India is changing at a rapid pace as it continues to move from its colonial past to its globalized future. This Companion offers a framework for understanding that change, and how modern cultural forms have emerged out of very different histories and traditions. The book provides accounts of literature, theatre, film, modern and popular art, music, television and food; it also explores in detail social divisions, customs, communications and daily life. In a series of engaging, erudite and occasionally moving essays, the contributors, drawn from a variety of disciplines, examine not merely what constitutes modern Indian culture, but also just how wide-ranging are the cultures that persist in the regions of India. This volume will help the reader to understand the continuities and fissures within Indian culture and some of the conflicts arising from them. Throughout, what comes to the fore is the extraordinary richness and diversity of modern Indian culture.

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The Cambridge Companion to Modern Indian Culture

Edited by Vasudha Dalmia and Rashmi Sadana
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**Chronology**

### The Brahmanical tradition and the Vedic period

The Brahmanical tradition dates from the Vedic period (roughly 1500 to 600 BCE), when the sacred Hindu texts known as the *Vedas* were first composed. This period becomes a critical reference point for many Indian modernists, revivalists and nationalists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who, in the face of British colonialism, hark back to ‘tradition’ in order to help define a modern India. Despite the coeval influences of Buddhism, Jainism, *bhakti* devotional traditions, and later, of Islam and Sufi traditions, Indian ‘tradition’ in the modern period is almost exclusively focused on Hindu texts and mythologies dating from the Vedic period.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Period</th>
<th>Event/Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3000–1500 BCE</td>
<td>Period when the Indus Valley civilization, one of the world’s oldest, arose and flourished.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>second millenium BCE</td>
<td>The so-called Aryan migrations occur – that is, migrations into the Indian subcontinent of people speaking an Indo-European language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1500–1200 BCE</td>
<td>The <em>Rig Veda</em>, or first book of the <em>Vedas</em>, is composed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>900–500 BCE</td>
<td>The later <em>Vedas</em>, the <em>Brahmanas</em> and the early <em>Upanishads</em> are composed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500 BCE – 500 ACE</td>
<td>Hindu law books (e.g., <em>The Laws of Manu</em>) and epics (e.g., the <em>Ramayana</em> and the <em>Mahabharata</em>, of which the <em>Bhagavad-Gita</em> is a part) are composed, and the six orthodox systems of philosophy are developed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Classical and medieval India

320–647 Reign of successive emperors of the Gupta dynasty. The Gupta age is known for both its religious and social tolerance and its renewal of Brahmanical orthodoxy. It is also a period of great literary, scientific and cultural production. The poet Kalidasa writes the play *Shakuntala* and poem *Meghaduta* in this period; the cave paintings of Ajanta in western India come from this period, as does the calculation of the value of ‘pi’ (3.141) by the mathematician and philosopher Aryabhata.

405–11 The Chinese scholar Fa-Hsien travels to India and writes of the Buddhist culture that he finds there.

Sixth century Development by Shaivite (the Nayanars) and Vaishnavite (the Alwars) saints in Tamil Nadu of bhakti worship, which calls Brahmanism into question and celebrates the direct communion of devotee and God; rise of the Pallavas in South India.

Sixth to Seventh centuries Rise of multiple kingdoms including Harsha of Kanauj (606–47) and Pulakeshin II of Badami (609–42).

711 Mid eighth century Arabs conquer Sind.

871–907 Aditya I defeats the Pallavas, founds the Chola dynasty.
Indian modernity is often correlated with the arrival of the British and the cultural and economic changes that ensued during the colonial period; however, the dates in this subsection will suggest that modernity is a process with no fixed start date. European colonization developed in fits and starts, and the decline of Mughal sovereignty was also gradual.

1526 The Mughal Empire is founded when Babur, a descendant of Timur (or Tamerlane), defeats Ibrahim Lodi, the last Delhi Sultan, at the battle of Panipat.

1600 Queen Elizabeth I grants a charter to the English East India Company for trade with the East Indies.

1605 Accession of Jahangir to the Mughal throne.

1619 The English East India Company obtains permission from Emperor Jahangir to trade in India.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1628</td>
<td>Accession of Shah Jahan to the Mughal throne. Builds the Taj Mahal in Agra and the Red Fort in Delhi during his reign.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1639</td>
<td>Madras is founded, as Fort St George, by the English East India Company.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1651</td>
<td>Foundation of the English East India Company’s first factory, at Hugli in Bengal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1657</td>
<td>Shah Jahan falls ill and a fraternal struggle for succession to the Mughal throne begins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1658</td>
<td>Aurangzeb, third son of Shah Jahan, imprisons his father, takes the throne.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1668</td>
<td>Bombay is ceded to the English East India Company.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1690</td>
<td>Calcutta is founded by the English East India Company.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1707</td>
<td>Death of Aurangzeb, which marks the beginning of the decline of the Mughal Empire.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1757</td>
<td>During this period Mughal power becomes decentralized, and Hindu and Muslim revenue farmers as well as Hindu and Jain merchants and bankers gain in economic power. The Mughal emperor is still recognized as the legitimate ruler of India, and Muslim civil servants and Hindu scribes skilled in Persian are still the mainstays of administrative structures, but political power shifts from the centre towards regional rulers, small potentates and even Hindu rajas of local villages. The English East India Company defeats Nawab Siraj-ud-daula of Bengal at the battle of Plassey. The British take political control of Bengal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1765</td>
<td>The right to collect revenue (diwani) in Bengal is ceded to the British.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1770</td>
<td>Bengal famine; one-third of the population dies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1793</td>
<td>The Permanent Settlement gives zamindars (landholders) private property rights and holds them responsible for collecting revenue from raiyats (peasant cultivators) in perpetuity and remitting those revenues to the colonial state.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Nineteenth-century social and religious reform

Major themes of this period are British colonial governance in India, the rise of English-speaking Indian intellectuals in Bengal, the influence and importance of Brahmanism, Muslim and Hindu identity formation, and the changing role and position of women.

1803 The British take Delhi after repelling fierce resistance from the Marathas – warriors from dominant peasant castes whose power and influence had spread since the seventeenth century over much of the Deccan region of western and central India. The British gain political dominion over Gujarat (in western India), aided by their alliance with Hindu merchants.

1813 The British Parliament lifts a ban on allowing Christian missionaries into India. Entry is permitted under a new system of licensing.

1815–30 Rammohun Roy emerges as a key figure in social reform movements and religious controversies in Calcutta. Many will come to consider him the ‘father of modern India’.

1818 The British overthrow the Marathas and assert their dominance over western and central India.

1829 Sati, widow immolation on the funeral pyre of the husband, is officially abolished by the colonial government in India. Brahmo Sabha is founded by Rammohun Roy as a group devoted to theism and universality.

1833 Britain outlaws slavery, infanticide and human sacrifice in India. Rammohun Roy dies in Bristol, England.

1835 Thomas B. Macaulay presents his ‘Minute on Indian Education’ to Lord William Bentinck, Governor-General of India. The British colonial government subsequently introduces English education for Indians, and English replaces Persian as the language of the British colonial higher administration in India, marking the defeat of the Orientalists by the Anglicists.

1843 Brahma Samaj is founded by Debendranath Tagore, who institutionalizes the ideology of Hindu reform started by
Rammohun Roy’s Brahmo Sahba. Vedanta is accepted as the authentic scriptural source of Hinduism.

1853
The first railway and telegraph are established in India.

1857
On the night of 10 May, Indian soldiers of the xi Native Cavalry based in Meerut rise up after having witnessed their fellow soldiers being taken away in chains for refusing to load their rifles with cartridges rumoured to be greased with pork and beef fat. This anti-British campaign, which comes to be called the Mutiny or Rebellion of 1857, spreads across India and lasts for over a year, causing much bloodshed. The British quell the rebellion in 1858. The Emperor, Bahadur Shah II, is exiled to Burma, and his sons and grandson are killed by a British military officer, exterminating the Mughal line.

1858
In response to the 1857 uprising, the British Crown abolishes the English East India Company and assumes direct rule, appointing a Viceroy of India.

1859
Syed Ahmad Khan publishes ‘Asbab-e-baghawat-e-Hind’ (‘Causes of the Revolt’); it is translated into English in 1873. This document catapults Khan on to centre stage in public debates about religious and social reforms as he speaks for Muslims in India.

1868
Rassundari Debi, a Bengali woman, completes her autobiography, *Amar Jiban* (‘My Life’), the first work of its kind. An expanded version is issued in 1897.

1875
Swami Dayananda founds the Arya Samaj, a Hindu religious reform movement calling for rejection of ritual and idolatry and a return to purity and simplicity through adherence to the *Vedas*.

1877
Syed Ahmad Khan founds the Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh, later known as the Aligarh Muslim University, to foster the education of Muslims in particular.

1877
Queen Victoria proclaims herself Empress of India.

1885
The Indian National Congress is founded in Bombay, with the intention of creating a dialogue with the British colonial government and gaining more rights for Indians under colonial laws.

1888–91
Mohandas K. Gandhi studies law in London.
Twentieth-century nationalist movement

Major themes of this period include the rise of competing Indian nationalisms, the anti-colonial struggle, Hindu nationalism, the Muslim Question and the call for a separate Muslim state, independence from Britain and the Partition of 1947.

1893
Swami Vivekananda receives great acclaim at the World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago, at which he represents Hinduism.

1893–1914
Gandhi works in South Africa as a lawyer and activist for the rights of Indians there. He employs ideas of "satyagraha" (non-violent protest) for the first time.

1905
Bengal is partitioned by the British into two new presidencies, one of which has a Muslim majority. In protest, Indians begin to boycott British-made cloth and other imported goods, launching the "swadeshi" ('one's own country') movement.

1906
The Muslim League is founded, with the purpose of protecting the political rights of Muslims.

1907
The Indian National Congress is split between moderates, who believe in constitutional principles and seek reform, and extremists, who favour active opposition to British rule, including the boycott of British goods and services, and in some cases, violence.

1908
Gandhi's "Hind Swaraj" ('Indian Home Rule') is published.

1909
The British institute the Morley-Minto Reforms, which increase Indian membership on advisory legislative councils and introduce a separate electorate for Muslims.

1911
The Bengal Partition is revoked by the British.

1911
Hindu Mahasabha, a Hindu nationalist party critical of the secular Indian National Congress, founded.

1912
The capital of British colonial India is moved from Calcutta to Delhi.

1913
Rabindranath Tagore is awarded the Nobel Prize in literature.

1913
Dadasaheb Phalke's "Raja Harishchandra", India's first silent film, is shown commercially.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td>The Rowlatt Acts (or the Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Act) are instituted in February by the British colonial government (based on a 1918 report by Justice S. A. T. Rowlatt). It allows for Indians suspected of sedition to be imprisoned without trial and is seen as an affront to Indian civil liberties. It fuels widespread protest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td>The Amritsar Massacre is committed on 13 April, when General Reginald Dwyer orders British and Gurkha soldiers to open fire on a mass gathering of Indians in Jallianwala Bagh, an enclosed park in Amritsar, killing 379 men, women and children, and injuring 1,200. The anti-British Khilafat Movement is launched by Indian Muslims in support of the Turkish Sultan and Caliph, spiritual leader of the world Muslim community, whose position is threatened by the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire by Britain and its allies. In an attempt to forge unity between Hindus and Muslims in India, Gandhi strongly supports the Khilafat Movement. Gandhi leads an India-wide protest against the Rowlatt Acts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924</td>
<td>The Khilafat Movement ends as the Muslim Caliphate in Turkey is abolished.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>Hindu nationalist ideologue Vinayak Damodar Sarvarkar (1883–1966) publishes <em>Hindutva: Who is a Hindu</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>Muhammad Iqbal (1873–1938) gives the Presidential Address at the All-India Muslim League session in Allahabad. Working towards a federalist solution to the communal problem, he emphasizes the need for specifically Muslim interests to be part of the political sphere in order for Muslims to reap the benefits of their numerical majorities in certain Indian provinces.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>Gandhi’s ‘Salt March’ (12 March–5 April). Along with seventy-eight followers from the Sabarmati Ashram and many more who join along the way, Gandhi marches 241 miles to Dandi, where he breaks the law by picking up a natural lump of salt at the sea shore. Gandhi gains worldwide fame after this event, with photos appearing in <em>Life</em> magazine, among other publications.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>India’s first sound film, <em>Alam Ara</em>, in Hindi-Urdu is released.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1932  Iqbal delivers a second Presidential Address to the Muslim League.
1935  The Government of India Act is passed, providing for limited home rule, with continued British control over foreign policy and defence.
1940  The Lahore Resolution, calling for a separate Muslim state, is ratified by the Muslim League. It is inspired by the Presidential Address to the League session in Lahore delivered by M. A. Jinnah (1876–1948).
1942  The ‘Quit India’ Movement is launched by the Indian National Congress, advocating mass civil disobedience and an immediate end to British rule in India. Britain outlaws the Congress.
1943  The Bengal Famine causes the death of over 3 million people.
1945  Britain concedes the necessity of granting Indian independence and advocates formation of an interim government.
1946  General elections are held, and the Congress Party and Muslim League emerge as dominant parties. Attempts to form an interim government fail. Muslim–Hindu violence breaks out.
1947  In June, the Congress Party and Muslim League agree to the partition of India.
       In July, the British Parliament passes the Indian Independence Act, providing for two independent dominions to be created, to be known as India and Pakistan.
       Pakistan gains independence on 14 August, with M. A. Jinnah as the nation’s Governor-General.
       India gains independence on 15 August, with Jawaharlal Nehru as the nation’s first Prime Minister.
       On 29 August Dalit leader B. R. Ambedkar becomes chair of the newly set up Drafting Committee of the Constitution of India.
1948  Gandhi is assassinated by a Hindu extremist in Delhi.
Jinnah dies. Ceylon gains full independence from the British. India and Pakistan go to war over disputed territory in Kashmir.

1949 The Awami League is established to campaign for East Pakistan’s autonomy from West Pakistan.

1950 The Indian Constitution goes into effect.

1951 Ambedkar establishes Milind College in Aurangabad, deliberately choosing one of the most impoverished and neglected areas of Marathi-speaking western India.

1952 India’s first general election is held.

1955 Bandung Conference of ‘non-aligned’ Afro-Asian states.

1956 Indian states are reorganized along linguistic lines. On 14 October Ambedkar, along with many other low-caste Hindus, converts to Buddhism in a massive ceremony in Nagpur.

1958 General Muhammed Ayub Khan takes power in Pakistan.

1961 The Dowry Prohibition Act is passed, authorizing penalties for demanding, giving or accepting dowry.

1962 India and China go to war over a border dispute in the remote area of Aksai Chin; India is defeated.

1964 Nehru dies.

1965 War breaks out once again between Pakistan and India over Kashmir.

1966–76 The Green Revolution in agricultural techniques commences, which over the next decade greatly increases India’s food production.

1966 Indira Gandhi, daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru, becomes Prime Minister of India.

1970 The Awami League, under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, wins an overwhelming election victory in East Pakistan. The government in West Pakistan refuses to recognize the results, leading to rioting.

1971 East Pakistan secedes from Pakistan and declares itself the new, independent nation of Bangladesh. India goes to war with Pakistan to help the Bangladeshi cause.

1974 The National Committee on the Status of Women in India publishes its report, highlighting women’s work.
and the invisibility of most women’s contributions to household incomes.

1975–77 ‘Emergency’ is declared by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi after she is found guilty of illegal campaign practices. Democratic rights are suspended and leaders of the political opposition are jailed.


1980 The Congress Party wins elections and once again Indira Gandhi becomes Prime Minister.

1981 Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* is published and wins the Booker Prize.

1983 The Indian Penal Code is amended, with the aim of better addressing ‘dowry deaths’ and domestic violence; the Criminal Laws Amendment Act, section 498A, makes cruelty to a wife a cognizable offence (that is, police are obliged to take action once a complaint has been registered) that is also non-bailable.

1984 Indira Gandhi is assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards in retaliation for having launched Operation Blue Star, the storming of the Golden Temple in Amritsar. Her assassination ignites riots all over Delhi in which thousands of Sikhs are targeted and killed. Her son, Rajiv Gandhi, becomes Prime Minister. In December, a gas leak at a Union Carbide pesticides plant in Bhopal kills thousands immediately, and many more subsequently die or are left disabled.

1985 The court case of Shah Bano, a Muslim woman and mother of five whose husband refused to pay her maintenance after divorcing her, sparks intense national debates over the merits of women’s rights (seen as being protected by a uniform civil code) versus minority rights (as followed in ‘personal laws’ set by each religious group within the Indian polis).

1987 On 4 September Roop Kanwar, a convent-educated 17-year-old Rajput widow, commits sati (she immolates herself on her husband’s funeral pyre), launching a series
of national debates and protests regarding women’s rights.

1990

In August the Mandal Commission issues its report recommending that 50 per cent of government jobs and education be reserved to the castes officially classified as ‘backward’. In response, there are several riots and self-immolations by middle- and upper-middle-class students in many cities, who fear they will lose employment and educational opportunities soon to be reserved for others.

1991

Reforms are instituted in India leading to economic liberalization, the intensification of consumer culture and a new prominence of the ill-defined but ever-expanding middle class.

1991

Rajiv Gandhi is assassinated by a suicide bomber sympathetic to the Sri Lankan separatist group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

1992

On 6 December, Babri Masjid (Babur Mosque) in Ayodhya is demolished by Hindu nationalist volunteers (kar sevaks) bent on clearing the way for the construction of a Hindu temple on the site of the mosque, which they believe is the sacred birthplace of Lord Ram.

1992

The government of India sets up a National Commission for Women (following the National Commission for Women in India Act No. 20, 1990) to review the constitutional and legal safeguards for women and recommend remedial legislative measures, facilitate redress of grievances and advise the government on all policy matters affecting women.

1993

A third of all seats in village councils (panchayats) are reserved for women.

1997

Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things is published and wins the Booker Prize.

1998

On 11 May India begins a series of five nuclear tests at the Pokhran test site in Rajasthan.

1999

A third of all seats in state legislatures and the Parliament are reserved for women.

2002

From February to June riots erupt in the state of Gujarat between Hindus and Muslims after the Godhra train incident, leading to a massacre of Muslims.
Map 1 The Indian subcontinent.

Partition, Independence and beyond