Social Context in India
History, Religion and Family

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January 2010¹

¹ This teaching note was written by Professor Pranab Majumder for use in the Global Consulting Practicum (India) course at the Fuqua School of Business at Duke University. © Pranab Majumder 2010. Version 1.01
Cover Picture: Kate Lyden and Alison Ingvoldstad with schoolgirls in a village near Hyderabad (India GATE 2008)
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1. Introduction

Every organization is embedded in the social context in which it operates. This social context fills in the blanks since everything cannot be specified in detail in operating manuals, procedure handbooks, or ethics guidelines. Starting from the perspective of a US student I will attempt to lay out the social context in India with the purpose of explaining norms and guidelines for working in India.

Evidently this is an impossible job. It is made impossible by the sheer diversity and variety that India encapsulates. Every time I go to India with you (my students) I learn new things, since you do different things that I would never dream of doing (not because they are “wrong”, but because it never crossed my mind to do them that way).

Take everything written here as a guide written by a layman. This brief note would become far more cumbersome and unwieldy if I tried to be pedantically accurate and completely representative. For details, you can always go to any of the Duke libraries, or, for that matter, Wikipedia.

Figure 1: Alicia Grossman tries out a saree at a Jaipur shop (GCP 2009) (by Nathan Mah).
1.1. Magnitudes of difference

Let us consider a round-figure salary of $100,000 per year, which is the ball-park figure for MBA graduate salaries. Clearly, you know what this means. You can differentiate between, say, an $80,000 job and a $120,000 job. But your ability to differentiate between $8,000,000 a year and $12,000,000 a year is less developed. Oh sure, you know that the percentage differences are the same, and surely there must be some differences. But exactly what they mean at a social or emotional level- you have no idea.

Speaking from personal experience, there was an enormous jump in my income (by a factor of 100 in raw terms) from when I was working in India as a manager in the early 1990s to when I am working in the US as a professor in the 2000s. It takes a long time to get used to this change. To this day I get triggered by decision rules from my past into putting hours of thought into saving a dollar on a purchase, while calmly ignoring differences of tens of dollars for other purchases. It still does not sit comfortably with me. For the first five years after I started teaching I would carry less than ten dollars in my wallet. I just did not feel the need to carry more. No impulse purchases, since these “felt” so much more expensive.

Similarly, we cannot comprehend the difference in earning 80 cents a day versus earning $1.20 per day. We just cannot. In percentage terms though, it is just as much a difference as earning $80,000 a year versus $120,000 a year. All that we can do is try to draw analogies between what we know viscerally, and what we know factually. For example, I once overheard a story about some missionaries in a place in South America who were kidnapped for a $3,000 ransom. It is almost like Dr. Evil asking for a world ransom of “One million dollars!” in the first Austin Powers movie.

As you visit India you will find that there are surprising differences in magnitude in many aspects of life compared to what we are used to over here. Only a few of them can be placed on a linear scale with one side being “more” than the other.

Figure 2: A lady in the Qutb Minar complex, New Delhi (GATE 2008).
1.2. Diversity

A common theme all across India is Diversity, with a capital “D”. Where do I even begin? If you want an analogy, consider asking a question about Europe. You would of course, be constrained to provide an answer that applied equally well to all of the following: British, French, German, Spanish, Italian, Greek, Lithuanian, Czech, Polish, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Russian, Turkish, and so on. Now, just multiply that about ten or a hundred times. Here are some sample questions:

- What do Europeans eat and drink?
- How do Europeans dress?
- How rich/poor are the Europeans?
- Can one European understand another’s language?
- Are women “free” in Europe?
- Is there religious persecution in Europe?

There are at least 25 major languages in India (which are printed on each currency note). There are at least 400 to 500 different dialects, and I suppose at some point of time people gave up counting. If you live in a region you can probably pin down the district (i.e. county) a person comes from by the specific accent, words, dress, food or some other common element associated with him/her.

There are no non-discrimination laws in India that can be practically enforced. As soon as I see you I know where you come from (or at least from your name). My name, Pranab Majumder, allows people to know that I come from the state of West Bengal. In some parts of the country traditional names are constructed from your name, your father’s name (not family name), your caste and your district. Go figure out how you can avoid discrimination in such circumstances.

But the beauty of it is that everybody is discriminated against, which means that nobody is effectively discriminated against. It is MAD- mutually assured discrimination. It is not personal. When I meet another person who speaks the same mother tongue I often slip naturally into speaking with that person in that tongue, automatically excluding all those who cannot understand it. Conversely, if I do not speak with that person in “our” language, I have to very carefully also indicate (obliquely) that I am not snubbing him/her, and that I am “connected”. It is enough to drive you up the wall…

Figure 3: Worker at the Amer Fort (Jaipur 2008).
1.3. Three Indias

Here is a very insightful analogy we heard from one of the managers of Coca Cola India. It is illustrative of the way market researchers segment the country at an aggregate level. With the caveat that it is full of stereotypes, it is nonetheless useful.

“India is an Australia embedded in a Mexico in the middle of Africa.” (paraphrased).

About 5%-10% of India’s 1,000 million people are rich and globalized. This is approximately the population of Australia, and their per-capita GDPs are similar. These Indians travel between global cities and can converse with you about the NY Yankees, or Manchester United, or the McLaren F1 team. About 6 or 7 of the world’s richest individuals are Indians. There are more billionaires in India than in Japan. They purchase global brands and there are many entrepreneurs among their ranks. These are the Indians whom the world sees today. They have “arrived”.

Another 15%-20% of all Indians are almost there. They form the middle class, and work very hard to make it to the first group— if not for themselves, then for their children. They value literacy, aspire to enter the IITs and IIMs, and go abroad for higher education or a better life. Their ranks contain large number of doctors, engineers and managers. In terms of per capita GDP, these comprise the Mexico in India. You have seen many of these people too. I belong to this group.

Finally, about 75%-80% of the people in India have absolutely no hope of getting to either the middle class, or the first group. They are either poor, or live at a subsistence level. They have abysmally poor access to health care, housing, education or jobs. You have never seen these people, but will notice them the first thing in India, as well as
all the time we will be working with NGOs. These are your bottom of the pyramid equivalent of Africa.

These numbers are really so large that even the “Australia” in India is 100 million people. That is enough to support Mercedes-Benz and Gucci showrooms in the larger cities. For example, with all the IT and outsourcing revolution that has taken place in India during the 2000s, it has directly affected only about 2-4% of the population. A small fraction, but that is already 20-40 million people.

It is not amazing or unique there is disparity in India. What is striking is that all three occupy the same space and can be seen at the same time on the streets of any city. Be prepared for all the contradictions that this entails.

I think it was Joel (or maybe it was Greg) who asked me this question during the India GATE 2007 when we were in Mumbai. He asked, “Pranab, while there are disparities in many other countries, it is only in India that they exist side-by-side. So tell me, why do the poor people not rebel? Let alone rebelling, why don’t they just throw a stone at the BMW whizzing past their shack next to the highway?” That question completely stumped me. It took me a few months of thinking before I came up with a satisfactory answer.

Let us get the unsatisfactory answers out of the way first. (a) The poor are brainwashed and oppressed everywhere into accepting their fate without complaining. (b) The spiritual nature of Indians and their belief in reincarnation makes them accept any misfortune in this life in the hope of getting a better life next time. While these answers may contribute a bit, I do not find them convincing.

The truth is that there are parts of India where the poor are rebelling. In interior parts of state with chronic poverty and no hope of development there are rebel groups called Maoists (as well as other separatists) who have almost completely kicked out the local administration and set up their own parallel administration and militant training camps. Once in a while the Indian army gets involved, and these local insurgents may either lose the battles or melt away. But the problem stays. That finally gave me the answer.

The “poor” people we see on the streets of cities in India don’t think of themselves as poor. They moved to the cities because a life lived on the sidewalk is much better than what they had in the villages- starvation, abuse and death. They live in cardboard and tin, but they earn a living, and their children may hope to get an education. In an eerie parallel, whatever I made of my life by moving from India to the US, they have made with their lives by moving from the villages to the cities. Now why in heck will they spoil it by throwing a stone at a BMW?
2. The Historical Context

History is a strange thing in India. Religious philosophy there emphasizes the circle of life— for society and civilizations. What is there today will not be there tomorrow. In addition, there has not really been much continuity in kingdoms or record keeping until Muslim rulers came and settled in India. A lot of the history of India was pieced together by the British colonial rulers, albeit colored by their imperialist rhetoric. Nowadays folks in India are much more inclined to researching their country’s history, but it is easy enough to argue that that too is colored by nationalist rhetoric. Anyway, we have to start somewhere, so with these and many other caveats, let us begin somewhere.

The history I will now attempt to summarize is of South Asia, which, broadly speaking, is the area currently covered by (from west to east) parts of Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bangladesh, and parts of Burma. Sri Lanka may be counted too, but I don’t have much on that.
2.1. The Geography of India

India has a unique geography and it all boils down to one word- The Himalayas. The world’s youngest and highest mountain range stretches all along the north of India. To the northeast it is really high, with a large plateau of Tibet (which has an average elevation of about 4,500 meters or about 14,500 feet). Historically no army has approached India from that side. The northwest is high too, but not as much. In fact, there are some very high and difficult mountain passes, at the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The Himalayas control two very important geographical influences. First, they stop the cold northern winds. Most of India has never seen snowfall, even as far north as New Delhi, although it does occasionally cool down to about 0°C. It surprised me the first time I heard about snow or ice as far south as Florida or Texas in the US. Clouds must travel north from the Indian Ocean, and bring with them warmer temperatures. Second, the Himalayan glaciers provide a perennial source of melting ice, feeding a whole network of rivers from the gradually melting ice. Thus, all through the ages large areas of India have been able to sustain agriculture almost year-round, a bountiful land indeed.

Till the industrial revolution there was little difference in human productivity, and each nation’s per capita GDP was more or less equal. Since India could sustain a larger population, it was a rich country, and participated heavily in global trade, mainly through land routes through the Middle East.
2.2. The Indus Valley Civilization (2500 BCE-1500 BCE)

In the second half of the 19th century, when the British were expanding the rail network in the western part of India, in what is now Pakistan, they used locally available material as ballast (i.e. broken rocks used to support the rails). Most of this was in the form of small flat fired-clay bricks. One of the engineers noticed that this was quite different from the “modern” bricks, and petitioned the archaeologists to study these in depth. This finally happened in the 1920s. Meanwhile hundreds of miles of railway lines were laid using these bricks.

What they finally found was that there had been an extensive civilization in the large area covered by the Indus River and its tributaries, covering all of Pakistan, and large sections of Northwestern India. This was named the Indus Valley Civilization (IVC). The entire civilization was dated to exist from about 2500 BC to about 1500 BC. What the railway construction was using were about three- to four-thousand-year-old fired-clay bricks. To this day each time it rains more of these are uncovered, along with children’s toys and figurines of animals. They are literally everywhere. After all, a thousand years of living creates a lot of detritus. The first place where these artifacts were found was locally called Mohenjo Daro, or “mound of the dead”.

The IVC comprised many cities along the rivers, with well-developed ports, and evidence of trade with Mesopotamia (current Iraq) and Egypt. The cities were laid out in a rectilinear grid, with houses, public areas, granaries and public bath houses. Very few large artifacts have been found. Many seals and tablets have been found, and many of these have what looks like writing, with about 400 distinct symbols. To date nobody has been able to decipher these, and the accepted conjecture is that this is not a fully developed language/script. A swastika has been found on some of these seals.

Figure 9: Mohenjo Daro (Wikimedia Commons)

Figure 10: Soapstone carving of a Priest/King (National Museum, Karachi) (Wikimedia Commons)
IVC was an agrarian society, and was quite advanced in the use of measurement standards, engineering, and even dentistry. It was well developed in arts—with realistic renditions of humans and animals in an artistic manner which does not arise in the western world until the Greek and Hellenistic forms more than fifteen hundred years later. The cities show evidence of urban planning with proper sanitation. There is no conclusive evidence of kings, priests, or armies—no building that can be identified as a palace, temple or barracks has been found.

Over time this civilization disappeared. Initially the hypothesis was that they were decimated by Aryan “hordes” that migrated in from central Asia. But over time, this theory has lost favor. After all, what appears as “sudden” replacement of one set of archaeological evidence by another may have happened over, say, 500 years in a pretty gradual manner. It is also conjectured to have been caused by changes in the rivers or the local ecosystem. Many of the elements of IVC can be found in later civilizations in India, showing a degree of cultural continuity.
2.3. Waves of Immigrants (1000 BCE onwards)

Beginning from about 1000 BC, a group called the Indo-Aryan people came through the western Himalayan passes. The evidence for this is primarily from similarities in their language and religion. In fact, during the 19th century prominent European historians attempted to link European history to ancient Indian history by claiming a common source from where the Aryans came.

The modern impact of this is that when Hitler was looking for a symbol to represent the ancient and pure Aryan race he chose a symbol which has been used in India for more than two millennia in religious and social occasions- the swastika. It is almost as if the primary association with the teachings of Christ was not with all that he said, but with the cross-burning practices of the Ku Klux Klan.

The word “Hindu” itself has a very interesting history. The river Sind in Northern India (mostly in Pakistan now) was the first major river that people entering India from the northwestern passes encountered. Thus, the people they encountered were people from the land of the Sind. A particular tribe found it easier to pronounce it Hind- thus the language is Hindi, and the people are Hindu. Finally, the Europeans came and named it Indus, hence India.

There really was no Hindu religion to begin with. There were distinctly different religions- some were more philosophical and abstract, while others were more icon- and ritual-oriented. You picked that which suited you. Contemporary accounts from those times speak of many religious philosophies, from those who preached a completely hedonistic path to salvation, to those who preached complete renunciation.

Over the centuries all the immigrants brought with them their own history, culture and religion. Little of this exists as distinct pieces. There was a great mash up of cultures, philosophies and customs. During the period from 1000 BCE to about 500 CE all these pieces were integrated into coherent narratives in terms of mythologies and philosophies. However many of the original texts and components still retain their individual identities. People from specific parts of India have their favorite parts of the religious smorgasbord. Folks originally from around Mumbai offer their prayers to Ganesha, while those from around Kolkata are devoted to Durga and Kali, two forms of the mother goddess.

For example, around 150 CE a central Asian tribe called the Yue-Chi settled in north India, and were locally called the Kushan dynasty. They ruled over large parts of the area for a couple of hundred years, and smaller descendant kingdoms continued ruling for a little while longer. Their coins have deities from a vast number of sources- Greek figures like Helios and Serapis, Persian deities like Ardoksho, Athsho, Mao, and Indian figures like the Buddha and Shiva.
2.4. The Vedic Period (800 BCE)

One of the philosophies which has lasted and flourished from those early days till today is the Vedic philosophy, which is what is commonly called Hindu philosophy. This is a core of philosophy texts, a number of quasi historical texts, and a whole set of associated rituals. Encoded in this, somewhere is a lineage of kings which is most likely historical, but with little to map it to other events, it is only partially dated and only approximately located.

You can understand the vibrancy and diversity of the numerous schools of religious thought if you read the Buddhist accounts of the young Siddhartha. Buddhism, generally speaking, came about as a reform movement which argued for simplicity in daily religion, against the over-ritualization of the other paths. Buddhism was a minor religion until it was embraced by one of the most militant kings India has ever seen, named Ashoka. We know that the Buddha lived approximately around 600 BCE mainly because his grandfather Chandragupta was contemporary to Alexander the Great that. In fact, this connection was made in the late 18th century by British historians in India who realized that the Sandrokottos in Megasthenes’ accounts (this was a later Greek traveler and historian) was Chandragupta.

The main impact of the Vedic age on India today is the creation, in the Hindu mindset, of an ideal age of peace and prosperity where everyone lives on heaven on earth (in the context of the circle of the rise and fall of civilizations and societies). Two of the main pseudo-historical sagas are also set in this age, the Ramayana (literally “the story of Rama”) and the Mahabharata (literally, “the great (story of) the Bharatas”)

Both of these are composed in verses, and are written in Sanskrit, which is the origin of almost all the languages in India. The Mahabharata, particularly, is rather long, at about a hundred thousand verses. Sanskrit is a very organized language with all vowels and consonants classified according to the way they are uttered, and the language is highly structured. The basic grammar of Sanskrit was codified by a linguist called Panini, in the 4th century BCE in the city of Pushkalavati, very close to modern day Peshawar in Pakistan. In fact we obtain much of our meager knowledge of common living in those days from sentences in this work which were written to illustrate grammar. However, the unusual aspect of this is that until Alexander the great came to the northwest India, the entire area had no script. All these long compositions were transferred from teacher to student purely by memorization. It is not that the people did not know of writing- there was extensive trade with other parts of the world which had scripts.
2.5. Alexander the Great (326 BCE)

In 326 BC, Alexander the Great reached the western shores of the Indus River at the very end of his world conquests. At this point his army pretty much refused to go any further in the face of the heat, mosquitoes, and war elephants. He then headed down the Indus, and attempted to return to Greece via sea, but died on the way. His vast kingdom first broke up into large pieces, and then smaller pieces, and then got assimilated into the local kingdoms. This entire process took about 200 years. Since the Greek alphabet influenced modern English script, an interesting fact is that some of the Indian records from those times can look strikingly similar to English.

Alexander's brief stay in India influenced some things, but did not really change the course of history (in the way it changed it in Persia). However, his visit provides a concrete record of where India was in its history- from the records of Megasthenes, and from his encounter with Chandragupta, the grandfather of Ashoka. The use of a script spread from these parts, and the extensive Sanskrit and local languages now started to be written down on copper plates, rock inscriptions, coins and other artifacts. They also brought the Greek pantheon into India, which got absorbed and assimilated over time. The Greek genome also made its way into the area. In the reverse direction, two Buddhist monks went back with him to Greece.

Figure 13: Alexander's Campaign in India (Wikimedia Commons)
2.6. Ashoka (3rd Century BCE)

Although Ashoka was one of the most important rulers of India, his name was lost until the British tried to decipher some iron pillars and stone writing, and realized that he probably influenced (if not directly ruled) all of India. They dated his reign when they connected his grandfather Chandragupta to one of the Greek historians.

They discovered that Ashoka was the person in whose name large iron pillars had been found in far reaches of India where he proclaimed (in a rather grand manner, of course, but in the common language) that he was embracing Buddhism, and encouraged all his subjects to do so as well. This was right after he had killed a gazillion people and turned rivers red, literally.

Today Ashoka is known as the first ruler who united the whole of India. This is important to the national consciousness since after this the only rulers who ruled over the entire geographic extent of modern India were either the (Muslim) Mughal rulers, or the (British) colonial rulers. Naturally, there are issues with tracing the historic unity of modern India to these rulers. It also helps that Ashoka is the most ancient ruler of them all.

In these and later years Buddhism flourished in India, as well as in Sri Lanka, and East Asia. There was a huge university in Pataliputra where the total population was about 100,000 which is comparable to a large state university in the US today. Buddhism spread all the way from Afghanistan to Japan.

In later centuries there was a decline in Buddhism within India. Partly this was due to a political backlash- there were prominent rulers who ruthlessly persecuted Buddhists. In fact the adoption of Buddhism as a state religion probably did little for the defense of a nation. Another reason was that Hinduism (which had become increasingly ritualized before the Buddha) went through some reform initiatives that focused on its core values. Perhaps equally important was that with the increasing popularity of Buddhism many elements of Hinduism were incorporated into it, including a whole pantheon of deities, and many rituals. This made it much more similar to Hinduism, and hence reduced the original draw of simplicity. (In fact, when I visited Kyoto, Japan in 2004 we visited a temple of a thousand wooden Buddhas in different forms corresponding to the many deities in Hinduism, including Shiva, Vishnu, etc).

While not as popular outside India in the way Buddhism is (except in the Indian diaspora), another religion which arose during the same period was Jainism.
2.7. The Ancient Period (0-1000 CE)

From the time of Alexander till about 1000 CE there is a lot of History. It is really detailed, and there are a lot of dynasties and rulers, big and small. We can trace the descendants of the Greeks for many hundred years, and also note the arrival of further waves of immigrants who rose to power. Much of this history is obtained from the records of Chinese Buddhist travelers (Fa-Hien c. 400 CE, and Hsuan-tsang c. 600 CE) who came to India to visit for many years, driven by their desire to obtain copies of some original Buddhist texts.

There were the Kushans, who originated from central Asia, almost China, in fact. They brought the central Asian pantheon into India. At a later period there was the Gupta dynasty, where art and culture flourished, giving it the title of the Golden Age. In south India there were three main kingdoms of the Cholas, Cheras and Pandyas who fought amongst each other to such an extent that it is impossible to find out now who ruled which district at which time.

The battles between these rulers were very different from modern warfare. The machinations of the ruling and martial classes did not really affect the life of the common farmer. There are accounts of a battle proceeding in one field while the farmer tilled his lands in the next. The next main epoch starts with the gradual advent of the Muslims.
2.8. The Muslim Period (1100 CE-1550 CE)

There had been trade routes via the Middle East between Rome or Egypt and India through the ages, and with the advent of Islam nothing much changed for a few hundred years. However, with the expansion of Islam out of the Middle East, many of these kingdoms (called sultanates, from the “sultan”, or king) started bumping up against the western edges of India.

Initially many of these kingdoms started to make forays into India on plundering expeditions. Since much of the wealth was stored in temples (Hindu churches), this also meant that these expeditions also destroyed a lot of temples, a fact which has been emphasized by some historians in recent times. Around 1200 CE the Rajput king Prithviraj Chauhan was defeated by Muhammad Ghori. With this the Muslim period in India started in earnest.

A small detour is necessary to describe the Rajputs who ruled much of Northwest India in those days and later. They are a fiercely martial race, and committed to a very honorable code of conduct in life and war. They were rarely united, and each kingdom maintained its independence fiercely. They created enormous problems for those rulers who did not make their peace with them. When the British came in contact with them, a gentleman called Todd spent many years with the Rajputs and wrote a glowing chronicle of these people.

For about three hundred years after Muhammad Ghori there were a lot of regional sultanates all over India, including South India (except for the extreme south). There were also scattered Hindu kingdoms. This is a period of the usual historical kingdom-y things that kings do- win the throne by killing all of their brothers, attack and plunder each other, scheme with some to attack other neighbors, and so on. While they are classified as Hindus and Muslims, it was more statecraft than religious motivations that determined alliances and enemies.
2.9. The Mughals (1550 CE-1750 CE)

Around 1526 CE a tribal leader from Central Asia named Babar came to India and ruled for a brief period of time before he was succeeded by his son Humayun, who was promptly defeated by another sultan. They were called Mughals, a corruption of the term Mongols. Humayun did manage to scrounge up support from some other Central Asian tribes and regained his small kingdom in India, but died soon in an accident. His son, Akbar succeeded to the throne when he was 14 years old. Things did not look too bright.

With the help of capable lieutenants he proceeded to ally with the Rajputs and expanded his kingdom to most of North India. He and the next four rulers are known as The Great Mughals (Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb). He set up the foundation of this empire and unlike previous Muslim rulers, included Hindus in all levels of the administration. In fact, although Jahangir and Shah Jahan were not really capable rulers, there were other capable administrators who made sure that the kingdom prospered and grew.

The last ruler, Aurangzeb, however, went on extensive military campaigns that distracted attention from administration. In addition, he was a conservative Muslim who alienated large sections of the Hindus and Rajputs. He also alienated the Sikhs (in North India) and Marathas (in central India). Thus, although at his death in 1707 CE Aurangzeb had the largest Mughal kingdom, it effectively fragmented right after his death, until a mere 50 years after his death the Mughal “kingdom” was effectively just the city of Delhi. Everyone else paid lip service to the Mughal “emperor”, but there was no other administrative, revenue or military affiliation.

On a related note, during this period the great kingdom of Vijayanagar flourished in south India, giving rise to much prosperity in those parts of the country. It fell to Muslim armies slightly before Aurangzeb’s time. The viceroyds of Vijayanagar, called Nayakas continued to rule.
2.10. The Colonial Era (1750 CE-1947 CE)

Meanwhile, the Portuguese had discovered the first trading route to India in 1494 CE. The land routes were subject to uncertainty and lawlessness over the long journey, which made the sea routes worth exploring. Over the next couple of centuries most European powers - British, French, Dutch and Danish also joined in the trading game. In those early days spices from India were worth their weight in gold, particularly black pepper.

Over time these colonial powers decided that profits could be increased by having direct control over the production of spices rather than as mere traders. Thus, over time, they got more involved in the politics of the regions, although they were still very small, and not generally noticed by the main players. Over time the French and the British grew to be powerful, and there were a series of major battles in India between about 1780 CE and 1799 CE, almost concurrent with the battles in Europe. With the defeat of the French in Europe their colonies in India were starved of resources and political will and the British came to be the sole rulers of India. Or, more practically, the British East India Company was the ruler of India (the same one associated with the Boston Tea Party and the Opium wars in China).

The earlier British rulers were often true lovers of India, and frequently assimilated with the local cultures. With improving communications, transportation and political power the new British were more interested in consolidation of power, as well as evangelism. The methods of consolidation created great resentment among the local rulers who till then had peace treaties with the British (which increasingly removed any actual power from them). Aggressive evangelism created resentment among the common populace, both Hindus and Muslims. This led to a widespread revolt in 1857, when the mainly Indian armies revolted against their commanders, and killed many of the colonists, including women in children. After the revolt was suppressed in retaliation the British decimated entire towns.

All of these led to the revocation of the East India Company’s charter, and control of the colony of India passed directly to the Queen of England. Since the nominal head of the revolt was the geriatric Mughal “Emperor” in Delhi, simultaneously the British also started a systematic effort to divest the Muslims of any degree of political or economic power.

During the next few decades they attempted to create a “middle class” of educated Indians who would then form the level of middle managers in the colonial scheme of things. However, this backfired as these educated Indians saw the inherent unfairness of the colonial
scheme of things, and started the move to demand independence. Finally, after many years of protests and compromises, the World-War-weakened British Colonial Empire finally collapsed.

Some economists have estimated that the money extracted from India during the period the Queen ruled India was the equivalent of one shipload of gold every week. It was certainly a large sum of money. Most of the British affluence during this period was funded from her colonies, and India was the largest and most prosperous one.

While it is true that the British extracted a lot of money and resources from India, the main reason that India fell from being one of the richest countries in the world to being one of the poorest was that it continued to stay an agricultural economy, and was completely shut out of the industrial revolution. The colonial economic philosophy was the all colonies serves as sources of raw materials and markets for goods, while Britain served as the industrialized producer of goods. In order to do this the British built extensive railroads to the major ports (Bombay, Calcutta and Madras) for both extraction of minerals and agricultural goods as well as for distribution of finished products.

However, this economic doctrine was untenable by the end of WWII, and anyway the British rulers were financially bankrupt. In a horrific series of events an arbitrary map was drawn up to divide the country into two parts along religious lines. This led to widespread rioting and migration of millions from one part of the country to another. Some estimates put the number killed at about a million, while more than 12 million were displaced. The cataclysmic creation of the two countries of Pakistan and India reverberate to this day in the relations between them, including two open wars, the creation of Bangladesh, and an ongoing low intensity proxy war along the border.
2.11. Independent India (1947 CE-)

The first two decades of India’s independent existence were focused on developing the infrastructure of the country. India closed itself up, and the economy was centrally controlled in a model similar to the Soviet economy. This focused on improving agricultural productivity by improving irrigation and seed varieties, improving transportation by building roads and railways, improving industrial production by focusing on iron and steel, cement and other core inputs.

India’s economic model was a mixed model- the private sector played a role too. However, making money was looked down upon, and “profits” was a dirty word. Thus, the private sector was kept under tight control by an extensive set of licenses and permits that controlled what was going to be produced, and how much. During the next twenty years this system choked off all initiative and entrepreneurship and dug the country into a deep economic hole since it depended upon imports for most of its oil consumption. Finally, in 1991, India was forced to open up and an economic revolution has taken place over these past two decades that has raised the profile of India from a poor developing country to an active economy.

Politically India derived most of its structure from the colonial administration. Thus, although it is a democracy, it is rather different from the next largest democracy, the US. First, there are an enormous number of political parties, and some very small parties play a disproportionate share, particularly when the main parties are deadlocked. Secondly, regional affiliations play as large a role as principles and goals. Finally, the large number of competing regional and local agendas plays as much a moderating role in India as the separation of executive and legislative powers plays in the US since India cannot have a separation of legislative and executive powers.
2.12. History Today

India as a united entity is a recent phenomenon. Even during the colonial era, till 1947, most parts of India were nominally under kingdoms (there were about 500 of these Princely States). Thus, a major objective after independence was the creation of a cohesive political entity called India.

With such a long and detailed history it is not difficult to go back to the “golden” era of any particular state. That would have been the time when it ruled over most of its neighbors if not the entire subcontinent. For example, Bihar contained the capital of Ashoka but today is one of the most economically backward states. Delhi, of course, needs no reminder since it is still the capital of India, and also contains within its boundaries the ruins of seven previous cities dating back to Kurukshetra of the Mahabharata fame. Bombay in Maharashtra was home to the Marathas who ruled large portions of India in the 18th century. Bengal was the original capital of the British colony, from 1750s to the 1900s, and hence was the first region to get a large serving of “enlightenment”.

As a result of this it is very difficult to convince everyone that they are really Indians. Over the last 60 years there has been a lot of melting-pot-ness driven by the large cities, by the common administrative and defense services, and globalization in general. Yet you only need to scratch the surface in order to uncover regional pride.

It is very easy to be regional- you speak a different language, you eat different foods, or spices, you wear different clothes. Yet over time generation has grown up which speaks multiple regional languages fluently, and is equally at home in any large city (to an extent). I grew up speaking Bengali, Hindi and English and do most of my thinking in English. I am the weakest in my mother tongue Bengali (which was a great source of disappointment, even shame, for my grandparents). Yet I am sort of unlettered, since you can find among your own classmates here at Fuqua some who are fluent in five Indian languages each as different as Swedish is from Spanish.

Since there is such a long history most Indians may not have a completely accurate sense of history except for the big names like Ashoka and Akbar. There are frequent local history revisionist attempts, and also a lot of resentment at real or perceived injustices during the Muslim period and the colonial period.

Most of the younger generation is not really that interested in history since their elders fed them a steady diet of “how great India was in the old days” while living in the reality of India being forgotten on the world stage. Now that India is integrating into the global economy it is an exciting time, and many choose to look outward and future-ward, rather than inward and past-ward.
3. Religious Philosophy in India

Rather than explicitly start with religion let us focus for a moment on the philosophical aspects of religion and what it prescribes for humanity. This governs life in India, and while it is mostly Hindu philosophy, much of it is also common to Sufism, for instance. In addition, weave in elements of Buddhism and Jainism, and there is not much that is excluded from religious philosophy. Each religion in India has its own particular flavor- if you go to a Christian service or a Muslim home in India you will find differences from what you may have experienced at other places.

This description of religious philosophy is an ideal state, very rarely achieved. However, it forms the core of a (hopefully consistent) set of beliefs, and is useful in understanding how an Indian may interpret a situation, or a dilemma.
3.1. The Circle of Death and Reincarnation

All living beings are connected in a spectrum, from the least “aware” to the most aware (i.e. humans). Upon death the soul of every living being is weighed against its actions in the life just completed, and in balance may move upwards towards more aware animals, or less aware beings (including plants). In almost all cases the soul itself retains no memories of its previous lives (“almost” leaves open the possibility of past live memories in rare cases).

Being born as a human being is a culmination of many lifetimes of progression through the insect kingdom and the animal kingdom and so on. If during human life you commit more acts of cruelty and are, in general, a bad person, then upon death your soul may regress to be reborn in an animal form. Even in human form you may have to undergo many iterations based upon how aware or spiritual you are.

The purpose of all of this is to finally lead a life of such purity that it is no longer necessary for your soul to be reborn- you can then be assimilated into the pure entity called Brahma (or God for lack of a better translation). There is not heaven, and there is no hell. There is just the eternal circle of death and rebirth. The breaking of this circle is attaining “nirvana”.

This, by the way, is also the justification of being vegetarian. The idea is that each time you eat meat that involves the killing of an animal of some degree of consciousness somewhere along the line. You pay for this cumulative effect of killing other conscious beings by regressing after your own death into an animal form.
3.2. God and gods

There are more than 3 million gods and goddesses in Hindu mythology. While there are certainly some major ones, the historical reason for so many gods is that over time Hinduism assimilated all the distinct deities of every region within its borders, and many from past immigrants from elsewhere. These gods are not the fundamental gods— they are certainly capable of birth and death as well. It is just that they are in a higher plane of existence than humans.

There is no equivalent of the Devil. There are beings called asuras, or demons who often come and torment humans, and are defeated by the gods (when they choose to intervene). But asuras too live on the same higher plane of existence as gods, and are also worshipped (!) by humans.

The plethora of gods coexists with the philosophical realization that there is just one God, who shall remain undefined, although God is free to take the form of a god, or even a human being. In fact there is a rich literature on the nature of God, which is completely distinct from the chronicles of the mere gods. The canonical work on this, of course, is the Bhagvada Gita (literally the song of God) (also just called the Gita).

The Gita is actually a small part of the epic Mahabharata, but is often considered the core of Hindu philosophy. The context goes somewhat like this. The main event in the Mahabharata is the battle between 5 brothers (representing good), and their 100 cousins (representing evil). One of the protagonists Arjun (on the good side) actually has as his charioteer Krishna, an incarnation of God. Just before the battle begins Arjun asks Krishna, “What is the point in fighting my own relatives and cousins?” This is the question that is answered in a generalized form, applicable to all human action. It explains the nature of God, the nature of the universe, and what are the attributes of a good, moral, sensible life. What is lacking from this work is just as significant— nowhere in this work is heaven or hell mentioned. Nowhere are any gods mentioned.

The philosophy described in the Gita is rather simple and complex at the same time. One of the most famous verses in it describes the nature of work, or activity. It states that a human being can only claim control on the action of working itself, not on the results that arise out of that action. In fact, the path to happiness does not arise from action. You do not reach happiness because you work— you work because you are happy. (Anyway, with more verses like this, the Gita can keep you philosophically busy for a long, long time.)
3.3. The Universe

The universe goes through very long cycles of creation and destruction, and the timescale is estimated to be many billions of years (it is probably a coincidence that this of the same order of magnitude as the scientifically estimated age of the current universe at 14 billion years). There are three forces that enable this cycle, manifested as gods. These are Brahma the creator of the universe at the start of each cycle, Vishnu the sustainer of the universe during each cycle, and Maheshwara (or Shiva) the destroyer of the universe at the end of each cycle. There is a complete hierarchy of time scales in the structure of the universe, with the human lifecycle somewhere in the middle.

Within each cycle there are many eras where there is a cycle of gradual increase in non-pious people, culminating in God taking a human form in order to kill all evil humans. This human form is called an “avatar”. By the way, the Buddha is considered the last known major avatar of God.

Figure 21: The ten Avatars (Wikimedia Commons)
3.4. The Phases of Life

There are four phases of life for a human being. Ignoring childhood, these are studenthood, married life, hermit-hood and complete renunciation. These are not equally long. In fact, everyone need not go through all these phases. If, for example you decide to join a monastery, you are, in effect, a permanent student (of religion).

The first phase of life is being a student devoted to gaining knowledge about philosophy and religion. During this time a student joins the household of the teacher (“guru”), and spends many years learning. This is a time for celibacy as well and usually covers the teenage years.

The second phase of life is during marriage and work. Marriage in those days happened during the teenage years. Since this is the only phase of life that actually earns money and is the economic engine of life, there are norms about how a married person should support the other phases of life, e.g. schools, monasteries, etc. Included in these norms is the concept of individual debt of multiple types. For example, having been born, you are also obliged to have children in order to pay off your debt to your parents. Having been a student once, you are obliged to support other students (by donating to schools).

The third and fourth phases of life happen when you finish your work life, and your children are all grown up and married. You gradually remove yourself from the activities of daily life, focusing more on the spiritual aspects, and finally end up completely renouncing all worldly pursuits.

Now originally this was prescribed for men and that too for particular castes. But I guess you can say that today it serves as a template for the ideal life, although very few people follow it to the very end. Think about how difficult it really is to give up all worldly pursuits, for example.
3.5. Yoga

Over time the word yoga has come to be associated with a set of physical exercises or postures for physical fitness. This is a highly truncated version of the philosophy of yoga which emphasizes the union of the body, mind and soul. Thus, the practice of yoga in its complete form must include “workouts” for all three. As with everything else, the purpose is to become a better human being and come closer to nirvana. It should be remembered that yoga is actually a distinct school of philosophy within Hinduism distinct from the Vedic philosophy embodied in the Gita.

Over the ages yoga has influenced many other religions. Yoga influenced Mahayana Buddhism, which is the form of Buddhism that spread to China and Japan. Thus, Zen Buddhism has similarities to yoga. In a similar vein, Sufi Islam has adopted certain elements of yoga.

Figure 22: Statue of Buddha in Yogic meditation (Kamakura, Japan) (Wikimedia Commons)
3.6. Caste and Occupational Groups

There are classically four main castes in India. They derive from specialization of activities, and at various times in history they were not very rigid, allowing members born in one to transfer to another. The current hierarchical rigidity of the caste system actually has its genesis in the 1901 census by the British and their effort to categorize all the occupational classifications into a few hierarchical categories. This led to a lot of resentment, and has colored political discourse ever since.

In modern India caste is supposed to not matter. Yet, perversely, there is an entrenched system of affirmative action based on caste. This is so severe that there are civil movements (and more violent ones too) based on the desire to be included in the most backward castes so that affirmative action can be availed of. This is primarily in the form of quotas of admission to educational institutions and quotas for government and administrative jobs. Some of the founders of the constitution proposed that it be a temporary measure, to expire in about a decade, but I don’t think it will lapse any time soon. In some cases the quotas add up to more than half the available positions.

The caste system was also not really meant to be a hierarchy. For example, what is considered the “highest” caste is not the most powerful one in terms of land, money or political power (other than the occasional exception). In addition, there was not a strong desire for “upward” mobility- each caste values its own identity, and historically each generation takes up the professions of their parents.

The first caste listed is the priestly caste. Actually, more than priests, they are keepers of knowledge. In fact the prescription for student-hood was only for this caste. Thus, they were not meant to spend their life pursuing wealth or political power. However, they have the exclusive access to all religious and philosophical knowledge that is needed to progress towards nirvana.

The second caste is the martial caste whose ranks include soldiers and kings. It can be argued that this caste is the most flamboyant and rich caste, and is usually the one which has most political power. The third caste is the traders and businessmen who control the economic activity. In fact this caste had the most money in the form of working capital. The final caste comprises the service providers and artisans.

It is interesting to note that members of other religions like Islam and Christianity also have social classification schemes in India, sometimes mirroring the Hindu system (sometimes tracing back to their original caste at the time of conversion). In addition, caste is not unique to India, and has been observed in other parts of the world, including Europe. Today, of course, this has been supplanted by class, which may be defined as a pseudo-economic classification system. This is gradually becoming more prevalent in India too.

In modern India if we leave aside the aspect of affirmative action, caste has become much less a determinant of your destiny especially in urban settings. For example, almost everyone values higher education, and the study of religious texts has been democratized to a very large extent. In fact as most people become affluent they adopt the religious lifestyle of the priestly class in terms of observations of the customs and rituals.

Caste and the associated classifications do matter in a very visible way when “arranged” marriages are considered. In every newspaper in India the largest section of the classifieds is
headed “Matrimonial”, and it is often broken up by region/language, caste, religion and various other combinations. Even though folks may be relatively progressive in many aspects of their life, they are often conservative when it comes to marriage.

Over the past few decades a lot of families in urban areas comprise of spouses from different parts of India, different castes, and even different religions. This trend has been accelerated by modern institutions where people from all walks of life live and work together, like universities, administrative system, and defense services. Large corporations also provide such an environment, but it is not always as much of a mini melting pot as the others. While this is a welcome development it also results in the loss of the diversity of local customs and culture.
3.7. Religion in Secular India Today

While the term “secular” in the US means the absolute elimination out of religion in all aspects of public life, in India it actually means the attempted inclusion of every religion everywhere.

This means that taxicabs have an icon from every religion that has an icon - a picture of Christ (Christian), next to a picture of the baby Krishna (Hindu), alongside a picture of Guru Nanak (Sikh) and so on. There are pictures of gods and goddesses on the walls of government offices. While there is official separation of church and state at the policy level, this is not so at the individual employee level. It is possible to figure out a person’s religion from their name. The only major religion to have very few practitioners in India today is the Jewish religion, although there were historically many pockets all over India. Their synagogues still exist, but unfortunately each congregation has shrunk to almost nothing due to immigration to Israel.

When I was in India I used to think that I am progressive. That was true for the Indian context. However, if I switch from a relative comparison between my views and those of the average Indian to another comparison of my views with the average American, then it is fair to say that I am rather conservative. In a similar vein, no matter how conservative you are, the average Indian will perceive you to be rather liberal. (Reminds me of a quip I heard on TV about Massachusetts conservatives.)

Another issue that often rears its ugly head in many cases is the issue of missionaries. Over the past thousand years, first with Muslims and then with Christians, the normal mode of expansion has been conversion of the existing population into the new religion. In many cases these were voluntary, but in a larger number of cases these were forced (or choice between conversion and death). Those were different times, a more violent era.

Over time this has led to a significant backlash against aid and missionary workers. This is also one of the reasons that Buddhism does not really exist in India- historically there have been violent backlashes against their success in converting people into Buddhism. Most people in the US probably do not think of missionary proselytization in a classical sense, mainly because religion does not play as active a role in public life here as it does in India. But if you go visit India as part of a church group, this is something you must be sensitive about. The truth is that there are a lot of poor people in India, and there are many opportunities to help them out. Any aid from a religious organization, even in times of disaster, is looked at suspiciously.

There are innumerable public holidays in India to accommodate different religious beliefs. This was quite endemic about twenty years ago, when the economy was more tightly controlled by the government. This meant it was open to attempts by specific ethnic/regional groups to gain recognition through the declaration of a national holiday on the birthday of a prominent figure (long dead, of course). With globalization it is a 365-day year in many cases.

Due to Partition during the creation of modern India and the subsequent religious tension there was an active policy of emphasizing unity in the early decades. This also resulted in the creation of a separate provision of civil law to deal with Muslim legal matters. This has created a backlash and given rise to a fundamentalist Hindu movement. In a country where religion matters (particularly in rural areas) this has significant political implications too.
4. Personal Relations and Society

4.1. Family

In a classical view of gender, each gender has its place. The male role is external-protection, economic sustenance, and generally patriarchy, for the lack of a better word. The female role is internal- nurturing and maintenance of family relations. However, this dichotomy is incomplete without considering that staple of Indian social context, the “joint family”.

The joint family is a household in which the grandfather and grandmother are the heads, all sons and daughters-in-law, and unwed daughters, as well as grandchildren live in the same house. No individual has exclusive rights to his earnings (it was usually “his”- women did not work outside the household). No individual would cook and eat by themselves. This is actually encoded in the tax code- you can file your taxes as the head of a joint family.

While the grandfather is the nominal head in this patriarchal setup, and makes all important decisions, in reality it is a complex political game between all members based on income, duration of tenure (for daughters-in-law), favorite grandchildren, governance style (fairness and equitability) and many other factors. Add in a widowed sister of the grandfather who moved back after her husband died, and things get interesting. In particular, the transition of patriarchy from the increasingly senile grandfather to the eldest son may take years, and many disputes.

This is still common in rural areas. However, in rural areas many women work as hard as the men, and are much less willing to suffer silently. (In the middle class, however, many women have very restricted economic and emotional independence, and may suffer for decades.)

In urban areas, due to lack of the space needed for a joint family, the common unit is a “nuclear” family, consisting of the husband, the wife and some kids. Once in a while a widowed mother or a sister (of the husband) may live with them, but the head of the household is the young man.

Even in nuclear families, however, it is still common to have very strong bonds with the rest of the family. When I was growing up, we used to spend alternate weekends at my maternal grandparents and my paternal grandmother (my paternal grandfather passed away when I was 6). While this separation may potentially reduce the intensity and presence of internal politics, it does not reduce it by very much. The ability to walk away to your own household after each weekend often brings with it a reduced desire to compromise, and disagreements and incidents can fester for decades.

It is a great setup for the grandchildren, though. The politics of the elders really did not propagate down to us. Even if two of my elders were in the middle of serious differences they still loved all of us, and I have the fondest memories of these weekends. Family sizes had reduced to two kids by the time I was born (at least in my section of society), but my father had 5 siblings, and my mother four. We were a lot of grandchildren, and I am very close to all my cousins.
4.2. Relatives

In each Indian language (all 25 major ones) there are separate words for relatives when there is just one word in the English language. For instance “aunt” translates to four different words. In my mother tongue, these are

- “mashi” for mother’s sister,
- “mami” for mother’s brother’s wife,
- “pishi” for father’s sister,
- “kaki” for father’s younger brother’s wife, and
- “jethi” for father’s elder brother’s wife.

Oh wait, that is five. The last two come from the patriarchal nature of families by differentiating between elder and younger brothers of your father (remember, the eldest son is the heir).

Similarly, there are many different modifiers of a female cousin based on whether she is

- your mother’s sister’s daughter, or
- your mother’s brother’s daughter, or
- your father’s sister’s daughter, or
- your father’s elder brother’s daughter, or
- your father’s younger brother’s daughter.

Whew! That reads worse than it sounds. To tell you the truth, often there are relative definitions that I am unfamiliar with and have to ask someone later on what exactly that was.
4.3. Friends and Strangers

It is very common in interactions in India to assign a relative title to a friend, or even a stranger to denote respect, or indicate closeness. For example, if there are neighbors who are closer in age to my parents then it is common to address them as aunts and uncles. In today’s youth-focused environment many of them may tell you to address them as elder sisters or elder brothers, thus signaling their desire to be considered closer to your age (without giving up any of the respect their age deserves, of course).

It is a bit rude to address someone by their given name, no matter what their age. If you want to be formal, you may address them as Mr. Majumder, or Pranab-ji, or Majumder-ji. The “ji” is like “Mr.”, and is more common in north India. With gradual Anglicization of language, it is equally common to hear Majumder-uncle from younger kids. To refer to someone as a brother, folks use Majumder-bhai, or Majumder-bhaiyya (the exact word differs from place to place). For sister, the terms are Majumder-didi (elder sister), or Majumder-behen (younger sister). It is acceptable to ask a person what they would be comfortable with. Many of them may ask you to call them by their name too.

For example, the driver and local translator/guide assigned to take you to different field sites during these two weeks is an important person in the scheme of things. Assume that his name is Balaram Singh. Sure, you can call them Mr. Singh, and there will not be anything wrong with it. However, at the end of the first meeting, it is equally possible to ask them if you want to call them Balaram-bhai (if you have started on a social conversation). When this request comes from men, it has the male brotherhood associated with it. When this request comes from women, this has a little male protectiveness associated with it. When this request comes from women, this has a little male protectiveness associated with it (in small doses that may be a useful thing).
4.4. Gender and Sexuality

In India there is a wide variation in social norms, which probably is also different across social caste and economic class. But in general, it would not be unfair to say that India is more conservative, and, at the same time, it is experimenting at a frighteningly fast pace. While there are no major differences on a day-to-day basis there are a few things you will notice straight away. Let me list these as far as I remember.

In most places there is a natural segregation of the genders. At a party, the women gradually coalesce at one place, and the men at another. On a more organized scale, it is very common for a school to be “for boys” or “for girls” only, although that is changing. It is virtually unheard of to have co-ed dorms. In a work setting, it is much more common to shake hands with a member of the same gender, and do a “namaste” with members of the opposite gender. On the street it is much more common to go up to a member of the same gender to ask for locations or directions. This is why I recommend going out in groups with at least one member of each gender.

On the “initial shock” scale, it is very common to see two men walking hand in hand, or with arms draped across each other. This is accepted! On the other hand, it is extremely rare to see a man and a woman (even if they are husband and wife, let along boyfriend and girlfriend) walk holding hands (don’t even think of kissing/hugging in public!). In fact, if you ever see this, it is a blaring announcement of a couple on their honeymoon (which is sort of tolerated), or young lovers (which is very much frowned upon). You tell the difference by the icons of marriage, e.g. wedding rings, “sindoor”, “mangalsutra”, etc.

It is very forward for women to make eye contact with men (strangers) in public, and even rarer for women to smile at men (strangers). This may lead to “misunderstandings”. Unfortunately, it is very natural to do so when you have grown up in the US.
4.5. Media Stereotypes

Consider the US media, and all that it portrays about the social context. These would be whatever we perceive from popular sitcoms like Friends, Seinfeld, CSI versions, Lost, Desperate Housewives, reality TV shows and even The Simpsons. Many of these are primarily for entertainment value, and really do not reflect “real” life. Characteristics are exaggerated, situations are much more exciting and interesting, men are ripped and women are hot. Even when these claim to be “real” or reality, it is just as artificial, since they do not claim to be representative, but merely watchable. That necessarily pushes them to the extreme.

These media perceptions distort reality for an “external” observer. For example, it is difficult to deny that some people in the US practice polygamy. Yet, from even news programs covering FBI raids over the past couple of years an external observer might conclude that there are large pockets of polygamous sects all over the US. Or conclude that most women in suburbs are doing it with their gardeners. Or that people in New York primarily hang out with individuals like Kramer and Puddy.

Once we see a stereotype we tag them to certain visual or behavioral characteristics. Thus, if you have primarily been brought up on eye candy like soap operas and Housewives what do you notice about the women? Young, beautiful and well dressed. Actually, dressed different from, say Middle Eastern women, or Indian women. While a person who has lived in the US may be able to perceive differences in the female casual/formal dress code (friendly, flirty, not interested, etc) outsiders cannot.

A similar phenomenon will occur when you view Indian movies and try to get from them a basic idea of the main Indian stereotypes. I will warn you that Indian entertainment media is enormously skewed towards entertainment, and suffers from various historical biases that leave their traces till today.

Emily Bickel-Domingo asked me during the India GATE 2007, “Hey Pranab, how come the Indian actresses dress like sl**s but won’t kiss? It is just like high school!” Now that is the perfect comment to highlight life in two completely different areas of the world. Indian actresses do not kiss on screen since that is part of an antiquated code or morality from the film review board (an R rating decreases box office receipts), but they dress as provocatively as possible (without going topless) since that is “just” eye candy, and almost every movie goes with it. It also helps that most of these movies are musicals, so there is enough opportunity to stick in a music video whether or not it is related to the plotline. But, for me, the insight into US high schools was new too.

The local media also tends to show that which is entertaining and shocking, so do not expect a balanced coverage. Moreover, there is a remarkable lack of any program like “60 Minutes” or any other kind of serious investigative journalism. Any expert panel discussion is mostly composed of sound bites and people interrupting each other with provocative jabs (including the “moderator”). There is also a keen interest in exposing corruption and sexual scandals since these are almost voyeuristic in nature. Moreover, it is evolving extremely fast.

Indian media is also split up regionally by language. In our hotel rooms you will find a number of Indian language channels, as well as many European and East Asian language channels. The versions of MSNBC, CNN, and other news channels are almost unrecognizable in terms of their formats and the topics they cover.
Indian consumer product advertising is a very vibrant field, and as evolved as any other in the world, with the additional favor of being locally connected. You might not recognize Coca-Cola or McDonald’s ads at all when you see them in India. As many companies found out early on, you just cannot take a US product and merely translate the language and advertise it as you would in the US, or Europe. You have to connect it locally. It is a particular challenge connecting it to the further 25 major regional identities.