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India Today

With so many states, languages, religions, traditions, opinions and people – so many people! – India always has lots going on. The political, economic and social systems of the world's largest democracy are complex and, while mostly functional, there are hitches. Ongoing conflicts with neighbouring Pakistan have been constant challenges, as have bouts of unrest on the domestic front, from communal discord to violence against women. But Indians are eager for change – and travelling ever closer towards it.

Best in Film

Fire (1996), **Earth** (1998) and **Water** (2005) Trilogy directed by Deepa Mehta.

Pather Panchali (1955) Haunting masterpiece from Satyajit Ray.

Pyasa (Thirst; 1957) and **Kaagaz Ke Phool** (Paper Flowers; 1959) For a taste of nostalgia.

Gandhi (1982) The classic.

Lagaan (2001) Written and directed by Ashutosh Gowariker.

Best in Print

Midnight's Children Salman Rushdie's allegory about Independence and Partition.

A Fine Balance Rohinton Mistry's beautifully written, tragic tale set in Mumbai.

White Tiger Aravind Adiga's Booker-winning novel about class struggle in globalised India.

Behind the Beautiful Forevers

Katherine Boo's mind-stirring account of life in one of Mumbai's slums.

Shantaram Gregory David Roberts' vivid experiences of his life in India. A traveller favourite!

The Political Landscape

When the Congress Party regained power in 2004, it was under the leadership of Sonia Gandhi – the Italian-born wife of the late Rajiv Gandhi, who served as prime minister from 1984 to 1989. A planned national agitation campaign against Sonia Gandhi's foreign origins by the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was subverted when she stepped aside to allow Manmohan Singh to be sworn in as prime minister. However, despite Singh's formidable fiscal reputation (in 1991, Singh, then finance minister, floated the rupee against a basket of 'hard' currencies; state subsidies were phased out and the economy was opened up to foreign investment) many deemed his decision-making power, as prime minister, to be stymied under Sonia Gandhi.

In January 2013, Rahul Gandhi, Sonia's son, assumed the post of vice president of the Congress Party. The move didn't surprise anyone: the Nehru-Gandhi name has become synonymous with the party. But he wasn't widely seen as a strong or strategic figure, and in 2014 the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) suffered a huge defeat with the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) winning by a landslide under the charismatic leadership of its prime ministerial candidate, Narendra Modi. The election went down in history as the world's biggest, with approximately 814.5 million people eligible to vote (a rise of around 100 million voters since the 2009 election), according to the Election Commission of India.

With the BJP securing 282 seats (in the 543-seat Parliament) on its very own, this was the first time since the 1984 election that a party held enough seats to govern outright. Reasons for Modi's success at the federal elections include his former economic reputation as chief minister of the state of Gujarat, his appeal to 'ordinary' Indians due to his working class origins, and his masterful political campaigning which involved savvy use of digital technology, including social media.