current 153 million people resident in Pakistan. Many people believed that the 1947 partition would separate Muslim and Hindu, yet they are in almost equal numbers either side of the border.

Of course, these figures are the averages from a diverse nation. The population of each state is varied with different blends of religion and people. In Punjab, two thirds of the population is Sikh and in Sikkim almost a third are Buddhist. In Nagaland nine out of ten are Christian and in Arunachal Pradesh one third of the population practices the tribal animist religion Doni Polo/Sidonyi Polo.

The former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee represented the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The party has a character of strong Hindu nationalism though