

Profile: India's billion people have a booming economy, enormous needs_122004

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As many as 30 million pilgrims flooded the Hindu holy city of Ujjain to seek spiritual cleansing in the sacred Shipra River. India alone is home to 14 "super-mega" people groups with more than 10 million members each who are currently "unengaged" by a church-planting movement strategy. (Matt Jones Photo)

'As India goes, so goes the Great Commission'

By Erich Bridges

International Mission Board

MUMBAI, India (BP)-What country is home to thousands of millionaires and nine of the world's richest billionaires, makes more movies than Hollywood, boasts the world's largest democracy and is home to 24 million Christians, including 19 million evangelicals?

India.

Americans whose most vivid impressions of India come from old National Geographics and Rudyard Kipling's jungle stories might update their mental file with these facts:

- ◆ Eighty percent of India's 1.07 billion people—second only to China in total population—are Hindu.

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But more than 130 million Muslims call India home, and some estimates

range above 150 million. That rivals the combined population of all countries in the Arab Middle East.

- ◆ The Indian middle class—those earning \$2,000 to \$4,000 annually—now numbers 300 million, larger than the entire U.S. population. It's expected to approach 450 million within the next five years.
- ◆ Massive rural-to-urban migration likely will double the population of India's cities within two decades. That's equal to “all of Europe, all of a sudden, needing water, sanitation, drainage, power, transportation, housing,” says an Asian Development Bank official.
- ◆ No fewer than 555 million Indians are under the age of 25, and Indian universities produce more than 1.5 million graduates each year.
- ◆ The booming Indian economy was forecast to grow 8 percent this year as Indian industries match or surpass some of the world's top producers.
- ◆ India has some 200 million English-speakers. The nation's vast collection of people groups also speaks several hundred other languages and dialects.



Pilgrims seeking spiritual cleansing in the sacred Shipra River offer fire to their gods. (Matt Jones Photo)

- ◆ Three Indians made Time magazine's list of the world's 100 most powerful and influential people this year—Bollywood superstar Aishwarya Rai, former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and information technology mogul Azim Premji—reputedly the world's fourth-richest man.

Make no mistake: India still faces enormous problems of poverty and need. The poor in some 800,000 towns and villages still account for the great majority of the population. About 300 million people live on less than a dollar a day. As many as 3,000 Indian farmers in a single state—Andhra Pradesh—have killed themselves over the last six years because of debt and drought.

India has the world's largest number of working children—up to 115 million. Many toil in sweatshops. At least half the population cannot read.

Meanwhile, many of the graduates pouring out of the nation's universities can't find decent jobs. Despite economic growth, too many applicants are competing for too few positions. The government counts 40 million jobless workers, while the vaunted Indian info tech industry employs fewer than 1 million.

But India has made amazing progress on many fronts—economic expansion, education, technology. Its scientists, academics, computer specialists, entrepreneurs and entertainers are challenging—and often surpassing—the best other countries can offer. Expectations are soaring.

Hundreds of India's ethnic, religious and caste groups live in geographical or social isolation from each other, looking at the rest of this vast “nation of nations” with curiosity or suspicion. Many a south Indian, if set down somewhere in the north, would be as bewildered by the customs and languages as someone from the U.S. heartland parachuting into Scandinavia.

In other places, particularly the cities, different peoples and cultures mix

and mingle in seemingly countless combinations. Mumbai-or Bombay, as it also is known-is India's largest city and is a world unto itself.



India boasts nearly 20 million evangelicals, such as this member of Andheri Baptist Church. Yet 80 percent of the country's 1.05 billion people are Hindu. (Matt Jones Photo)

With more than 17 million people jammed into a 180-square-mile peninsula, Mumbai is the financial capital of India, the film capital, the organized crime capital, the AIDS and prostitution capital. It is the home of India's most expensive real estate-and Asia's biggest slum. Multitudes live under plastic tarps on the streets, and others dine with old money at the exclusive stadium cricket club, where the joining fee is \$30,000.

Travelers on Mumbai's sidewalks and crowded commuter trains can rub shoulders with stock traders in \$1,000 suits, beggars, college students,

Muslim women covered by black burqas, Punjabis, Tamils, Kashmiris, Bengalis, Assamese, Gujaratis, Keralites.

“Diversity is India,” observes a leading Christian strategist who lives there. “You can lose yourself in all the challenges and unlimited horizons for missions in this country. You could pour a thousand lifetimes into India and never exhaust it.”

India's 24-million-member Christian community is growing, but it remains a small minority of the national population of 1.07 billion.

India and its immediate South Asian neighbors have more than 200 people groups with populations exceeding 1 million. Nearly half of the world's unreached people groups live in India and the South Asian region. South Asia, which includes India, has half of the world's Last Frontier population-more than any other region.

India alone is home to 14 “super-mega” people groups with more than 10 million members each currently “unengaged” by a church-planting movement strategy. In other words, Christians are not yet focusing on any of these groups in a way that will result in growing, self-sustaining church movements. Just one of these ethnic peoples, the Rajput, totals 40 million souls.

“As India goes,” the Christian strategist said, “so goes the Great Commission.”

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