

Fiche

1. Basic facts

Capital city	New Delhi
Currency	Indian rupee
Area	3,287,000 km ²
Population	1.2 billion
Official languages	Hindi + English

2. Significant characteristics

- the 7th largest country in the world;
- the 2nd most populated country;
- the most populous democracy in the world.

3. Concept

• The caste system is a system which dates back 3,000 years when Hindu priests divided the Indian society into 4 great social classes which are hereditary:

- 1. the Brahmins (priests and scholars);
- 2. the Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers);
- 3. the Vaisyas (farmers and merchants);
- 4. the Sudras (peasants and labourers).

• You can't change the caste you are born into. The Brahman caste is at the top of the social ladder, at the other end the Dalits or Untouchables are outcasts. They can only occupy certain jobs such as cleaning or mending shoes. Even if discrimination against Dalits has become rare in towns, in rural areas they are still expected to use specific eating places, schools, places of worship and sources of water. The caste system is officially banned today, and yet it still exists with over 170 million Dalits of which one third are illiterate.

4. National hero: Mahatma Gandhi

• Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) was born in India, but studied law in London before going to South Africa where he defended the rights of the Indians who worked there under apartheid. When he returned to India he campaigned against the British rule of the country and practised civil disobedience with such acts as boycotting British goods and leading protest marches. The British imprisoned him on numerous occasions and Gandhi demonstrated his disapproval by going on hunger strike. His non-violent means of protest has been a source of inspiration to other leaders such as Martin Luther King.

• Gandhi was assassinated in 1948 by a Hindi fanatic angered by the tolerance he demonstrated towards other religions.

5. Key date

1947: Creation of Pakistan. Religious differences divided the Indian Independence movement during the 1930s and there was a call to create a separate state (Pakistan) for Muslims. Gandhi was unable to find a way to unite the Indian people in spite of their religious differences. The creation of Pakistan led to millions of Muslims having to leave India to go there and to Hindus having to leave Pakistan to go to India.