

Understand India

INDIA TODAY..... 1106

A snapshot of contemporary India.

HISTORY 1109

India's brilliant historical tapestry.

THE WAY OF LIFE 1126

India's mores: what makes the country tick.

SPIRITUAL INDIA 1133

India's dazzling religious diversity.

DELICIOUS INDIA 1141

Fragrant spices, hot-off-the-griddle breads and tantalising snacks.

THE GREAT INDIAN BAZAAR 1151

India's mind-boggling array of arts and crafts.

THE ARTS 1159

Everything from devotional songs to henna decoration.

SACRED ARCHITECTURE 1164

The buildings that help the soul to soar.

INDIA'S WILDLIFE & PARKS 1169

Big jungle cats, wild elephants and fluttering birds.

THE LANDSCAPE 1174

From snow-sprinkled mountains to palm-fringed beaches.

India Today

With so many states, languages, religions, traditions, opinions and people jostling for space and attention, what is striking about India is not its problems, but how well things work considering these many obstacles. Despite challenges ranging from poverty and violence against women to religious tensions and military squabbles with its neighbours, India continues to thrive as the most successful nation in South Asia and the largest democracy in the world.

Best on 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 Man Booker-winning novel about class struggle in globalised India.

A Suitable Boy More than 1300 pages of romance, heartbreak, family secrets and political intrigue from Vikram Seth.

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

The Political Landscape

India's politics continues to be shaped – and in many cases, shaken – by the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who surged to power in 2014, as the Bharatiya Janata Party scored a landslide victory over the ruling Indian National Congress and its dynastic leader Rahul Gandhi, great grandson of India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. During the election campaign, Modi was painted as a religious fundamentalist and hawk by opponents, primarily because of lingering allegations of involvement in intercommunal violence in Gujarat in 2002, but his tenure has been more conciliatory than many feared.

Although some hardline causes have seen growing support – most significantly opposition to cow-slaughter, which has led to bans on the sale of beef and tragic attacks on people accused of killing cows – Modi's focus on neoliberal economics and the so-called Gujarat model of development has brought solid support from many sectors of the Indian population, regardless of religious background. In his first few years in government, Modi decreased welfare spending but lowered taxes, reduced red tape and increased investment by foreign companies, leading to growing opportunities for India's middle classes.

Perhaps Modi's bravest manoeuvre came on 8 November 2016, when the government, without warning, demonetised the nation's ₹500 and ₹1000 banknotes, in a shock move intended to drive tax-avoiders, corrupt officials and terrorism-funders out into the open. While criticised by many – including the International Monetary Fund, which downgraded India's economic forecast as a result of the ban – demonetisation did not lead to the predicted civil unrest, despite massive upheaval and vast queues at the nation's banks before new banknotes entered circulation.